

MONSTER MISHAP

The book cover for 'Monster Mishap' by Rory Miles features a dark, starry night sky as the background. A large, bright full moon is positioned in the upper right quadrant. On the left side, a green-skinned orc with large white tusks and a mischievous expression is depicted. On the right side, a woman with long, wavy red hair and green eyes is shown smiling, with her hands clasped near her chin. The title 'MONSTER MISHAP' is written in a large, white, serif font at the top, and the author's name 'RORY MILES' is at the bottom in a similar font. Below the author's name, it says 'USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR'.

RORY MILES

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MONSTER MISHAP

RORY MILES

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Introduction

Hello and welcome to Monster Mishap!

This is a sweet monster romance so if you're searching for a dark monster read, this may not be what you're looking for.

This book contains:

An overabundance of tusk-sitting (face sitting but with tusks as support). Cursing. Stretching. Quite a lot of sex - maybe 3 to 4 peppers on the 5 pepper scale. Brief mentions of the FMCs absentee parents. Brief mentions of physical abuse by a parent (incredibly brief and never gone into in great detail, but still present). A people pleaser learning to say no. A murderous trull who threatens to flay people with his toe-nail (don't ask).

And last but not least. The magical saliva. Listen, y'all. This is a monster book. There's no way Orcus' massive member is fitting without a little assistance. It is big. Not "wow, that's girthy" big. I'm talking "shut up and let me rearrange your insides" big. It doesn't hurt (because Orcus knows how to prepare Daisy), but if such situations bother you, this book probably isn't for you.

Monster Mishap

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*To anyone who never quite fit in and dreamed about the
monsters who could come save them.*

ONE

Those dildos aren't going to use themselves

DAISY

“They’ve found me, Daisy! They’ve found me.” Edgar, my roommate, is zipping back and forth in his wheelchair, glaring out of the window like the world has personally affronted him. On his bad days, that may as well be true.

Today isn’t a bad day, it’s what I like to call a fun day. One of the times when he’s more lucid and manages to craft stories that sound like they’re straight out of one of my favorite fairy tales.

“Daisy,” he roars. “Prepare to make your escape!”

I toss the duster aside and climb down off the step stool, leaving the ceiling fan to its dust. “Escape?” Clutching my chest, I walk toward him. “Is it that serious?”

He spins in his chair, bumping into a pile of random knickknacks. Edgar isn’t a handsome man. He has skin that’s a strange shade of white which gives the appearance that he’s always one breath away from barfing, and his once thick brown hair now sparsely covers his wrinkled head. He’s also in desperate need of a caretaker, but he’s been banned from the providers in our area. I hadn’t expected to meet Edgar when I responded to an ad to rent a room in his house after being unexpectedly evicted, but I’m glad I did. Who knows what would have happened if I wasn’t the one he accepted as a tenant.

Life has taught me that people aren't always nice. Sometimes they're horrible.

He raises his wiry eyebrows. "One creature carrying an unidentified object. There might be more of them."

"Should I call for backup?" Ally, my co-worker at the call center, would gladly pretend to be a dispatcher. I've never been more thankful for telecommuting than when I moved into Edgar's house. My anxiety could never cope with leaving him alone for eight hours a day, especially not when he's worried about people coming after him like he is now.

"On this planet? Bah. We need to find the witches; they owe me a favor, and they'll know how to get rid of this vermin."

Edgar, while occasionally super grumpy, gets easily confused, and he needs someone who actually gives a shit about him. If Edgar has a family, they don't care enough to check in on him. We're a lot alike in that respect. It would be nice for any of my family members to remember I exist and actually give a crap about my life, but my texts go unread and my calls go unanswered. I'm not surprised. My parents probably rejoiced when I moved out and they were no longer obligated to tolerate my presence.

"We have to find the witches, Daisy."

"We still haven't found the bespelled amulet, though, remember? We can't go if we don't have the transportation spell." Or so Edgar has informed me time and time again. I probably shouldn't indulge Edgar, though honestly, he responds better when I don't treat him like someone who's slowly losing grip on reality. Besides, I think he likes it when I take him seriously, it gives him a sense of purpose and we all need a reason to exist.

"Fucking fuck." He growls and peers out the window again, wheeling closer to the glass. "It's nearly at the doorstep now. Run while you can, Daisy. He's here for me."

I step over a stack of random books and papers and make my way toward him. Since I moved in, I've done my best to

clean the place up, but there's only so much I can do short of throwing everything out. Edgar cherishes his belongings and doesn't seem to notice how I almost fall face first into the window as I dodge another stack of random crap.

My fingers press into the cool glass and my eyes snap to the mailman. He's wrapped in full winter gear, bracing against a harsh wind, and what he's carrying is certainly *not* unidentified. At a glance, it's a seemingly innocent rectangular package, but the company's logo—Pleasure More—is written in bright red letters along the side and there are little dick shaped hearts covering the entire box. It doesn't take a genius to guess what might be inside. I'm not about to tell Edgar the package is mine or explain what it'll be used for. I didn't exactly anticipate him noticing the delivery.

"I'll handle it. I've never met a man I couldn't charm." People pleasing shouldn't be used as a weapon, but we all have our strengths. I give him a wink and scurry around Edgar's treasures—AKA junk he refuses to part with—and grasp the door handle.

"Daisy," Edgar hisses. "You're innocent. You can't—"

I rip the door open and a frigid breeze slams into me. "Why have you come?" I demand while crossing my arms and narrowing my eyes on the unsuspecting mailman.

"Uh." The guy glances down at the package, eyeing the phallic shaped hearts and flicks his gaze back to meet mine. "I think this is for you?" There are traces of laughter that follow his question.

Yeah, laugh it up, buddy. While I'm one of Pleasure More's frequent customers, I seriously hate their packaging. Maybe I can submit a suggestion through their website. Then again, I'm not sure I want to do anything that would risk my customer account. My sex life's years-long dry spell is one reason, and I love their products, and as far as Edgar knows, it's a weapon. Crap. What else could it be besides a weapon or a dildo?

Think, Daisy, think.

“A courting gift?” I gasp and quickly snatch the package from his grasp. Another cold breeze sweeps through the door and I tuck the box under my arm with a shiver. “See, Edgar? He isn’t here to fight, he’s here to try and get into my loins.”

The mailman rears back. “What?”

Ignoring him, I sigh. “If you were a prince, then my heart would be yours to claim.”

“Is he a royal bastard?” Edgar asks, somehow sounding grumpier than before, like a prince would be the worst possible person that could show up on his doorstep.

I shake my head. “No. ’Tis only a peasant.” I look at the guy whose face is scrunched in confusion. “I’m sorry you’ve wasted your time, but I’m waiting to marry until I find my prince. I’m sure you understand.”

The mailman’s eyebrows slam together. “Lady, what the hell are you talking about?”

“Language,” I scold before snapping the door closed and slapping my hand over the package nestled beneath my arm. I spent more than a pretty penny to buy the dildo, the least the company could’ve done was put it in proper packaging.

Edgar scoffs. “Fool. You’re too good for the likes of him, Daisy.” He rolls closer, curiosity sparking in his cataract clouded gaze. “What’s the gift? Cake?”

I chuckle nervously and shift to the side to conceal the package. “No, but I did get some groceries delivered this morning and there may have been cake involved.”

“Is it chocolate?” The question is so pure, so childlike, that it warms my heart. People may think I’m doing Edgar a favor by standing in for a nurse, but it’s moments like these that soothe the lonely ache inside my chest and they’re part of why I stick around. That and I happen to like the grumpy old man. If anything, Edgar is doing me a favor.

“As chocolate as chocolate can get,” I tell him with a big grin. “One piece of cake and a tall glass of milk on the way. Mind the step ladder on your way to the table.”

“The step ladder can look out for me,” Edgar grumbles and wheels himself into the kitchen.

Biting back a laugh, I watch him go. I had only intended to live here temporarily, but that all changed once I realized Edgar needed someone. I help him live a somewhat normal life, making sure he doesn't hurt himself and reminding him of things he's forgotten, and he doesn't ask questions about my family. I'm surprised he remembers me given how advanced his Alzheimer's is, but he does. I like to think that's because he enjoys my company.

I take my delivery to my room while Edgar waits. Side-eyeing the dildo-hearts decorating the outside of the box, I rip it open. *Oh, wow.* I hum in approval, completely forgetting how horrible the packaging is. The dildo really is as big as they said it would be. Tracing my fingers over the edges, I marvel over the veins that run up either side. Thick. Dark purple. Suction cup bottom. Perfect for mounting it to the bottom of the tub.

“Daisy?” Edgar hollers from the kitchen.

I squeal and fumble the toy like he had shouted *Drop the dildo, you horny bitch, and come out with your hands raised!*

“Chill out, Daisy.” I shove the toy under my pillow. Promising my new toy that I'll see it later, I smooth my *Leave me alone, I'm reading* sweater and head back into the kitchen. Tonight can't come quick enough.



EDGAR FALLS ASLEEP EARLY and I help myself to two glasses of wine before drawing a bath. The guest bathroom is far enough away from where my elderly roommate sleeps that I don't worry about waking him. In truth, this little space has become my sanctuary. It's the least cluttered room in the house; even if it is severely outdated and lined with shelves

full of random things. There isn't even a shower, but that's fine by me because it gives me an excuse to read.

I bring in the new dildo and reverently set it down on a towel at the base of the tub. You'd think it was the Holy Grail with the way I'm handling it, but there's nothing holy about what I'm going to do with that toy. Sliding off the simple black robe, I step into the bubbly water and sink into the hellfire heat with a wistful sigh. I make quick work of washing up before snatching my e-reader off the floor and opening it to my latest romance and searching for the word cock.

Oh good, it appears 90 times.

Satisfied with the amount of smut, I settle into the bubbles and chew on my bottom lip as the royal meet cute begins. I should probably read different types of books, but I'm stuck reading the same story over and over. A princess desperate for love. A reluctant prince. Tension. Hot, filthy sex. Happily ever after.

I have a type. And if that type has made it literally impossible to enjoy being around real men, then so be it. My fictional princes do it better anyway.

Falling into the story, I sip on my wine and try not to smile. My stomach flutters when the prince places his palm low on the princess' belly and yanks her against his hard body. *Yes, that's what I'm talking about. Get that pussy, Prince whatever your name is.* The more I read, the more I flush. My core clenches, aching to be filled. I set the wine and book aside before draining the water. The dildo is so thick my finger and thumb don't even touch as I pick it up.

Suctioning it to the bottom of the tub, I straddle the toy and grab the e-reader again, dropping straight into the scene as I slowly sink onto the dildo. I hiss as it stretches me but keep reading. I rock a little, and as my body adjusts to the girth, I ease my hips up and down the thick stretch of silicone. Not only do my fictional princes do it better, this dildo is going to ruin me for real cocks.

My e-reader shakes in my grasp. I place it back on the towel and slip my hand between my legs. Fingers gliding over

my aching clit, I continue to use the toy to please myself until my legs begin to quiver. My walls clamp around the dildo, and I lift my hips all the way up before slamming myself down on it. Reaching up, I clutch the shelf above the bath to keep my knees from slipping on the slick bottom of the tub. I repeat the same motion, moaning at the delicious feeling of being so full.

I start to move faster. Things topple off the shelf and something plunks onto the wet porcelain, but all I can think about is how good I feel. Shivers race down my spine, and my toes clench. My clit pulses, and I push down hard. I slip and I adjust my grip on the shelf. Something tiny and cold digs into my fingers, biting into my skin and providing enough pain to complement the pleasure coursing through my body.

Closing my eyes, I wish for a prince with a thick, monster cock who could fuck me properly. I wish for the love that I've never had. I wish for a fairy tale that'll never come true, but the vision is exactly what I need to push me over the edge. Stars burst across my vision and a bright flash of light fills the room. My eyes snap open and my stomach drops as the tub disappears and I fall through an iridescent shimmering mist that smells like freshly spun sugar.

I squeal and fall for what feels like a second before plopping into another bathtub—not Edgar's—and onto a thick cock—not the toy I ordered. No, this cock has more girth and it's attached to a massive green monster with tusks sticking out on either side of plump navy lips. The bite of pain that comes with the stretch of him is the final push I need. My body spasms and my hands lash out, grabbing the tusks as I writhe and moan as I come.

“Fuuuuuck,” the monster rasps.

Something inside my chest snaps tight, like an invisible string tethering me to the monster and it draws me toward him, a demanding force I can't control. A flood of emotions that aren't mine wash over me, frustration, suspicion, *pleasure*. Sensations I can't describe, feelings that shouldn't be there, wrap around me tighter and tighter and tighter. Binding. *Mate*. That word slips through my mind as another orgasm hits me. I suck in a breath and roll my hips.

“Yes, yes, yes,” I whimper around gasps, clenching my eyes shut tight and tugging on the tusks.

The monster grunts and desire blooms in the center of my chest.

Wait.

Monster. Tusks. Tether. Dick.

Am I that drunk?

Blinking, I stare at the green giant in shock. Wide navy eyes, a touch darker than his lips. Square jaw. Strong nose with a gold septum ring. Golden earrings on both ears. Dark, sweeping black hair. He’s unconventionally hot, but hot all the same. My gaze drops to my fingers wrapped around the ivory tusks which are adorned with golden cuffs near the tips. His cock pulses and I gasp.

“You’re inside of me.”

Yeah, that’s the most concerning thing at the moment.

“It’s just the tip,” he says in a smooth, rich voice. A devilish grin cuts across his face as he gazes down at where our bodies join.

“Just the tip,” I choke out, eyes bugging as I glance down. Sure enough, his thick hand is wrapped around his length, like he’d been rubbing one out before I landed on top of him, and only the tip of him is filling me.

Is this real life? Surely not. Have I finally lost my mind? Or is this some sort of twisted wet dream?

“Who sent you?” The question is chased by so much venom compared to his earlier smugness that I immediately look up. Frustration coils in my chest, but it’s not mine. The monster speaks English? Do monsters have their own language?

“Answer my question,” he demands, eyebrows slamming together. Cold, hard suspicion strikes me in the gut.

“What?” I ask between clenched teeth, hating the discontent that isn’t mine and it rides me like an angry beast

on my back. I try to ignore the emotion, but it grows stronger and stronger. What the hell is happening? Why can't I stop it? My heart flutters in my chest and begins to tremble. I want to wake up now.

“Don't play coy. Did my father send you to see if our coupling would forge a bond? I told him I didn't want a mate.” The monster frowns, and my chest tightens as more annoyance that isn't mine swirls inside of me. “I should've known he wouldn't stop sending me seducers after I left.” His fingers shift on his shaft and I inch down.

Everything but the way his cock is stretching me ceases to exist. All I can think is how big he is and how little I am. All I can focus on is the delicious way my walls wrap tightly around his length. His cock *definitely* wasn't made to fit inside of me.

“Oh, god,” I whimper as pleasure and pain war with one another. If this is just the tip...

“I don't know which god you're referring to, but I'm Orcus.” His grip moves again, and I slide down another centimeter, walls stretching beyond what I thought possible. Red hot lust glides down my spine. “So tight,” he rasps.

He's too big. Too thick. It'll never fit without destroying me. My muscles begin to tense, but a sweep of pain accompanies the tension. Remembering the instructions from my Pleasure More collection, I take a breath and relax my body.

“There you go,” he praises, moving again. “Damn, being inside someone has never felt this good.”

I take a little more, but my body bucks against the intrusion. It's too much. Too big. I can't take it. Sucking in a pained breath, I yank on the tusks I'm currently using as handlebars and the big body attached to them surges forward.

“Easy on the tusks.” He releases a dark chuckle that zips straight to my center, and his bare chest brushes over mine. Smooth and strong. A rumble of desire is chased by an aching need that settles deep within my core.

My nipples pebble and— “Oh my god.” I release his tusks and scramble away from him, whimpering softly as his cock slides out of me and leaves me so utterly empty.

Water splashes onto the stone floor as I scooch back. The tub—no, the hot spring is deep enough that I have to grip the side of it and kick my feet to stay above water. There’s enough space between me and the monster, but he takes up so much room all I can think about is him. All I can feel outside of my own confusion is a jumbled mess of emotions I don’t understand.

I’m still naked and he’s *staring* at me. Is he looking at my nipples? I narrow my eyes and sink a little deeper into the water to hide them. The monst—Orcus’ eyes are hooded and his blue lips kick into a devastating smirk that has my pussy wondering if we can’t find a way to fit him inside of us after all.

That cock will kill you. Are you prepared to die for dick?

Maybe.

I shake those thoughts out of my mind and force myself to focus on anything but him. The floor and walls are made of stone, some parts smooth, other parts jagged. Not a scrap of drywall in sight. There are no doors either, only one lone, dark corridor. This isn’t a house. It’s a cave. He’s a monster. I have no idea what’s happening. “I... You’re. Where am I?”

He chuckles and the deep vibrato of it makes my stomach flip. “Did I break you?”

I take in the rest of the cave, seeing past my panic and realizing I’m not just surrounded by stone. A fire crackles in a recessed part of the wall. Sconces flicker on the wall, casting dancing shadows across the space. There’s a dining table and chairs. Two puffy, oversized chairs sit in front of the hearth. The wooden bed frame is solid and thick, probably obnoxiously expensive. There’s even a bookshelf. Everything is larger than what I’m accustomed to, but that makes sense given Orcus’ size. He isn’t even standing up and I can tell he’s well over nine feet tall. His biceps are huge, and his chest?

Solid pectorals that are begging to be licked. He's huge. He's definitely not human.

There's no way this is real... but the way his cock filled me had felt real.

Orcus is staring again. Why is he doing that? His eyes dip to where my tits are barely visible through the water. Moments ago, they were pressed against his chest. A lash of desire licks up my spine. Heat blooms across my face when I realize the emotion isn't mine.

It's his. The wicked lap of lust matches the flash of want in his gaze.

Have I developed ESP? I can't process what sensing his emotions might mean right now. Clearing my throat, I say with a decided air of astuteness, "This isn't Edgar's house." While I rent a room, I still struggle with the idea of calling it home. It was only meant to be a temporary stay.

"Who's Edgar?" A growl chases the question, and I shiver in delight at the absolutely inappropriate amount of possessiveness rolling off of him and crashing through my body.

That part of me that aches to belong clings to his jealousy, but the rational part of me knows he has no right.

"My roommate," I explain, lifting my chin. "I was at Edgar's when I—" When I what? One moment I was riding a dildo and the next I was riding Orcus and this thing snapped tight between us and now I have ESP and he's accusing me of being his mate and knowing his father.

Hold on... he's accusing me of something I've only ever read about, and I can feel his emotions which means maybe I don't have ESP... maybe it's something more. Something paranormal and not humanly possible. Maybe in my orgasmic laced panic I heard him wrong.

"There's a lot happening right now," I say, voice strained as I try not to freak out more than I already am. "But did you say mate?"

TWO

One does not simply reject a mate as beautiful as her

ORCUS

My father is determined to have me take the throne, but by law, to inherit it, I need a mate. Replacing him as king also means incurring the brunt of the furies' anger. I've refused to take on that responsibility. He's the one who pissed them off in the first place. The king has sent dozens of temptresses my way. I foolishly took a few to bed before I realized what they were interested in and who sent them. They wanted the crown, not me. Thank Hecate, none of them were my mates. All those times were different.

But this creature... as much as I'm pissed, I can't stop admiring her. *So soft*. I can't stop thinking about how she stretched to accommodate me.

Dammit. This is what he wanted.

Heart racing as worry curls around me, I swallow the onslaught of panic the seductress is emitting and forget about my anger for a moment to study her. Her lips purse, so fucking soft and delectably kissable. Red hair askew and wet, sticking to her chest and barely covering her nipples, my mouth waters and my balls ache to fill her cunt.

"There's a lot happening right now, but did you say mate?" the seductress asks with a flutter of nerves that churn in my gut.

My fingers twitch, wanting nothing more than to pull her onto my lap and soothe that worry. *That cursed bond*. A slow

simmering anger builds in my chest.

“Isn’t that why you were sent? To seduce me and see if Hecate deemed you worthy enough to be my mate?” I lean forward, trying to intimidate the beautiful creature with my size.

Tipping her head back, wide emerald eyes framed by thick black lashes clash with mine. My heart skips a beat. A dusting of freckles covers her nose, and I fight the urge to memorize their constellations.

I’m fucked.

I don’t know how she made it happen, but the mate bond ties me to her forever. Forging a bond is more than us having sex. Aside from the consummation, there has to be substance, a reason, *fate*. Hecate must bless the pairing. Either she conned the goddess or... no. There’s no way the bond was meant to be. The goddess would surely know better than to link me to anyone working with my father, especially after what he’s done. Or maybe this is the furies’ way of punishing me for his crimes. Perhaps they’ve forced this bond to make me suffer.

“Who sent you?” I ask again.

She narrows her eyes. Preparing to fight, her defiance glides over me like a warm caress. My cock stirs in interest.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, but no one sent me, and I didn’t seduce you into... whatever you think I seduced you into.”

I mentally stroke the bond, watching her pupils flare as her chest heaves. The flush on her cheeks burns brighter, a pretty shade of red just for me. Enjoying that reaction a little too much, I caress her through the bond again.

“What,” the seductress sucks in a sharp breath, “is that?” Her forehead crinkles with what appears to be confusion, but if my father sent her, she’s being paid to pretend this was all an accident that worked out in her favor.

“The bond you forced on me.” Not able to stand the distance any longer, I grip her ankles under the water and yank her forward. Water surges over the sides of the bathing pit, and

she squeals, a sound that I'll commit to memory, and grabs my tusks again. I grunt and ignore the way her burst of surprise sends need slithering through my body.

There's another possibility. My father could have found a witch and paid her to cast a spell, tricking me into thinking that there's a bond. I know plenty of powerful magic users, and so does my father. That has to be it. None of this is real. This bond is an illusion, and I'm tired of being played for a fool.

"Undo the spell," I snap.

"What spell?" She shrieks as I grab her around the waist and slide her up my thighs. Her skin is so smooth. The bathing pit is big enough that her legs spread wide to frame my lap.

My erection points in her direction, but I ignore it. "Stop lying, *witch*. Break the pretend bond," I demand, raising my voice enough that she flinches ever so slightly and a spark of fear slaps me across the face. I grind my teeth and refuse to acknowledge the wedge of guilt settling in my chest.

She recovers in the next instant, glowering at me and using the hold on my tusks to pull my face toward hers. "Stop. Being. Rude!" she snarls, positively miffed at my brutish behavior.

The bond rankles and urges me to make her happy. *Witch craft*. What will it take for my father to realize I'm not going to be his puppet?

I lower my voice. "Release me of the enchantment and I'll let you leave."

"Great, what's an enchantment and how do I do that?" The infuriating witch flexes her fingers on my tusk, then glances at her hands as if only realizing they're grabbing me. "Sorry," she says and quickly releases me.

I don't like that.

"The spell you crafted to trick me into believing this is a real mate bond," I explain with a scoff. "Reverse the magic." It's an insult to Hecate to mimic her bonds. There's still time for the witch to undo this and escape the wrath of a goddess.

She swallows. “Magic? Where are we?” Her lip quivers ever so slightly, face draining of color.

A jumble of confusion and panic slam into me and my hands tremble ever so slightly in response. My heart pounds in my chest, and I frown. She’s truly confused. I sit back. Have I misjudged her? “You’re in monster territory,” I say slowly in case she hit her head during the fall onto my cock.

“Monster territory,” she parrots, eyes bouncing between mine. “You’re a monster.”

I bristle at the slight edge of fear in her voice. Hadn’t she cast that stupid spell to eternally bind herself to me? Hadn’t she been using me to service herself? Why is she afraid? “I’m an ogre.”

“Ogres are like onions.” Her voice is so soft I can barely hear her, and her eyes are widening more and more with each passing second.

“What?”

“Never mind,” she says quickly, nervously wetting her lips.

My cum would look much better moistening that pretty mouth. If Hecate weren’t a goddess, I might have some words with her about how the bond forces attraction. Though, I don’t think there’s much forcing to be done. This witch is gorgeous.

“This isn’t Earth?”

“What’s that?” I scrunch my face and give her a once over. She’s much smaller than me. Maybe she’s not a witch; perhaps she’s one of the non-magical folk. But then that would mean the bond is real and I refuse to believe that.

“*What’s that?* What’s. That? Cool, cool, cool. Um,” she says with a choked laugh. “I’d like to wake up now.” Then she sobs.

My cock deflates and the bond clenches tight with her emotions, making my chest ache so fiercely I’m scared my ribs might crack open. Fuck, she’s leaking. It sounds painful. It *feels* painful. *Shit, shit, shit.* I broke her. I stand, clutching her

to my body. Water drips off of us and every part of her presses against me, but the liquid sliding down her face is so concerning that I can't even enjoy the way she feels.

She squeaks and her arms wrap around my neck as she clings to me. I step out of the tub. The bond—pretend or not—is rioting inside my chest, and I drop her onto the bed, grabbing a towel and pressing it to her face.

“Keep pressure on it.”

“What?” the witch asks, voice strained.

“The wound,” I say, tipping her head back and scouring her pale skin for an injury. The freckles on her nose are like little stars. Mesmerizing if not for the cinch of emotion tightening around my throat. “Where is it?”

“I'm. Not. Injured,” she manages between snuffles. “I'm crying.”

Lies. This is *not* crying. Monsters don't do this. I've seen my mother cry once, but it was quiet and barely noticeable. But looking at her now, what she's going through is so... violent. Like it physically pains her. Her skin is bright red, like she's been slammed face first against a wall, and her eyes. Hecate, they're filled with so much moisture I don't even know how it's possible. Fat tears roll down her cheeks and another wave of distress hits me right as the creature hiccups and groans like she's in absolute agony.

The bond screams in protest, and my chest clenches until her distress becomes my own. She *must* be using some kind of spell on me. There's no other explanation for how desperately I want to fix things. Panic. Fear. Sadness. The emotions are horrible. I don't like it. *I hate it.* She whimpers again and my spine threatens to break under the weight of her suffering. “Make it stop.”

THREE

Grumpy ogres and caves and crying, oh my!

DAISY

Make it stop? I sniff, the sound full of snot and distress, and swipe the towel over both cheeks, not caring that I've gone from riding his tip—something I can't quite process yet—to full on meltdown in the middle of a huge, luxuriously soft bed.

“Stop,” he demands with so much conviction I start crying-laughing. He rears back and takes several steps away, as if trying to distance himself from the tears. “What was my father thinking sending a witch? I told him I didn't want this.”

I don't think he's stopped talking about his dad, even while I was on top of him.

“Daddy. Issues. Much?” I choke out between sobs. I'm full on losing it, but either this is the wildest wet dream I've ever had or this really isn't Earth. The stretch felt real, but maybe that was part of the fantasy. Reaching up, I pinch my arm and make a sound when it hurts. I do it again and blink away the last of the tears which have fled in place of pure, wide-eyed panic. “No, no, no.”

“Why are you pinching yourself?”

“Because,” I say with a huff, glaring at the big ogre. “I'm not awake.”

He squints at me. “Your eyes are open.”

“Of course they look open to you, but on *my* bed, where I’m *sleeping*, they’re closed.” I pinch myself again. Ow. Okay, that fucking hurts. I’m not dreaming. This isn’t Earth and the ogre’s name is Orcus and he’s not gross or even that scary. He smells like rich, musky goodness but that’s beside the point.

This is fine. Everything is okay. I can make the best of this. I always do. It’ll be easy. All I have to do is find a way to get back to Earth so I can... oh, god. Edgar! He can’t be left alone for long, and I don’t want him to think I’ve abandoned him.

“Orcus, I have to find a way back.”

“Why don’t you use the magic that brought you here? Why don’t you ask Hecate to help you?”

What does the Greek goddess have to do with this? Why is he so certain someone would force a bond on him? As far as I can tell, he’s a butthead.

“Or are you afraid of her wrath when she finds out you used your powers to fake a bond, *witch*?” He hisses the last part.

Goodbye panic, hello anger.

“I don’t have any magic,” I snap, then take a calming breath. I can’t lose my shit. I can’t. I have to stay calm. “I don’t know how I got here. I didn’t even know these *bonds* actually existed until you told me we had one! I want. To go. Home.” *Right, not doing so well with the whole controlling my anger bit.* I force my features to soften, and I smile at him. “Will you help me?”

The ogre considers me, probably wondering if I’m serious. I take the moment to look him over. Definitely over nine-foot-tall but maybe not quite ten feet. Green skin—not the shade of those cheap alien toys, but a deep, rich tone. His tusks are pearly white, and I’ve spent an unreasonable amount of time ogling them. Perfect for holding. A soft layer of fat covers his stomach, but he’s still clearly more hard than squishy. Dad bod isn’t quite the right description, considering his torso is a bit longer and wider than that of any man’s, but it’s close enough. Biceps, bulging. Check. Chest, muscled. Check. Thighs, thick

—and I mean *thicc*. Check. Cock, big. Massive. And those wide blue veins.

Oh shit. Now I'm the one staring. My gaze jumps to meet his. He's giving me that look again. Hooded eyes. Smirking. A carnal hunger, *his hunger*, ripples over my body.

He takes a step toward me, the stone ground trembling, and my eyes drop to his swaying shaft. Impossibly big, like three human cocks put together. I guess that explains the pain. How was that thing inside of me?

“What do they call you?” he asks, taking another step. His dick swings to the right like a pendulum. Maybe he's the one with magic. “You do have a name, don't you?”

I nod, still staring at his shaft.

A dark chuckle brushes down my spine and more of that heady, needy ache slithers through the bond. “If you keep looking at it, I'll see if that pretty mouth can fit around it.”

Doubtful, but I've never been one to quit without trying.

Dammit, I need to focus. I'm not on Earth. He's an ogre. I'm desperately horny since it's been far too long since the last time I attempted sex with a living, breathing person. That thing will tear me apart.

It hadn't though, a voice of chaos counters the one of reason.

“For fuck's sake,” he grumbles. A giant towel appears out of nowhere, and he wraps it around his waist.

Aw, man.

I bite my cheek and tip my head, ignoring the way heat crawls up my neck, or the way my nipples grow taut. “I'm naked too,” I rasp.

I'm full of useless observations today. One giant cock sighting and this is what I become? How did I ever think I'd know what to do with a prince?

Orcus' attention drops down my body. The thing between us pulses and we both moan at the promise of pleasure. His

eyebrows draw down. “Hecate,” he growls and stomps away.

Reappearing, he drapes a towel over my shoulders. The material is so big it completely covers me, but it’s surprisingly soft and warm.

He squats down in front of me, but I still have to crane my neck to meet his gaze. “What’s your name?” He’s scrutinizing me, waiting for some type of magic trick most likely.

“Daisy,” I say with a cautious smile. Instead of arguing with him, maybe I should try to help him understand I’m truly not from this world.

Humming, he searches my face. “What does it mean?”

“Uh, it’s a flower. What does Orcus mean?”

He squints. “Still playing pretend? Everyone knows that name comes from the tallest mountain in the Nether Realm.” Studying me with blatant distrust, he continues. “Though perhaps my father didn’t tell you about his fascination with that realm when he hired you for the job, witch.”

“I’m trying to figure out if you’re insulting me or if you really think I’m a witch.” I tip my head to the side. “Either way, I need to find a way back to Earth. Home.”

“Earth?”

I nod with all the confidence in the world and like I’m not completely panicking on the inside. “Now you’re catching on. You live here... whatever planet this is. I live on Earth.”

“You sound so serious.” Suspicion colors his features and floods through my body.

I really hate this bond thing.

Throwing my hands up in frustration, I lose some of that collected calm I’d gathered. “I am *very* serious.”

“But you’re a witch. My father sent you. This bond is fake.”

Oh look, there goes the rest of my sanity, scattering across the stone floor like marbles. “Will you stop talking about your dad for two minutes and listen to what I’m telling you? I’m

NOT a witch. I'm human. I'm from Earth. You're a giant ogre!"

"You think I'm giant?" he asks with a pleased smile, chest puffing.

"I need you to focus. Edgar is depending on me."

"Who is this Edgar you speak of?" His navy irises flash with menace and the bond pulls tight as displeasure—his jealousy—crashes over me with stomach churning force. For someone who doesn't want a mate, he sure is possessive.

I don't like that he can make me feel things. I don't like that I'm here and not home. My pulse races and my muscles tighten, ready to flee whenever I say the word. I push some of that discontent down the link between us and a deep, rumbling growl of frustration wraps around me and I get another flood of his fist clenching irritation.

I curl my legs beneath me and crawl to the edge of the bed, glaring at him as the towel shifts and slips off my shoulder. "Stop. Doing. That."

"Stop. Being. Frustrating," he returns.

Taking a steadying breath, I wait a moment before asking, "Are you going to help me find a way home or not?"

"Not," he grunts.

"Unbelievable. You'd think with all your daddy issues you'd want to get rid of me since I'm supposedly here at his bidding." I huff and sit back, shaking my head. "What kind of father would send a witch and ask her to fall from the air and land on top of you?"

"My cock you mean." His lips twitch and a tickle of yearning strokes over me.

Heat licks my cheeks. "Don't say cock."

One of his eyebrows notches up his forehead. "Why not?"

"Because," I say.

"Hmm. You make a compelling argument."

“Because,” I begin again, “That’s not how you speak to a lady.”

The onyx eyebrow arches even higher. “*You’re* a lady?”

“Yes,” I say quickly. “And I have things to do on Earth. So if you could help me, maybe drive me to the nearest transport station, that would be great.” I don’t know how magic works, but if I can get here, there must be a way to get back to Earth.

“Drive?”

“No cars,” I say with a nod and drop my gaze. “Of course, there aren’t any cars.” Probably no phones either. Wi-Fi? Doubtful. Rolling my bottom lip between my teeth, I worry it and try to keep my heart from racing.

Orcus’ big hand suddenly grips my chin.

My eyes lift to meet his as he uses his thumb to free my lip. He smooths his finger over it, and I inhale, breathing in the musk of his scent. Leaning closer, his eyes bore into mine. There are specks of light blue in the depths of his irises, like pretty stars coming to life in the night sky. Another wave of heady possessiveness crashes into me.

Tipping his head to the side, he searches my face. “You’re not a witch, are you?”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you. I don’t belong in this world. I don’t know how it happened, but this,” I gesture between me and him, “was not intentional. If I knew how, I’d gladly release you of it.”

My heart stutters, the bond protesting my declaration. We stare at each other. The suspicion in his gaze slowly fades, replaced with glints of relief, and my muscles, which were tensed from his ire, relax. He really was terrified I had forced him into something.

“Please,” I whisper. “Help me find a way home.”

“You’re not leaving,” he says.

My face scrunches. Is he serious? “Why not?”

“Because if you’re not a witch and this bond is real, we’re mates. Our souls are tethered and if you somehow find a way to get back to this Earth, you’d be in incredible pain.” His face inches closer. “You can’t leave.”

While the inner romantic in me swoons a little and screams *yes daddy*, the part that’s rational rankles. “I’m curious why you think you have any right to tell me what to do.”

His eyes light with amusement. He’s so brutishly handsome when he’s not pissed at me. “This bothers you.”

My eyebrows pinch together. “Of course it bothers me.”

“Because you’re a lady?”

Yeah, sure, let’s go with that. “Precisely. A lady is never told what to do.” More lies, but he doesn’t know a damn thing about Earth, and I’m not about to let this big ogre bully me.

“You’ll stay,” he grumbles.

“I certainly will not.” I step off the bed and onto the cool stone. The towel sways around me like a maxi dress. I expect him to move, only he doesn’t. Sighing, I tip my head once again. Even when I’m standing and he’s squatting, I still have to look up.

Orcus scowls like I’m being the unreasonable one. Wasn’t he accusing me of using a spell to trick him into this whole mate bond? Wasn’t he just demanding to be released from it? The tether sparks, as if sensing my attention. Orcus is still blocking my way like a giant, stubborn boulder.

“Orcus,” I say softly, placing my hand on his shoulder. “If you would please move, I have a portal to find. Or a platform. Or however you all travel between the worlds.” I bat my eyelashes and pout my bottom lip, sending promises of sunshine and rainbows through the bond.

He suddenly stands. “Fine.”

There, sweet *always* works.

One problem? Even with the towel covering his waist, when he stands, his bulge is in my face. I stare at the cloth

covered appendage. *Holy. Wow.* I'm being rude. I cringe and look up at him.

Swallowing the lump that's suddenly formed in my throat, I say, "You're... very tall."

"Thank you." That cocky smirk is back. "I'm one of the tallest ogres there is."

The way he preens at my compliment makes me think it's truly something to be proud of and that is more than a little endearing.

"I'm sure you are." I can't help but smile back at him.

His gaze shifts over my face and a wrinkle of confusion nestles between his eyebrows. "Come." Turning, he walks through the massive cave. I follow after him, the giant towel trailing behind me like the train of a wedding gown. His height means I end up scurrying behind him, the best imitation of a run I can do in my makeshift outfit, and even still, he's always ahead of me.

The hall is dark but as we traverse through it, light slowly begins to filter in. Orcus' body blocks most of it. I try not to stare at him but fail. His back is broad, thickly muscled. He could crush me in his arms. His thighs are bigger than my waist, and his feet? Well, let's say he'd make a pretty penny if he put those puppies on the internet.

I'm sure people would subscribe just to watch him stick those big toes into a cream pie.

We pass another corridor that shoots to the left. I wrinkle my nose at the faint scent wafting in my direction. "What is that?"

"The latrine."

That explains the stench. While unpleasant, it could be worse. At least there's a bathroom. Another fifty feet and he ducks under a jagged rock and steps out of the corridor. I'm suddenly blinded by sunlight. Lifting my hand, I shield my eyes and take slow steps out of the hallway and out onto the—edge of a cliff?

“Holy crap.” It had been night when I fell into this world, but the sun is high in the sky now and the winter’s bitter breeze is nowhere to be found. It’s almost hot. I squint as I adjust to the light and look around, or more correctly, down, at the breathtaking sweep of trees. Miles and miles of a vibrant forest sprawl across the landscape and the valley below, leaves of every shape and color. Dark green, light green, soft yellow, copper. The scene is an ocean of greenery, so vibrant. So alive. Each color is so vivid, I can’t quite decide which I love best. Spinning, I look up. There are a few trees that have taken root in the limestone mountain face, though not many at this height.

I glance around again, but for as far as I can see, there are only trees and the rest of the mountain range. Fresh, pine scented air settles in my chest. This is surreal. I’ve never felt so insignificant. Who needs Earth when you have this view? Someone on Earth needs me though. “Um, Orcus?” I ask the Jolly Green Giant.

“What?” His surly tone makes me bristle.

Maybe he’s the Grumpy Green Giant.

Ignoring the rush of annoyance, I ask, “Are there any cities in this territory?”

“Cities,” he tests the word out.

“Towns? Villages? Mounds with fairies?”

“Fairies aren’t real,” he says, looking at me like I’m crazy.

I’m getting a little tired of being the strange one. He’s a monster, and on Earth, monsters aren’t real. *He’s* the weird one, not me.

I swallow my frustration and keep my tone light. “Will you take me to a village?”

“No.”

“No?” I sputter. “But you said—”

“Changed my mind,” he interrupts, glaring at me like I’m the one being difficult. “It’s too far.” He shrugs.

Too far? Is he serious? Couldn't he take one giant leap for ogre kind and get us there?

I take a fortifying breath and infuse some of that happiness from earlier into the bond. "Will you please take me to a village so I can find a way home?"

He grunts at the wallop of goodness I launched at him. "Stop doing that."

"Doing what?" I smile and bat my eyelashes.

"Whatever you're doing to the bond. It makes me want to... be nice." He finishes with a grimace.

I plant my hands on my hips. "And that would be so bad?"

"I'm not nice." His mouth pulls back, like it's physically painful to even say the word out loud.

"Really? I never noticed."

He blinks and furrows his brow. "You haven't known me long enough."

He missed the joke. I sigh. "I need your help, Orcus. I don't know anything about this world or where to go, but I do know that I need to get back to Edgar before he realizes I'm missing."

His face darkens at the mention of my roommate. "You'd rather return to him than stay with me?" Disappointment suddenly grips me.

"I hardly know you," I say softly, not wanting to hurt his feelings more than I already have.

"You're my mate." The tether between us yanks tight and I'm forced to take a step toward him.

"First, and I cannot say this enough, I'm *not* your mate." Denial for the win. The bond tugs and I stumble forward. "Second, stop doing that!" I growl, trying to find my footing.

He scoops me up, both hands wrapping around my waist, and tosses me over his shoulder. The towel shifts ever so slightly, but the important bits are covered. "You'll stay."

“Put me down.” I smack his back, but he doesn’t even flinch. My feet flail as he turns and ducks into the cave. “This is no way to treat a lady.”

“You are *my* lady and I will treat you how I want.”

I put my all into trying to escape his hold, but it doesn’t work. He’s too strong. He’s too stubborn. I wished for a prince. Not an ogre who wouldn’t listen. Is he really going to keep me here?

FOUR

Never underestimate the power of a nap and yummy snacks

DAISY

Sitting at the wooden table in Orcus' cozy cave, I do my best to hang on to my indignation, but I keep nodding off and this hard chair isn't the best place for a nap. The warmth from the crackling fire is lulling me into a false sense of safety. I scowl at the grumpy ogre again. Some things I've learned in the last hour? He's much better at glaring than I am. The jet lag between Earth and this world is no joke. His shirt is so big on me and it fits more like a dress, but it's well-worn and by far the most comfortable thing I've had on since I landed in the hot spring.

"You should sleep," Orcus grouses from his spot on the bed. He's reading a book and it shouldn't be attractive, but it is.

"I'm fine." My heavy eyelids drift shut and stay that way for a few seconds. His bed was rather soft. My head snaps forward, and I startle awake, shooting a scowl in Orcus' direction when he laughs.

"You're being stubborn. It's annoying." His forehead scrunches.

Well, now that's rich, isn't it? He's the one that decided to help me leave and then changed his mind and refused to listen to reason.

Exhaustion weighs me down, and I glance longingly at the bed. "If I take a nap, I don't want you getting any ideas. It

doesn't mean I agree to stay.”

He simply grunts and perhaps I'm reading too far into the sound the ogre is making, but then a wallop of doubt hits me through the bond as if to say *we'll see about that*.

I narrow my eyes and struggle to my feet. “You can't seriously want me to stay. You seem very content in this cave on your own.” Reaching the bed, I sigh as I crawl up the mattress with leaden limbs. I flop onto it and yawn.

The paper of Orcus' book crinkles, and I roll to my side and study him. He's casually reclined, one foot propped up so the book can rest on his thigh, and one of his arms is slung over his head. Everything I've ever read about ogres, and that's not much, never portrayed them like this. His musky scent wraps around me like a warm hug and the bond vibrates with relief.

Books and movies always make ogres out to be grotesque and foul. Orcus is none of those things. Tusks and all, he's gorgeous. Model worthy. Warm satisfaction rolls over me. He likes my admiration?

He side-eyes me. “You're staring.”

“Am I?” I yawn again and close my eyes, pretending like it never happened. So. Tired.

A soft, pleased chuckle chases me into dreamland.



BIG HANDS PULL me against a strong body. I hum in approval and nestle into the touch, loving the snuggles. A soft snore sounds behind me and whoever is there exhales over the top of my head.

Wait.

I peel my eyes open and look around the darkened cave. The fire has died down. I glance back at Orcus, watching the

steady rise and fall of his chest. He's dead asleep, and I doubt he even realizes he's touching me. The ogre doesn't strike me as an open cuddler.

No longer tired, I slowly slip out of his hold. The stone floor is cold beneath my feet. Shivering, I rub my arms and take a step away from the bed. I pause and wait to see if Orcus jolts awake. The soft whoosh of his breath can barely be heard over my heart pounding in my ears, but he doesn't wake up. I may not know much about this world, but I do know I can't stay here with Orcus.

The tie between us is impossible to deny, but I can't be his mate. I don't know anything about him and he's... an ogre. I'm human. He's so big... in every respect. How would it even work without him killing me? I chew on my cheek and furrow my brow. The logistics of how aren't important right now. What's important is that he's asleep.

Right.

I scan the darkened cave, barely able to make out most of the space. There has to be something I can use as a weapon. Tip-toeing around the kitchen table, I carefully slide a spatula out of the utensil holder and clutch it to my chest. My outfit is hardly travel ready, but I don't have shoes or time to figure out an alternative. The ogre could wake up at any second.

It's time to go.

I quietly make my way out of the cave, hardly breathing for fear of waking him. The soft breeze that was sweeping down the stone corridor grows stronger as I emerge onto the moonlit bathed cliffside. I shiver and wrap my arms around myself. Orcus' shirt billows around my knees. It might've been warm earlier, but at the top of the mountain at night, it's cold.

The moon is nearly full and no different than the one from Earth. A blanket of twinkling stars coats the midnight blue sky. Maybe I'm not as far away from Earth as I originally thought. At night, the forest is an intimidating sea of trees, branches arching into the sky like tentacles reaching for the moon. Leaving this late is dangerous, but this might be my

only chance. I grip the spatula a little tighter and blow out a shaky breath.

Everything is fine. I'll take a casual stroll down the mountainside and find a witch or some other type of magical being to help me get home.

How hard can it be?

I'm not fooling myself, but with false bravado, I take a steadying breath and start down the path that winds down the mountain, carefully dodging sharp stones. If the sky and moon are the same... does that mean I'm in the same solar system? Or maybe this is a parallel universe, but instead of humans there are monsters.

Fuck if I know. I work at a call center; I'm not a scientist. Fantastical things don't happen to me. I'm nobody. The forgotten child of two people who never wanted to be parents. The most impressive thing I can do is bend over backward to make other people happy and buy cake for Edgar. Pressure settles in my chest as I think about Edgar waking up only to realize I'm not there. He's probably beside himself. I should probably worry about the dildo and what happens when he finds it, but that hardly seems important now.

A sharp, cold breeze whips around the mountain. I hunch and power on, hissing in pain as I step on twigs and too-sharp rocks. I'm what must be halfway, *please let it be halfway*, down the mountain when a strange sort of howl rips through the night.

Pausing, I hold my breath and glance around. Does this world have mountain lions and bears? Wolves? Who am I kidding? There are probably scarier things out here on this mountain.

Think positive thoughts.

I could definitely bitch slap a mountain lion with this spatula. There. That's positive.

Besides, the howl wasn't that close. I'm all alone on the path, and I'm being quiet. There's no reason for anything to bother me. A snarl sounds in the distance. A full body tremble

rolls over me, but I clutch my spatula, ready to lash out, and force my feet to keep moving. I pass another cave, the entrance of this one is shorter and narrower than Orcus’.

Curiosity wants me to venture into it, but dying isn’t part of my plan. I quicken my steps. A harsh shiver rattles my bones, but the crisp night air isn’t responsible for the trembling. It’s so quiet. Maybe there’s nothing to worry about. Maybe I’ve seen too many scary movies. Stones scatter behind me followed by labored breathing. I stop waking and the hair on the back of my neck rises. Clenching my fingers around the wooden handle of my weapon, I slowly turn until I’m facing a haggard looking beast. Misshapen head, one eye, foul stench. Not as tall as Orcus, but still a good two feet taller than me. It’s a lot wider and heavier than Orcus, too.

“Hello,” I say with a nervous chuckle.

“My mountain.” It takes a step and lifts a branch that’s been crafted into a club over its shoulder. My pitiful utensil can’t compete with that. The skin above its eye wrinkles. The beast bares its teeth and snarls.

“I’m sorry.” I stumble back. “I was leaving.”

“My mountain,” it growls, taking another step and closing most of the distance between us.

I gasp and continue to back away. “Your mountain. I’m going.”

“GO!” it screams and surges forward, swinging the club back.

“I’m fucking trying, okay!” Squealing, I pivot and make a mad dash down the path.

It roars, almost like it’s angry that I’m running. It really needs to make up its mind. Either it wants me to go or it wants me to stay put so it can beat me to a pulp. I’ll take option one. The beast is so heavy the mountain trembles as it charges after me. No, no, no, no, *no*. Rocks tear into the bottoms of my feet and I struggle to breathe as I break into a sprint. My sides immediately start to ache—I should really do more cardio—and the creature closes in.

Shit, shit, shit.

“I’m going!” I shout over my shoulder, hoping it’ll stop chasing me.

The beast’s lips peel back, revealing blunt, yellowing teeth. “My mountain!”

“I heard you the first time!” I suck in a heavy breath and clench the half of an ab muscle I have, desperately trying to go faster.

“My—” it grunts and a louder, scarier sounding monster growls.

Oh good. More monsters. I don’t look back, not even when my ankle rolls and I drop to the pebble covered path. My spatula flies out of my hand and rocks tear into my shins. My ankle throbs, but there’s no time to stop. The ground shakes as whatever beast came for the one that was chasing me comes closer. I attempt to stand but agony shreds through my tendons, and I collapse back onto the path, completely helpless. Refusing to die like all those half naked women in horror movies, I start to crawl. My chest heaves and tears blur my vision. Orcus’ shirt gets caught beneath my knee and I pitch forward with a sob.

Rough hands snatch me around the middle and I flail, releasing the full body scream I’d been holding in. My heart skips as I’m lifted high into the air.

“Easy now.” Orcus’ smooth voice brushes over my skin and he cradles me in one arm. My legs dangle over the side of his forearm and one aches so much I’m scared to think about it. “This is *my* mountain, fucking cyclops.”

I tremble in his hold and clutch his arm, glancing around and searching for the beast. It’s nowhere to be seen. Relief slams into me and I look up at Orcus. He’s peering down at me between his ivory tusks, one eyebrow arched in accusation.

What did you think would happen?

“I was going to find a village,” I explain even though he didn’t ask.

“I assumed.” He doesn’t have to call me dumb because I can sense it through the bond.

“I didn’t know there would be...” I trail off. I had known there would be monsters. My need to return to Earth drove me to leave in the middle of the night, probably not the safest time to travel, especially when I don’t know anything about this world. “I have to get back to Earth.”

Orcus adjusts his arm and my ankle throbs. I wince. He scowls—he’s very good at scowling—and takes in the blood and filth covering my legs.

“You’re hurt,” he says between clenched teeth.

“Only a little,” I lie.

His annoyance filters to me, and I try not to grind my teeth in response. “You’re staying with me.”

I shake my head. “No, I’m not.”

“Oh?” He sets me on the ground and as soon as he lets me go, my ankle protests and I begin to fall. He scoops me up before my knees can bang to the ground. “You’ll stay.”

“Stubborn ogre,” I grumble as he cradles me in one arm again.

“Foolish lady.”

His frustration is hot and makes my skin itch, but it’s not as bad as the lump forming in my throat as I realize I’m not going anywhere, at least not for a while. We hold one another’s stare until I relent and sag against him. I may not be leaving tonight, but mark my words. I will find a way to get back to Earth.

FIVE

Pleasure is a powerful teacher

ORCUS

Daisy is lucky I found her. Another few seconds and the cyclops would've bludgeoned her to death. They're obnoxiously territorial and not very smart. This is my mountain, and he knows it. I set Daisy on top of the table. She whimpers when I gently touch the bottom of her foot.

"It's a sprain. It'll be fine." She gives me that breezy smile. The ache of pain jetting from her to me says otherwise. "Seriously. It's no big deal."

I stare at her for a moment. Is she serious? She's covered in blood and her feet are shredded. This is not fine. The bond rages at the thought of her being hurt and a similar emotion rolls through me. My chest aches a little and the bond squeezes tight. I don't like *that*, but I don't like *her* being in pain more.

The bond is meant to be cherished and they're blessed by Hecate. The goddess conspired with the fates and crafted a spell that links two souls together, but they can only be linked if the Hecate agrees the match is well made. Or so I've always been told. I'm still not entirely sure my father didn't send her, but to force a bond goes against everything I know. The gods are notorious for doing what they will, though. Perhaps anything is possible if the goddess was given the right motivation. Regardless of *how* it happened, the fact remains that Daisy and I are tied to one another.

Mates take care of each other, even if one mate knowingly put themselves in danger and almost got killed. With a notch of frustration between my eyebrows, I head to the dresser and grab an older shirt and some rags, hating how much I'm compelled to help her.

I didn't ask for this.

I didn't ask to be bombarded with her emotions.

Stopping by the bathing pit, I bend down and wet the cloths. My gaze strays to Daisy. She's right where I left her. Good. At least she listened, probably only because her ankle is hurt, but still. Seeing her right where I left her pleases the bond. She's abusing her bottom lip and staring at her ankle.

Urgency startles through my system, kicking my heart into a gallop. Huffing, I drop to my knees in front of her and sit back on my heels, gingerly picking up her good foot first. I wash off the blood and pick out the tiny pebbles embedded in her heel. The proximity eases some of the discomfort that's made itself at home inside my chest. Under the copper tang of her blood, her scent is floral and rich. Soft and warm. Daisy's breaths are shallow while I work. Her skin is so delicate. So breakable. Occasionally, she hisses in pain but she doesn't yell at me or call me names. I take that as a good sign.

Ripping the old shirt, I fashion a bandage and tightly wrap it around her foot. A little bit of blood seeps through the cloth. It's the best I can do for now.

I lift my gaze once I'm ready to start on the foot with the sprain.

Her green eyes are set on me, apprehension written across her forehead. "Maybe you can leave it?"

"Not a chance, little flower."

She doesn't blink at the nickname. Taking a deep breath, she nods at me. "Okay. I'm ready."

I doubt it. Standing, I grab a vial of luminescent liquid from a tray of various tinctures on my bookshelf. There are only two left. I wish I had more, but my plans to go to the

magic village were disrupted when she fell into my lap. Holding it up for her inspection, I carry it back to her.

“What’s that?” her voice pitches.

“This is a pain-relieving tincture.”

She tips her head in thought. “I thought monsters might have enhanced healing.”

“Hecate’s creatures can heal themselves, but she blessed them with that magic. Echidna didn’t give such blessings.” I hold out the vial. “You should take it.”

Daisy reaches out, hesitating above my palm for a moment before wrapping her fingers around it. She uncorks the vial and stares at it. I take a steadying breath. After saving her she thinks I’d try to hurt her?

“I’m not going to poison you.” I’m enjoying her company far too much to do that.

Lifting her eyes to meet mine, she holds my gaze and brings the vial to her lips. She pinches her nose before draining the entire thing. “Oh,” she says with a soft gasp. Her surprise is a tickle of warmth. “That tasted better than I thought it would.”

I kneel before her. “This part might not be pleasant, but the pain relief will kick in soon enough.” I take her foot and begin cleaning the rocks and dirt from the bottom. She pants while I clean. I keep my touch gentle but when it comes time to wrap the foot and ankle, there’s no getting past hurting her. The Hecate cursed bond bristles. I grunt, still not used to that feeling, and hesitate.

“It’s okay,” she whispers. “You’re helping.”

I rip two strips of fabric from the shirt and begin to secure the foot. She whimpers a little when I help the foot into a bent position.

“You’re all right.” I look up and hold her gaze. “You’re doing good.”

Her pupils dilate, and her attention strays to my lips and then to my tusks. Another emotion stirs within me. One that’s

dangerous but hard to ignore. The longer we stay bonded, the more I heed its demands, the more it'll mean. We go from being magically tied together to wanting to be together, and I know better than to want something I shouldn't have.

All a mate means to me is being under my father's control.

I wrap her ankle, and her body coils tight, tensing from the pain. "Relax," I murmur.

"Stop telling me what to do," she grouses.

My lips twitch. "Unlikely." I tuck the end of the wrap and begin cleaning her legs. She watches me while I work and I pretend not to notice the weight of her attention, heavy as it is.

"So," her voice is carefully light, "that was a cyclops?"

Even the mention of the monster that almost knocked her head off has me clenching my jaw. She has no idea how close she was to death. Or maybe she does and simply doesn't care. Either way, she was careless with herself. It's annoying.

"Yes. They're territorial even when they have no right to be." I slip my gaze up to meet hers. "And venturing out at night was foolish."

"I know," she whispers, dropping her gaze and pressing her lips together. Her embarrassment warms my cheeks.

"You're lucky I found you."

Hurt filters through the bond, but I don't regret chastising her. If she's my mate, she needs to be careful. She should take care of herself. It's natural for me to want to keep her safe, but I don't know that she understands how much waking up to find her gone bothered me. Using the bond, I explore the emotions she's laying bare.

Embarrassment. Self-loathing. A little annoyance. But worst of all, pain and tension. The last bit I can distract her from. Her muscles are still bunched tight when I'm done wiping away the blood. I drop the cloth and run my fingers over her calves, pressing the tips into them and massaging.

"Oh," she breathes and a new sensation washes over me.

Lust.

She wants to leave. I want the bond broken because of what it means, but my instincts don't want her to leave, and that's frustrating. The thought of her out there, stumbling around in the dark sets my protective nature on high. She's safe here with me. Maybe she doesn't realize that. Maybe I can keep the fact that I have a mate a secret and do whatever I can to protect her. Which means maybe I need to give her a reason to stay.

Glancing up, I catch her gaze on my tusks again and my cock stirs. Whether she realizes it or not, she's practically begging to fuck me and the bond is more than happy for me to do just that. I shouldn't fuck her.

She felt too good stretching around my cock. That feeling has the potential to be addicting. I dig my fingers into her muscles and she stiffens, holding her breath.

"You need to relax, little flower."

"I'm rested," she argues.

Always arguing.

"You slept. Breathe," I say, squeezing her muscle again, and this time a soft moan escapes her. "But you aren't relaxed." Slowly, I knead my way up her legs. She makes soft noises of relief, but those aren't the noises I want to hear. I want to hear her whimpering my name. I want to hear her falling apart at my hand.

The bond ripples in agreement and Daisy stirs in response to that feeling, her desire rich like the finest wine. After the bathing pit incident, I know she isn't ready to take me. I could see if she was up for trying, but I don't want to break her and many ogres have done just that when paired with smaller mates.

She needs to be stretched to properly accommodate me. My saliva will help relax her muscles and make it so I won't damage her organs, but it's best to ease her into taking my cock. Frustrated as she is, she may not even want that. I move one hand higher. Her skin is soft as silk and my palm easily

glides up her leg, my thumb dragging along the inside. She sucks in a sharp breath when my fingers dip beneath my shirt that's bunched around her thighs.

“Orcus,” she says, though not in protest. “I’m not staying.”

I ignore that comment and glide my hands over her skin. “Tell me, little flower.” I hold her gaze, enjoying the pure blazing desire filling hers. “Do ladies like pleasure?” I inch closer and closer to her heat.

Her muscles twitch beneath my touch. “Yes.” She gasps.

So responsive. So delicate.

“Spread for me,” I demand.

Automatically she opens her legs, inviting me in and pulling up my shirt. Her cunt is covered in soft, curling hair, and she's already dripping. Here I thought she didn't like me. I smirk to myself and run my thumb over her, caressing and teasing.

“You don't. Have to be. Smug.” Her pupils are fully dilated when I lift my gaze to meet hers.

“You're dripping.”

Her cheeks turn pink and the bond trembles with her lust. Her need.

I very much like that.

Adjusting my positioning, I gather up her slick with one thick finger and edge into her center. Sighing, she drops her head back. I tease her entrance until she releases a tiny growl of frustration and grabs my wrist, forcing me deeper inside her.

My cock pulses as she rocks her hips. Needy. *Mine*. The possessive claim rolls through my head, but I shove it aside. “Can you take another finger?”

“I don't know if I can,” she rasps.

“My saliva will help your body adjust to accommodate me.” I curl my finger inside of her, stroking a soft spot deep

inside that makes her cry out. “Will you let me taste you, little flower?”

There's more to tusks than meets the eye

DAISY

“Yes,” I say with far too much comfort given the situation.
When in monster land...

Orcus' thumb rolls over my clit. Pleasure lights up my nerves and my hips buck into the touch. He chuckles to himself, repeating the motion in rapid succession until I dig my nails into his wrist to keep from collapsing back to the table.

My core clenches around his finger. He growls and rips his hand away. Sucking in a breath and searching his face, I wonder if I've somehow made him mad, but he grabs my thighs and yanks my ass to the very edge of the table. Heart skipping, I stare at him, waiting for whatever move he has planned next with anticipation stirring in my stomach. He's very, very big, and I'm so small in comparison. I teeter on the lip of the table but his tusks hook under my legs, balancing me and pinning me in place right as he buries himself between my legs.

Running his nose over my cunt, he inhales and hums in approval seconds before he flattens his tongue and strokes that thick muscle through my slit. Humming in approval, he runs his big tongue through my slit. Some guys would balk at the natural landscaping, but not Orcus. He takes it like a champ, stroking the hair and parting me so he can tease my clit with his lips and tongue. His tusks secure me, making it so that

there's no way to shy away from his touch. The monster holds me captive and I surrender.

I carefully run my fingers over the top of his hair, worried I'll offend him if I grab onto it.

He sears me with a look and his lips brush over my skin as he says, "Take what you want, little flower."

That nickname should bother me. Him going down on me after being a grumpy butthead should bother me. I should be focused on escaping. But then he runs the flat of his tongue from my center and up my slit, pausing at my clit and sucking hard, and I forget all about logic and lose myself in the pleasure he's offering.

Do ladies like pleasure?

Yes, they fucking do.

My fingers dive into the soft strands of his hair and tug. I expect some sort of frustrated reaction. It never comes. If anything, Orcus works with more fervor, repeating the full-length lick.

Heat pools in my center and my stomach flips when he plunges his tongue inside of me, greedily taking every drop of my essence. I flex my walls and he growls, grabbing two handfuls of ass. I tentatively rock my hips.

He pauses long enough to say, "Don't be shy."

With his permission, I shamelessly grind against his face as Orcus ruins me for any other man. This is more than I've ever dreamed about. Every stroke of his tongue is like fire racing over my skin. Every caress is like kindling, taking the flames of pleasure to an inferno of euphoria. He finds his way back to my clit and slides two fingers inside of me. There's a slight burn as my body stretches to accommodate his fingers, but it's there and gone in a second. Together, they're about as girthy as my new toy and I'm more than pleased to find I can handle them. He pulls them all the way out and slams them back into my cunt, hitting the spot deep inside me with such force that electric pleasure reverberates through my body.

"Oh, f-f-fuck," I stutter around the word.

“Look at you, you like the way I feel inside of you so much you can’t even talk.” His praise traces down my spine and I’m not even mad at how smug he sounds. He relentlessly fucks me with two fingers and sucks at the sensitive bundle of nerves until my mind becomes mush and all I can do is hang on and try to breathe. As if sensing I’m close, he swirls his tongue over my clit, coaxing me.

The pleasure builds and builds and builds until I’m wound so tight I feel like I might break. “Oh, fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck,” I’m squealing and making sounds that should be embarrassing but his ministrations never slow until I shatter, and the world falls apart around me. I expect him to stop, but he doesn’t. He doesn’t let up. He doesn’t let me go until my toes curl and the next wave of pleasure is the strongest orgasm I’ve ever had. Pleasure. Heat. Pure fucking goodness detonates inside of me. Screaming, I squirt all over him as wave after wave of ecstasy rolls over me until I’m nothing but a limp mess of delirium.

It takes me a while to recover, but Orcus is too busy licking me clean to care. My fingers are still clutching at his hair, my knuckles nearly white. I release him, hoping I didn’t hurt the ogre, but when he takes me off his tusks and pulls back to give me that devilish, self-satisfied smirk that zings straight to my clit, I stop worrying.

He wiggles his fingers inside of me, triggering an aftershock. I release a soft moan and arch my back.

With a dark chuckle, he slowly slides them out centimeter by centimeter, watching as my nostrils flare. I clench my walls, trying to keep those fingers for myself. What does he need them for anyway?

As soon as they’re out of my cunt, he slides them into his mouth and sucks them clean, holding my gaze as if he wants me to know how much he enjoys the way I taste. His warm pleasure unfurls inside my chest. Fuck, that shouldn’t be hot. His tusks are gleaming, my cum coating them like oil, and I bite my lip, wondering if it would be weird to lick them clean. He narrows his eyes and releases his fingers, placing both of his hands on my legs and leaning toward me.

“What are you thinking?”

He was literally buried in your coochie like an ogre ready to suffocate his way to death. What was it he said? Don't be shy now.

“Your tusks,” I begin, then decide it's better to show him what I'm thinking rather than stumbling through the words. I grasp his jaw and draw his face toward mine. Starting with the left tusk, I dash my tongue over the cum-coated ivory.

I pause and look at him, making sure it's okay. His lips are slightly parted and his eyebrows are raised, but he doesn't seem mad. There's nothing in the bond telling me to stop. Taking that as an invitation to continue, I run my tongue over every inch, being mindful of the tip and the jewelry, and lick it clean before moving to the other one. Orcus' fingers flex on my leg but other than that, he's frozen. When I'm finished, I pull back. Heat crawls up my neck.

“Thank you for the orgasms,” I say with a bashful grin.

“You're welcome.” A soft sweep of comfort fills me, and he studies my face. “You're not hurt?”

I laugh. “Hardly. That was... that was probably the best fingering I've ever had.”

“It didn't hurt?”

“Nope.” There was that millisecond of burning but that's hardly what I'd call pain. A yawn hits me out of nowhere, and I stretch as my muscles melt.

Orcus stands and carries me to the bed. I would protest, but I'm spent and being in his arms feels so right. That's probably the bond. It definitely has nothing to do with his tongue. I'm still not planning on staying even if those orgasms will live rent free in my head, even if hearing him call me little flower makes my chest clench in a way that isn't natural. That name feels like a claiming.

The part of me that's only ever wished to belong begs me to stay.

But this isn't my home.

And as my eyes grow heavy and a pang of residual pleasure sweeps through me, I can't help but wonder if perhaps I could find a way to make myself at home.



MY THROAT IS like sandpaper when I wake. I sit up with a soft grunt and scrub my hands over my face. Orcus is standing in what appears to be the kitchen. There are no appliances, but he's chopping something with a giant knife and there's a big stone pot placed on a grate over the fire. A loud gurgle comes from my stomach, my body suddenly remembering that we very much like food.

“Do you have water?” My voice is dry and rasping, rough enough to make me want to hide under the blankets in embarrassment.

Orcus points to the side and I follow the gesture. A stoneware pitcher and some cups sit on farther down the counter. I slide off the bed. The wrap around my ankle helps stabilize it but there's a dull throb of pain when I put weight on it. I wince, but breathe through it. It's not as bad as it first was. The cuts were all minor and have mostly scabbed over. All in all, it could've been much worse. The cyclops could have killed me and I might've missed out on those mind-blowing orgasms. That would've been an absolute tragedy.

Orcus' t-shirt brushes over my legs, a gentle reminder of his touch. The tether between us responds to that, all but drawing me toward him. He doesn't turn to greet me as I join him at the counter, but I sense a curious shifting in the bond. I ignore the grumpy monster in favor of water. After three cups, I finally feel mostly human. The scent of whatever he's making fills the air with spices and herbs. My stomach grumbles even louder.

The knife clatters to the counter, and I watch Orcus stomp toward the pot and deposit vegetables—mostly root and some of which I don't recognize—into the concoction. He finally

meets my gaze. His eyebrows are sharply pulled down, lips pressed together in displeasure and annoyance rolls off him in waves, threatening to pull me under.

Does he regret what happened? My chest tightens at the thought. That was the best sexual experience I've ever had.

My stomach gurgles long and loud. I wince. "Sorry," I say, even though I'm not sure why I'm apologizing.

"When was the last time you ate?" he demands.

I have no idea what time it is here, but I've slept twice—though the last time was only a nap. That's probably close to ten hours together. Add the two-ish hours or so where I was trying to escape and he took care of me... "I'm not sure," I confess with a shrug.

His features darken. "You don't take care of yourself." Anger snaps through the bond, and he clenches his jaw.

Wait. Is he mad because I'm hungry? That's so cute and a little confusing.

"I do take care of myself. On Earth." I put my hand on my hip and arch an eyebrow. "Remember the whole falling from the sky incident?"

"How could I forget?" I would think he was being sarcastic, but his eyes and the bond tell another story, simmering with wanton cravings.

My body responds to that idea, my walls clenching, seeking out that same fullness his fingers offered. He takes a step forward and I hold up my hand. As much as I'd love another round, I'm afraid he's going to offer me orgasm upon orgasm until I forget that I have a life on Earth.

And would that be so bad? There's not much of a life to go back to aside from Edgar.

"What are you making?" I ask instead of requesting he help me find a way home. I'll figure out a plan once my belly is full.

The monster side-eyes me. "Autumn Stew."

I breathe and grin. “It smells wonderful.” Another hungry noise from my belly rumbles through the space between us.

“It’s almost ready.” His hands hang at his sides, fisting around nothing.

“Do you need any help?”

He shakes his head and grabs a book from the shelf, plopping onto the mattress. His gaze slides over me, lingering on where his shirt brushes over my thighs. I can’t tell if he wants me to stay or if he wants me to go. Maybe he’s always surly like Edgar.

“How long have you lived here?” I walk, slowly so as not to aggravate my ankle, and inspect every square inch of the cave while I wait for his reply. Some of the walls are smooth, others are covered in jagged stone. The chamber is warm, but with the fire, I’m not surprised. What does surprise me though is how tidy everything is. The furniture, while sparse and practical, is in good shape. Not too worn. All of the wooden pieces are clearly made by expert craftsmen.

Orcus’ attention is like a heat seeking missile that shoots right through me. “Long enough.”

“An ogre of many words,” I tease, continuing around the bathing pit. It’s big enough to fit two ogres. Another ogre would have no problem fitting Orcus inside of them. Stupid human vagina. My brow furrows. Has another ogre shared the bath with him?

The bond bucks in protest and my stomach churns. Wait, why am I so annoyed at that thought? I hardly know the ogre, but the idea of him with someone else makes my skin crawl. That’s probably mostly the mate bond’s fault. I still don’t like thinking about it.

“You’re jealous,” Orcus grunts like I hit him in the gut.

I look at him. “Yes.” There’s no sense in lying, but I’m not about to tell him why.

Eyebrows pinching together, he stares at me. “Why?”

I think he's trying to be intimidating. After living with someone like Edgar, it'll take a lot more than a surly stare to make me break. I turn away and continue on my way. There's no point in trying to explain my complicated emotions. Everything is so... unusual. Messy, even. I'm still not even sure I believe any of this is real.

I stop in front of the bubbling pot of stew. It really does smell delicious. The fire is crackling low beneath the grate and out of habit, I grab the thick wooden spatula and stir it, smiling to myself. I could get used to this. Cooking barefoot over an open flame. It's so simple. So un-hecktic compared to life on Earth. My cellphone is nowhere in sight and I'm not even mad. Though, I am a little put out that I wasn't holding my e-reader when the fall happened.

I'll miss my fictional princes... though Orcus might give them a run for their money when it comes to orgasms. No book has ever done for me what the ogre did. Then again, none of my book boyfriends have magical saliva and inhuman appendages. Maybe I was reading the wrong sort of books...

A big hand brushes down my shoulder and I squeal in surprise, dropping the spatula back into the pot.

"Scared, little flower?"

SEVEN

It isn't polite to think about dicks at the dinner table

DAISY

It takes a moment for my heart to stop racing. Orcus doesn't scare me. I mean he's basically twice my size and could easily kill me, but strangely enough, I'm not afraid. The cyclops attack might've made me a little jumpy.

I tip my head back and peer up at him. "Scared of little old you?" I grin. "No, Orcus. You don't scare me."

A scowl is all I get in return. Perhaps that was the wrong answer?

"The food is ready." Reaching over me, he grabs the pot without any hot pads and carries it to the table.

"Doesn't that hurt?"

"No."

Huh. Maybe his skin is made of tougher stuff than humans. Once the soup is cool enough, we settle at the table. I reach for a bowl, but Orcus grabs it and fills it to the brim. He grabs the bread as well, breaking off a big piece and setting it in front of me.

Laughing, I pick it up. "I could've helped myself."

"No." His tone brokers no argument.

"It's a wonder you live alone." I nibble at my bread, savoring the hint of sweetness and the soft goodness surrounded by a firm crust.

He pauses, spoon halfway to his mouth, and squints at me. “This is an insult.”

“A teasing one.”

Gaping, he shakes his head. “I gave you orgasms. I’m feeding you. You insult me?”

There’s a point somewhere in there.

I place my hand on my chest. “You’re right. I’m sorry. On Earth we have this disease called sarcasm. It’s terminal and I’m afraid I’m affected.”

“You’re sick? With sarcasm?”

I nod. “Oh yes. The illness is rampant on Earth. Mostly affecting the young and beautiful but once in a while you’ll find an elderly person inflicted as well.”

His forehead furrows so hard I almost burst out laughing, but for the sake of not hurting his feelings, I take my first bite of soup. The broth is rich and a little creamy, and the vegetables are cooked to perfection. Not raw, and not too soft or mushy. I hum in approval and smile at Orcus. He watches me then finally takes the bite I’d been keeping him from.

Hollywood always imprints these ideas of monsters and beasts, making them uncivilized and disgusting creatures. Orcus is the opposite of that. He takes perfectly sized bites. He wipes his mouth with a napkin. He chews—and I swear to god, he counts to twenty.

Navy irises capture mine. “You’re staring again.”

“Oh.” I focus on my food. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine.” He gestures to the stew. “Do you like it?”

“Are you kidding me? It’s fabulous.” I devour another spoonful and broth dribbles down my chin. I’m playing the part of an uncivilized monster much better than Orcus. If it bothers him, he doesn’t say. Orcus watches me eat with mild fascination—or perhaps horror given the broth incident—but I’m too hungry to be embarrassed. I finish my stew in record time. I give Orcus a prim look when he arches an eyebrow.

“What? You’ve never seen a lady eat?”

His lips quirk. “I’m beginning to think your definition of lady and mine are different.”

I scoff. “Why? Because I’m not graceful when I eat?”

He gives a non-committal shrug and stands to refill my bowl. “Eat.” Setting down another full bowl, he pushes it toward me.

Telling him he’s not the boss of me would be absolutely childish, but the words fly through my mind all the same as I pick up the spoon and attempt to eat with a little more finesse. Moments of silence stretch between us as we eat. He’s pretending to be aloof, but he can’t hide the curiosity that rushes through the bond.

Setting aside his spoon, he sets his elbows on the table and rests his chin on his hands. “Is there a cure for your disease?”

“What?”

“The sarcasm.”

Oh. I release a soft chuckle. “Right. That. Um, as far as I know, I don’t think so. It’s sort of a once you have it you can’t ever get rid of it sort of thing.”

His face creases with concern.

I wave off the worry. “It’s not a big deal. I’m not really sick.”

“But you do have sarcasm?” His nose wrinkles as he says the word.

“I... do have sarcasm.” I set my spoon in my empty dish, pretending not to notice that he’s still on his first bowl. Feeling bad for worrying him, I change the subject. “The other day you mentioned Hecate. Like the Greek Goddess? Is this world hers?”

“Hecate is one of many deities, perhaps the most bothersome at the moment.” He mutters the last part.

I cock my head. “The bond?”

His eyes flash to mine. “Yes.”

“You don’t want it.”

“My father tried time and time again to force me into coupling so he could—” He cuts himself off with a growl. “Never mind. It’s not important.”

Maybe being the forgotten child isn’t so bad after all. My chest still aches whenever I think about my parents, but at least they weren’t in my business trying to arrange marriages.

“If I understand you correctly, Hecate is responsible for the mate bonds.”

He nods and sets his forearms on the table, leaning toward me. “That, and she’s the mother of magic, the vampires and were-creatures, a moon goddess, and responsible for ordering the death of Echidna.”

I really should have paid more attention to Greek mythology, but I’m guessing this Echidna is within the pantheon and may or may not have been banged by Zeus. Leave it to me to remember the fact that Zeus gets around but not more important things like who Hecate is.

Orcus notices my confusion. “Echidna is the Mother of Monsters.”

“Vampires are monsters.”

He scoffs. “No. They’re not.”

“I think we’re going to have to agree to disagree. So, Echidna is your mom and Hecate killed her?” I frown and search his face. “That was rude.”

This gets a full belly laugh that has heat sweeping to my toes. “Echidna created the monsters, but she isn’t my birth mother,” he says once he stops laughing. “She’s similar to Hecate but less powerful and not a goddess.”

“So...” I begin slowly, hoping I don’t seem dumb. “You hate Hecate because she killed your not mom?”

“No.” He sighs and looks away. “It’s not so simple. I would not be here if not for Echidna, but at the same time, this

world and the Nether Realm would not exist if not for Hecate and the others. Besides, Echidna's spirit is in the Nether Realm."

"Now you're speaking my language. People on Earth love Hades and Persephone. There's even this author who wrote this book and it was so hot." I wave my hand in front of my face. "God, I love smut."

He gives me a funny look. "Smut?"

"Books with sex," I say quickly. "But back to Hecate. Can't we ask her to break the bond?"

"If it were that simple, we'd already be on the way to see her."

It's maybe a little unreasonable to be annoyed by that comment considering I brought it up, but still, those words hit an old abandonment wound. I push those thoughts to the back of my mind. This is nothing like what happened with my parents. "*You were an accident.*"

No, dammit.

This is different.

The ogre growls and I glance at him, noting the hard line cutting across his forehead. "What's wrong with your face?" he demands.

The question is enough to shock a laugh out of me. "Sometimes I wonder the same thing. It's just the way it looks."

"No, not that," he says with a frown. "You looked... felt... sad."

"Are you spying on me with the bond?"

Any hint of concern is gone now. "It's hardly spying if your emotions are screaming at me through the bond."

"Well, I don't know how to stop you from feeling them."

"It's nearly impossible to keep the strong emotions from bleeding through the bond."

“But not impossible?”

“No.” He doesn’t offer anything else on the matter. “Tell me why you were sad.”

“I’m not sure how it works with ogres, but where I come from you can’t command me to tell you things, even if you do give good orgasms.” The last part was meant to be said inside my head.

His features smooth. “Ah. I understand now. You were sad because I’m not pleasing you.” He’s so serious it’s cute, if not a little frustrating, that he thinks all I’m thinking about is his dick. Did it cross my mind? Maybe. Am I going to admit that to him? Absolutely not.

“I have to pee,” I blurt out.

Sighing, he stands with me and I shoot him a look as I test my weight on my ankle. It’s not horrible, but it sure as shit isn’t pleasant. I take the first few steps and he follows.

I side-eye him. “I know the way.”

“You won’t be able to use the latrine without my help.”

Anxiety digs its talons into my chest. I’m not ready for bathroom sharing experiences just yet. “I’ll be fine. Seriously. I won’t be able to pee if you’re there. What if I have to poop?”

He makes a face and stops walking. “Call for me if you need help.”

“Of course.” *Over my dead body.* I can do this without help.



FUCK. I need help. I made it fine to the bathroom and even managed to squat long enough to pee in the hole in the ground. It’s like a natural Porta-Potty, and actually doesn’t smell nearly as bad as those. That’s probably due to cold air sweeping through the much smaller cave. The fire in the cast-iron sconce

on the wall flickers as I clean my hands for the third time in the little bowl of fresh water.

My ankle is screaming at me. The walk here wasn't so bad, but the squatting was horrible and pushed the injury too far. Orcus was right and that's annoying. I should call for his help, but that means admitting that I was wrong and my pride isn't ready to accept that fact because that means I won't be able to leave on my own until my ankle is better.

Frustrated beyond belief, I scrub my hands over my face and then turn and stagger to the wall. I use it for support as I hobble toward the main corridor, hissing in pain on the fifth step. I need to elevate it. I need ice and ibuprofen. I can't get any of that here on this stupid planet. My eyes burn but I refuse to cry.

Everything will be okay. It has to be.

"Little flower," Orcus snarls when I limp out of the hall to the bathroom. His irritation crawls over my skin. Right. He's probably pissed that I inconvenienced him after I said I could handle it.

I sniff and glare at him. "I'm fine."

"Your pain is so strong I can feel it."

The bond is a pain in the ass.

"I don't know what you're talking about." I turn and take a step, wincing as my legs begin to shake. I'm not going to make it. I'm not in the habit of pissing people off. I go out of my way to make people happy. Asking Orcus for his help when it so clearly annoys him goes against my every instinct.

But I don't have to ask. One moment, my palm is trembling against the cool stone, and the next I'm whisked into his arms.

"Stubborn lady," he grouses. "You don't take care of yourself."

I don't have a biting response. The pressure is off my ankle and I'm too relieved to argue. Orcus settles me on the bed with more care than I expect. He pushes the bed against the wall. I

grip the sheets to keep myself in place. What in the world is he doing? The ogre snatches two pillows and gives me a stern, almost fatherly look. I find myself lying back without needing to be told. Orcus grunts and crawls onto the bed. I squeak when I start to roll toward him and scoot to the side. He keeps coming. I keep scooting until I'm flush with the freezing cold wall.

Those navy irises burn into me as he hovers over me. I stare up at him, wide-eyed and a little confused. He gently lifts my leg, placing the pillows underneath and positioning my ankle so it rests against the cool stone.

"Oh," I breathe. It's no ice pack, but it'll help.

He gives me another scathing look. *Stay put.*

I nod and press my lips together, watching as he climbs off the bed and heads to the bookshelf. His shoulders are tense. Great. Now not only am I the mate he never wanted, I'm a burden.

"We had so many plans... then we had you." My mother's voice cuts through my head, annoyed as per usual. She never enjoyed having me around.

Stop. The pain is messing with me. I can find a way to fix this. Maybe not today, but once I'm feeling better, I'll find a way to make sure the ogre knows how useful I can be.

"You're sad again." The vial of silver liquid in Orcus' hand almost shimmers.

"Yeah," I admit. "It's not a big deal." I eye the vial. "More pain medicine?"

He holds it out for me to take. "There are only two left. I don't have any healing tinctures, otherwise I'd give you one of those as well."

"I can't take that if you're almost out. What if you need it?" Scrunching my nose, I lean forward and gently run my fingers over my aching ankle. "With rest, it'll be okay."

"Here." Orcus taps my hand with the vial. "Take it."

"It's okay—"

A snap of anger shoots through the bond and my fingers curl into fists. “Stop saying it’s okay,” he growls. “You’re in pain and I can feel it and I need you to take the damn medicine.” Clenching his jaw, he squints and taps my hand with the vial again.

“All right, all right. I’ll take it.” Uncurling my fist, I snatch the vial from his palm, fingers brushing over his skin. A tingle shoots down my spine at the contact. I ignore it and quickly drink the pain medicine. “There, are you happy?”

He nods. “You should rest.”

I’m getting a little tired of being told what to do, but he’s right. The only way I’ll be able to make my way back to Edgar is by getting well. The last thing I want is for Edgar to think I abandoned him. I rub at my chest.

The ogre releases a harsh exhale.

Right. My emotions.

“I’m fine,” I lie again.

The funny thing is, I’ve been telling myself that same lie for most of my life. Maybe someday it’ll be true. One can hope.

EIGHT

The beast meets his match

ORCUS

I recognize stubbornness when I see it. Daisy, the infuriating creature, tries to walk more than she should. The pain-relieving potion helped with the inflammation, but it also made her brave. On the second day, I regret giving her the final vial. Maybe if she felt the pain, she'd realize her limits and stop pushing herself. I watch her walk to the pitcher of water and try to hide the slight give in her gait. She's not fooling me. My stomach has been in knots because of how much of her pain is shared through the bond.

Setting my book aside, I stand and join her at the counter.

"Thirsty?" she asks, handing me the cup she filled.

I push it toward her. "No."

She searches my face. "You don't have to stay, you know. I'm sure you have better things to do than glare at me all day."

I scowl. "I'm not glaring."

"This," she runs her finger between her eyebrows and I become increasingly aware of the hard line between mine, "hasn't gone away."

Because she's not taking care of herself.

"I don't have anything else to do," I tell her instead, which isn't true at all. I *had* planned a trip to the magic village for supplies and to see if there was a way to seek the furies' forgiveness, an offering of some sort, but that can wait a few

more days. The furies are immortal and one thing about the immortals is they like to play with their prey before they go for the kill. They've only just begun messing with my father's kingdom.

"Well, the least you can do is let me help with something."

"No."

She scoffs. "Now who's being stubborn?" Shaking her head, she sets the cup aside and gives me a pleading look. "I'm so bored."

"Do you like books?"

"I'm not sure how that's even a question," she murmurs.

My lips twitch. "Go lie down and I'll read to you."

A bolt of desire shoots through the bond and I ignore the ache in my balls. She slowly walks to the bed and I grab my book before plopping down beside her. Daisy rolls onto her side and tucks the pillow under her chin. Her green eyes are bright with excitement and I try not to stare at her or pay any attention to the way my cock stirs in my pants. I'm already pushing it.

I should have taken her to a healer the moment she was hurt, but the selfish part of me wanted to keep her here with me for a little while so we could exist in a bubble outside the weight of the world's expectations.

"This is a story about madness and love."

She releases a soft laugh. "Does he keep her against her will?"

I side-eye her. "Have you read the book?" I show her the cover.

"Something like that," she says, hiding a smile in her pillow.

I take that as permission to begin. "The beast had never known a gentle touch. Cruel hands. Hateful words. Those he knew all too well. Perhaps that's why when he first met Lana, he mistook her kindness for a twisted game."

Daisy's breath brushes over my skin, and I glance at her, happy to find a little grin on her face, then continue reading. I tell myself it's an excuse to keep her from walking around and has nothing to do with the flutter of happiness in my chest.



SOMETHING CLATTERS to the floor and jerks me awake. Colorful curses follow. I've never met a *lady* that used the word fuck as much as Daisy. Not that I mind. Yawning, I sit and take in the mess she's made in my kitchen. She's hobbling about and muttering to herself. Above a low fire in the recessed part of the wall, the small pot is steaming from whatever she's cooking and all the ingredients from my cold room are out on the table. Eggs. Vegetables. Fruits. She shoves a strand of that vibrant red hair out of her face and glares at the pot.

"What are you doing?" She rested for all of two days while I read to her off and on. It probably wasn't enough time for her ankle to fully heal, and I've discovered, with much frustration, that the woman doesn't listen to reason.

She releases a tiny sound of surprise but recovers quickly. "Good morning," she says. "I'm making you breakfast." Her forehead furrows.

"Why do you look so mad?"

"I'm not mad," she snaps, then takes a deep breath. "I'm sorry. I'm annoyed with your pot. It's not non-stick."

I make a face. I'm not stupid but some of the words she uses make no sense to me. If she were from this world, I'd think she might be speaking in another language. She's been using the common tongue, my primary language, since she arrived, and it's becoming increasingly clear to me she has no clue about this world. No one with knowledge of how things work would venture down a mountain in monster territory at night.

“I don’t know that word,” I confess.

“Non-stick. Teflon. Heck, I’d take a well-seasoned cast iron over this thing.” She frowns. “Do you have any butter? I couldn’t find it in the cold room.”

That I understand. “I’m out.”

She sighs and scrapes the spatula along the bottom of the pan. “Well, then I’ll make it work. Might have to soak your pot after, but most of the food will be fine.”

“You shouldn’t be standing.”

“I’m not going to break.” She wrinkles her nose and pours the egg mixture. “Besides. I’m feeling much better.”

Thanks to me forcing her to relax. I don’t blame her for being stir crazy, but I do wonder if this means the end of our story time. Something about the way she curls up close drives me wild. It’s a sadistic kind of self-torture. I haven’t allowed myself to touch her again. I’ve been trying to keep those bond driven urges under control, but it’s near impossible with the way my shirt clings to her tits and hangs above her knees, coating her in my scent and hiding the most delicious parts of her body from me.

Needless to say, my balls ache and the way Daisy smiles at me isn’t helping the situation. She looks at me like I’m... friendly. And sometimes, when she thinks I’m not looking, hunger fills her gaze. I like that more than I care to admit.

I stand and stretch, running a hand down my abs and yawning again.

“*Jesus,*” Daisy murmurs.

I glance at her but she’s focusing a little too hard on the pot. Her cheeks are bright pink. Lust, hot and lethal, zaps from her to me. Naughty, little flower. My cock stiffens and I saunter in her direction. Her breath quickens and she makes a point to ignore my approach, turning away from the pan and grabbing two plates from the counter. I quickly close the distance between us and place my hands on either side of her. She stiffens, but doesn’t turn around.

I cage her in and lower my head until my lips brush over her ear. “What are you thinking about?”

The bond pulses with need and my stomach clenches.

“Food,” she says, voice breathy and light.

“Liar,” I whisper.

Air hisses between her teeth, and she slips out from under my hold, practically running from me, and I let her, despite my brain screaming at me to make her tell the truth and then reward her.

“Here,” she says, shoving a bowl in my direction. “It’s a scramble.” She sits at the table, and I join her, adjusting myself once I’m seated and using the table to shield her from my painfully obvious erection. Looking at me, she tugs her bottom lip between her teeth.

Fucking torture.

I shake my head and take a bite. “Wow,” I say around a mouthful. This is different from what I usually make, but it’s delicious.

“Good, right?” She beams at me and that pure happiness hits me square in the chest.

My stomach flutters a little and I scowl at that. She says she’s not a witch, but Daisy has some sort of sorcery because I don’t get stomach flutters. I’m a hardened warrior. Daisy winks at me and shoves a forkful of food in her mouth. Cursed, stars, why do I want to smile?

NINE

What happens in the bathtub,
doesn't stay in the bathtub. Thanks
a lot, Edgar

DAISY

I'VE NEVER SEEN an ogre blush, but damn if it isn't cute as hell. Orcus' navy eyes slip over my face for the fifth time since we sat down and my smile grows a little wider. What's he thinking about? Moments ago, our minds were on the same track, the bond made that abundantly clear, but now I can't quite pin down what his emotions mean. Frustration. A bit of happiness. Confusion. Curiosity.

That's the most dangerous feeling of all.

I start to ask him about it but something falls from the top of the cave and into the bathing pit. Orcus growls and slowly sets his fork down while I scramble out of my seat and race over. That thing was very human looking. They haven't come up for air. Maybe they're drowning.

I kneel down at the edge of the bath and spot a familiar face.

"Edgar!" I shove my hands into the water, but he's too far down for me to reach like this.

One long, green arm reaches into the pit and grabs Edgar, dragging him out. Orcus sets the prone elderly man down with more care than I expect given how nasty he'd been when I was talking about Edgar.

“What are you doing here, Edgar?” I pump my hands on his chest to try and force whatever water he’s breathed in out.

“Why are you doing this?”

I shoot Orcus a look. “I’m trying to save him.”

“Looks like you’re hurting him.”

“This is how we save people when they swallow water.” Edgar gurgles, projecting water out of his body and wheezing as he struggles to breathe unhindered. I roll him over and pat his back. “You’re okay.” I help soothe him until his breathing returns to normal.

Orcus’ eyes are like a heavy weight, but I’m too worried to pay him any mind.

Eventually Edgar flops onto his back and looks at me. “Daisy,” he croaks. “I found you.”

“What are you doing here, Edgar?”

His bushy eyebrows pinch together and those cloudy eyes take me in. “I came to find you. Didn’t think you’d survive on your own.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” I say with a shake of my head.

“I knew you’d help me find the way, Daisy.”

I guess portal—or whatever it is—travel doesn’t erase Alzheimer’s.

“Edgar,” I begin, lips tugging down. “We’re not on Earth.”

He blinks. “Well, thank fuck for that. We need to get to the magic village.”

“I told you we can’t go unless we find—wait. Wait! Edgar.” When I was holding onto the shelf in the bathroom, something hard had pressed into my skin. It was right after that that the tub disappeared and I fell through the shimmering mist. I grab his shoulders and shake him a little. “That was the amulet?”

Grunting, Edgar wheezes. “Easy on the goods, sunshine.”

I release him and drop my hands into my lap. “Sorry. The amulet then. Is that the thing that brought me here?”

“That’s it.”

“Wait. Does that mean you’re not sick?” Maybe memory loss isn’t Edgar’s problem. He was telling the truth, but it was too far-fetched for anyone on Earth to believe. “You weren’t confusing books with reality or making up stories, were you?”

“I’m old and I forget stuff and I like to nap, but I don’t have half of what they said I had. You humans never listen.”

“What about forgetting the caretaker’s names?” I ask, still a little skeptical.

“Sally, Nathan, Chantel, Latoya, and Carl. Bunch of assholes if you ask me. I didn’t need a damn nurse.”

I cover my mouth and search his face. He’d given all those caretakers so much grief and misery the companies refused to send more.

“Don’t you look at me like that. You would’ve done the same in my position.” He thinks for a minute then chuckles. “Come to think of it, you wouldn’t. You’re too nice for your own good.” But then he squints at me. “When I found you’d gone, I thought maybe you weren’t so nice after all and left without me. Then I found the dil—”

I slap my palm over his mouth. “Let’s not talk about that, okay?”

The old man scowls at me.

“I mean it, Edgar. Pretend like it never happened. Please,” I tack on because I’m being pretty rude.

“Pretend like what never happened?” Orcus asks, unable to sit by as a silent observer any longer.

“Nothing,” I say too quickly. Giving Edgar one more pleading look, I remove my hand.

“She had a dildo in the bathtub,” Edgar grouses.

I gasp. “Edgar!”

“No one tells me what to do,” the old man snaps.

“Sounds like someone I know,” Orcus drawls.

I point at the ogre with his stupid gorgeous face. “You stay out of this.”

Scoffing, he rolls his eyes. After a moment of silence, Orcus asks, “What’s a dildo?”

“Candy,” I say at the same time Edgar says, “It’s a pretend penis, son.”

Slapping my hands to my face, I release a long groan as Orcus asks a few more questions.

“*Ladies* use these things?”

Edgar releases a bark of laughter that turns into a coughing fit. Grudgingly, I drop my hands to make sure he’s okay, but the bastard is full on smiling even though he’s hacking up a lung.

“This is what happens when you betray people,” I tell him.

“Ladies?” he wheezes around another cough.

“My intrusive thoughts are telling me to shove you back into the bathing pit.”

That fixes him right up. Edgar stops laughing and eyes me warily. He doesn’t say anything else about the dildo.

“Where’s your wheelchair?”

“In the bathroom. I figured I’d try the same thing as you did.”

“You used the dildo?” Orcus asks, pulling a face.

“Of course, not!”

“Jesus Christ,” I mumble. “Can we forget about that, please? So... you took a bath and held the amulet?” I ask Edgar.

He nods. “I wished that I would find you because you’re not suited for a world like this.”

“Are you calling her weak?” Orcus’ tone all but dares Edgar to try.

The old man studies the ogre then slides his gaze to meet mine. “Got yourself an admirer?”

“If that’s what you call a grumpy butthole who won’t help me find my way home, then yes, I have an admirer.”

“She likes my tusks,” Orcus says with a shrug.

“Well,” Edgar struggles to sit up, so I help him. “They are pretty shiny. In great condition too. Do you oil them?”

“Occasionally.” Orcus extends a hand. “I’ll help you stand.”

“He can’t stand,” I tell him, remembering that he’s probably never seen a wheelchair so he wouldn’t know why I asked Edgar about that. “His legs don’t work like ours. Edgar, are there more amulets somewhere in this world? Are there more people that have traveled to Earth?”

“It’s the first trip that I know of. I asked the warlock who made it to send me somewhere to hide... I guess he hadn’t worked out all the kinks because I certainly didn’t mean to get stuck on that messed up planet for so long. Good thing I had plenty of gold with me, otherwise I would have been living on the streets.” Edgar leans on his hands and glares at his legs. “I hoped to be rehabilitated eventually, but that didn’t work out. Anyway, like I said. Daisy isn’t suited for this world. She’s too sweet.”

Orcus arches an eyebrow but doesn’t say whatever it is he’s thinking. I think I’ve proven I *can* be nice when certain ogres aren’t being unreasonable.

Everything Edgar’s said catches up to me and clicks into place. Warlock. Spell. Gold. *You humans never listen.*

“Wait. You’re from here?”

Edgar sighs. “And they told me I needed supervision.”

I bristle. “Give a woman a minute, would you? There’s a lot going on.”

“He’s from Folk, the folk territory.”

“Was from Folk before they kicked me out.” He grunts and pushes his way into a better position. It’s a slow process, but he manages. Too bad traveling through whatever wizardry that was didn’t magically change his age. Edgar is still seventy-eight.

“Do I even want to know what you did?”

“Probably not,” Edgar says with a grimace.

“Hold on.” I scrunch my face. “It’s been a week and you just got around to searching for me? What were you doing all those days?”

Edgar frowns. “What are you talking about? I woke up this morning and couldn’t find you. You know the rest of the story.”

“It’s only been a day on Earth?”

The lines on my forehead deepen. How is that even possible? That’s a silly question. Nearly every sci-fi show has some type of time difference. But if only a day has passed on Earth and it’s been a week here...

“You’ve been gone for a long time,” I murmur.

“Yes,” Edgar says solemnly. “I’ve never been good at math, but if there’s a time difference... I’ve lost a lot of years here.”

My brow furrows. “But, maybe that’s good? You’re younger than you should be, right?”

He stares over the top of my head, lost in his own thoughts. I glance at Orcus, but he’s as surprised as I am. Maybe a little grumpy too. Though I’m starting to like the way his mouth pulls into displeasure, especially when I’m the one that transforms it into a smile.

“Point is.” Edgar’s voice is a little hoarse. “I found my way back and now I need to see a magical healer to fix my legs.”

That's an optimistic goal. I don't know the limits of magic, but no human medicine has been able to help him. For Edgar's sake, I hope there's someone who can help him.

Orcus eyes Edgar's legs. "But I know a warlock who might be able to help."

Rude. He'll help Edgar but not me?

"I thought you hated witches." I vaguely gesture at myself.

"I hate anyone who does my father's bidding," he counters. "This warlock is a good friend."

Edgar holds out his hands to Orcus like a toddler waiting to be picked up. "Well, what are we waiting for?"

TEN

What do ogres and jealousy both have in common?

ORCUS

The folk talks too much. We've been traveling for hours and I don't think he's stopped to take a breath aside from when we paused to relieve ourselves. Daisy's hand is draped over my shoulder to keep her steady as she stands. She tosses her head back and laughs at something Edgar says. I narrow my eyes, wondering how mad she'd be if I accidentally dropped them both. Probably really pissed.

Grudgingly, I keep them both safe in my arms. The path we're on is well maintained, so much so that I'm more than happy for the sun to set over the tops of the trees. Autumn is approaching, but that hasn't stopped the summer heat from beating down on me as we've traveled.

Normally it wouldn't be so bad. Carrying Daisy and Edgar is taking more of a toll than I expected. The folk can't walk and my mate is too short to make good travel time. I don't mind carrying them, but I do mind how much Daisy seems to enjoy Edgar's company. She's smiling. The bond is filled with sunshine and rainbows again. *She likes him*, I realize with growing agitation.

It shouldn't bother me, but it does. Taking a mate was never part of the plan, but by a twist of fate, she's here. If my father finds out... I don't want to think about it. I don't want the kingdom he's created. I don't want to face the consequences of the things he's done. Eventually, the furies will tire of toying with us and they'll come for blood. It'll be

dangerous and deadly. It'll put her in danger. I need to find a way to break this thing between me and Daisy.

The bond grows taugth in protest and Daisy shoots a curious stare in my direction. Ignoring the look, I continue toward our first stop. The warlock I know lives in a village far from my cave. As strong as I am, we'll need to rest along the way. I should continue walking and avoid other monsters for as long as I can, but Edgar needs a proper bed to sleep in and food. Besides, by the time someone can report back to my father that I have a mate, she'll be back on Earth.

There's a strange desire to help Edgar, probably because Daisy wants it, and I find myself paying more than close attention to him. Slowly, he says less and less.

"We're almost there," I tell them.

"He's sleeping."

I glance down. The folk's face is red from being out in the sun. Maybe the heat got to him. "The inn is nearby."

"An inn?" Her eyebrows fly up her forehead. "Not another one bed trope," she whispers.

I have no idea what a trope is. "Did you expect a cave?"

"Honestly? Yes."

Laughing, I gaze down at her for a moment. She braided her hair and used a scrap of an old t-shirt to cinch the one she's wearing tight around her waist. I want to yank out the string she used to secure her vibrant red hair and set those strands free. I want to... *no*. Swallowing, I force myself to look away. "This inn is built to cater toward monsters," I explain.

Her fear flits to me. "Do they cater toward cyclops?"

"Cyclops would never stay there even if they did. They're more roamers than anything and hate being confined. And the next time I see the one who nearly killed you, I'll make sure you never have to be scared again."

Daisy sags in relief.

“I will protect you. No one, aside from a cyclops, would be stupid enough to hurt what’s mine.” They would more likely run to tell my father I’m traveling with company than come near her.

“I’m not yours.”

I stroke the bond to prove my point and she gasps, nails digging into my shoulder. “Stop that.”

“Ogres don’t like to be told what to do,” I say, throwing her words back at her.

“You’re insufferable.”

Me? She’s the one who looks at me like I’m good. She’s the one who has the audacity to look so fuckable when we’ve been on the road all day. I’m not insufferable; I’m fucking suffering and I know she’s the one who could end my agony. She’s too tempting, and I know she feels more than disdain for me. I caress the tether between us once more and she stifles a moan.

“Your body likes me,” I tease.

She shakes her head. “My body doesn’t know what’s good for it.”

“So the brain is in denial then.”

“I’m not in denial. Clearly, this is something neither of us expected. It was an accident and we have to find a way to fix it.”

And yet I find myself once again torn between breaking the bond and keeping it. She makes me smile. Her huffs of annoyance when I’m being stubborn fill my chest with warmth. She’s quite possibly the most magnificent being I’ve ever laid eyes on. Her skin is soft. Her lips are plump and kissable. Her pussy is tight and perfect. *She licked my tusks.* And best of all, she wasn’t sent by my father.

She falls silent, but her irritation zips through the bond followed closely by another emotion. Despair?

That doesn’t sit right with me at all.

ELEVEN

Never let a snake keep you from dinner

DAISY

A breeze coasts over my skin and the deep green leaves of the forest trees rustle together, heralding our arrival. The inn is set off to the side of the wooden path we'd been traveling on. Though, inn doesn't feel like the appropriate word. It's a stone monstrosity tall enough for Orcus to comfortably stand. Light spills out of the dirty windows and booming voices pour into the night. The patrons inside are rowdy, maybe drunk, but seem to be having a good time.

Unease swims in my gut as he reaches for the door. Who knows what type of monsters will be in there? The only other one I met was downright terrifying.

Orcus steps into the dimly lit inn and all conversation stops. There are a few ogres, or at least they look like ogres, who turn rigid once they lay eyes on us. A couple of monsters sit off to the side, whispering as they study Orcus. They're huge like bodybuilders but have a strange, grayish tone to their skin. Gargoyles maybe? A handful of centaurs stand at the bar, clutching goblets of wine. A minotaur with big hooves for hands sets a mug full of beer at a table nearby and casts a curious look in our direction. He's wearing trousers, but his chest is bare, showcasing his deep brown hide and layers of muscle. There are more monsters I can't even begin to identify.

Everyone is staring. Almost everyone is quiet. Apprehension thickens the air, making it impossible to breathe

—or perhaps that’s me realizing how human I am. I force myself to inhale.

A monster with green skin that’s lighter than Orcus’ marches over. It’s probably only seven- or eight-feet tall judging by Orcus’ height and its waist is a bit smaller. It has tusks, but they’re not nearly as nice. All ogres aren’t made the same.

“Orcus—” the smaller ogre begins, but Orcus interrupts.

“I need two rooms.”

“Right this way.” The monster turns and leads us through the dining hall.

“That was rude,” I whisper. “You didn’t even say hi.”

Orcus grunts.

I think I might hate that sound. I would say more, but the monsters are all so eerily silent it unsettles me. Do they hate him? There are other ogres in the dining hall and no one seems off put by them. It’s only my surly green giant that’s getting some serious side-eye.

The smaller monster stops in front of two giant doors. “Two rooms for the pr—”

“That’ll be all. Thank you.”

“Still rude,” I point out.

Orcus closes his eyes and releases a full body sigh. “Help me with Edgar’s door.”

He sets me down, the material wrapped around my feet keeping most of the chill from the stone floor at bay. My ankle hardly hurts anymore, but there’s enough discomfort that I’m grateful Orcus carried me today. There’s food downstairs and the promise of warm beds. We’re on our way to see a warlock and I’m 100% going to ask for a way home. All in all, things are looking up.

“Why are you moving so slow?” Orcus asks.

Closing my eyes, I pray for patience and open the door. “Are you always so rude?” The prayer didn’t work. Maybe I

need to try to talk to Hecate instead of God.

“I didn’t mean it to be rude. Is your ankle bothering you?”

Oh. Well. I guess that’s kind of sweet in his own, grumpy ogre way. “It’s much better.” Together we ensure Edgar is comfortable, though the elderly man—er, folk—never wakes up and continues snoring.

I’m not looking forward to the jet lag that’ll accompany my return home. And I will get home, even if I have to threaten a warlock. I’m not quite sure how to go about threatening someone with magic, but I’ll find a way. See? Positivity for the win.

“Come.” Orcus turns and slips out of the room.

I stay beside Edgar’s bed, refusing to follow that type of request for a second time. The first time I let it slide because he was going to help me. It takes him a moment to realize I’m not following. Orcus returns with a huff.

“I said come.”

“Oh, I heard you.”

His eyebrows draw down, leaving angry gouged lines in their wake. “You’re hungry.”

“I am, but I’m not a dog,” I say through gritted teeth.

“I don’t know what a dog is.”

This ogre. I swear to god. “If you remember, I’m a lady. If you want a lady to do something, you should ask nicely.”

Releasing a full body sigh, he softens his voice. “Come, now.”

I laugh. “I’m so confused how you think THAT is any better.”

He grumbles and crosses his arms over his impressive chest. I ignore the bulging biceps. “Are you hungry?” he says.

“Lovely of you to ask, Orcus. I’m famished. Shall we go get some food?” I march around him and out of the room, heading toward the dining hall full of monsters. If I slow my

steps enough for Orcus to catch up, that's merely a coincidence and has nothing to do with the sudden fear gripping my chest.

"You're safe." He's so confident.

I tip my head and glance up at him. "You said you were the best warrior. Is that why they were all staring?"

"Something like that," he says.

We reach the sitting area and this time the conversation doesn't completely die down. Monsters do stop and stare, but they return to their food or drinks and carry on. The shock of his arrival must be wearing off.

Orcus claims one of the last empty stone top tables. I wait for the minotaur server to pass with plates full of steaming food before moving to sit opposite of Orcus. He snatches me around the middle and places me on his thick thigh. My hand instinctively clutches at his soft gray shirt. It's a lighter shade of the shirt he let me borrow. Before we left, I used what was left of the fabric he used to wrap my feet and made a belt. The outfit still isn't the most flattering, but at least now there's some shape to it.

"I can sit on my own."

"No."

I narrow my eyes, getting ready to ream into him, but a sudden low hiss comes from across the table. Whipping around, I release a tiny squeak. A big snake with gleaming yellow scales has taken my spot. It hisses again and leans across the table, flicking its tongue and tasting the air. I press into Orcus as my heart slams against my ribcage. Suddenly, sitting in his lap doesn't sound so bad.

Orcus' free hand catches the snake, his thumb and forefinger squeezing the snake's mouth shut, and he gives the snake a look that borders on murderous.

Am I... attracted to this?

"Either speak to me in your common form or go away." Orcus' voice is low and threatening. It should terrify me but a

shiver of delight races down my spine.

The snake's eyes flicker in acquiescence and Orcus releases him. The snake slithers back. I expect him to leave, but his form ripples, and a second later, a large, naked man with a dick covered in shimmery yellow scales stands before us.

Huh. I wonder how that feels.

A green hand covers my face and blocks the view.

“Hey!” I was looking at that.

“Stop staring at his dick.”

The bond tightens, scolding me, and I try not to pout. Yeesh, I was only looking. It's not every day I see a scaled dick.

“Don't blame her, Orcus. It *is* a nice cock.” This from the snake turned man.

Oh good. Even the snakes are humble.

“Someone get him something to wear,” Orcus snarls.

It's then I realize the dining hall is silent again. Orcus is a natural born conversation killer. Who knew? After a few moments of rustling and banging around, Orcus moves his hand. My eyes immediately shoot to the snake-man's crotch, but now he's wearing trousers and a loose top.

“She's curious for a folk. Has she never met a snake shifter before?”

“She,” I begin before Orcus can speak for me, “is capable of being addressed directly and no, she has never seen a snake shift into a human before. She has definitely never seen a scaled penis. I'm sorry for staring.”

The snake blinks at me; the slit of his pupils are surrounded by shockingly pretty yellow irises. If I were into snakes, he'd qualify as moderately attractive, but he doesn't have the same brutish handsomeness that Orcus does. His member is smaller, but that might not be a bad thing with the

scales. I'm not supposed to be thinking about either of their cocks.

"It's all right," the snake says.

"What do you want, Basil?" Orcus asks.

Basil slides his gaze to my surly mate. "Your father has been asking about you."

"And?" Orcus stops the minotaur server and orders us food and ale.

"And water, *please*," I add.

The minotaur gives me a curious once over then heads on their way. Most people have gone back to their conversations, but now they're subdued and there are more than a few glances tossed in our direction.

"You have a responsibility," Basil says once the minotaur is gone.

"No. He'll have to deal with the furies himself." Orcus waves his hands and dismisses Basil.

Red blotches Basil's cheeks and yellow scales ripple over his arms. "You can't shirk responsibility forever."

Some monster off to the side gasps. Orcus goes preternaturally still. The bond lights up with a rage that comes from somewhere deep inside my ogre. My heart slams against my rib cage, and my hands shake, taking on some of his anger. Basil steps forward, either oblivious to the ire he's provoked or stupid enough to test Orcus' patience.

"You have a place at court, but you chose to abandon your station when you had an argument with the king."

"You don't know what you speak of," Orcus growls.

My own hackles rise thanks to Orcus' irritation.

Basil barks out a cruel laugh. "I know only a fool hides in a cave."

Orcus' begins to tremble. The snake is doing a damn good job of riling him. The urge to protect him slashes through me,

and I'm up and out of his lap in the next second. I round the table before the ogre can grab me. Against all better judgment, I head toward the snake. Breathing in, I grab hold of that easily obtainable anger pouring out of Orcus and make it my own.

"Basil, was it?" I ask, stopping in front of him.

The snake blinks at me and his slitted pupil narrows. "This conversation doesn't involve you, folk."

"Oh my sweet summer child," I say with a laugh. "I'm not a folk. I'll tell you what I am though." I take three steps forward.

He steps back, surprised by my advance, then scowls at me and returns to the spot. Our fronts are nearly touching. Orcus stands, my body attuned to his, but I don't pay him any mind.

"I'm *tired* of monsters who don't listen. I'm thirsty. I'm hungry. I think I want beef jerky, but I'm shit out of luck finding that here, and now I'm beginning to realize I may never have my favorite snacks again. Most of all though, I'm a little pissed the server isn't coming back because you're over here trying to pick a fight." I sigh and place my hand on Basil's arm. "Can't we all get along?"

"No."

Well that's rude.

"Funny. Orcus said *no* too."

Basil flicks his gaze over my head and looks at Orcus. "Your *mate* is either brave or stupid."

I mean, I'm pretty sure it's both, but I tip my chin up, pretending like it's 100% bravery instead of a 50/50 split. The way he said *mate* sounded a whole lot like an accusation too.

"Leave, Basil." There's a certain deadliness to Orcus' voice that wasn't there before and protectiveness zings through the bond, enveloping me.

Basil takes a few steps away from me. "I meant what I said." Those snake eyes cut to me. "I'll be sure to let your father know about this... development."

Orcus steps around the table with a growl. The air thickens with the promise of violence.

“Are you trying to become a new pair of boots?” Who am I kidding, the snake isn’t listening to me. It was worth a shot though. I shake my head and focus my energy on my monster. His face is scrunched and his fingers curl into giant fists big enough to break these walls and pummel the snake into the ground. “Orcus.”

He moves toward Basil. Patrons scramble out of their seats and away from the snake. Oh, hell no. I’m not letting a fight get in the way of food. I move in front of the ogre, and he jerks to a stop to keep from bowling me over.

“Step aside, little flower.”

“No.”

His nostrils flare. “You will be hurt if you don’t move.”

“He’s not worth it.” I place my hand on his hip. “He’s much shorter than you are.”

“He is, isn’t he?”

Someone nearby barks out a laugh. Orcus’ lips twitch, and I hear a distant hiss before a door opens and shuts. Guess our slithery guest has made his exit. Finding my way back to my own emotions, which aren’t nearly as angry as Orcus’, I push some of my exhaustion and hunger in his direction.

The fight leaves his body. “You win this time, little flower.”

Good. I’m too hungry to deal with a fight. I smile. “Should we sit?”

He grabs my hand, leading me back to the table and placing me on his thigh like he had before. No one bothers us again, and I can’t help but wonder how Orcus knows the king and what station he had at court. He said he was a great warrior, but how great of a warrior must he be to be in what sounds like a huge disagreement with the king?



THIS IS the moment I've waited for my entire life. An inn. One bed. Forced proximity. I take a deep breath. *It's okay, Daisy. You've read this trope a thousand times. Just get into bed.* We've been sharing the bed at the cave, but this is different. There are probably empty rooms available. He could easily leave me for the night. He doesn't. I try not to think about how that makes me feel.

Orcus strips down to a simple pair of shorts and drops onto the bed. All that gorgeous green skin. All those muscles. And those tusks. Maybe it's because they're so prominent, or maybe it's because they're so damn smooth, but whatever it is, I know that they're probably my favorite feature of his. When did I start liking green skin and tusks? On Earth, I had a type... or at least I thought I did, and Orcus is none of what I thought I wanted in a partner. But he *is* rather handsome.

Orcus squints at me. Those beautiful navy irises might be my second favorite feature. "Are you going to stand there all night?"

"There are probably more rooms."

He lifts his eyebrows. "You want me to leave?"

"Do you want to leave?" I tuck my hands behind my back.

He scratches his jaw. "No."

My stomach flips, and I bite my lip, nodding and taking a brave step forward. "Then, we should have some ground rules."

"Ground rules?" He lifts an unimpressed eyebrow.

I nod and try not to stare at his chest. "That's how these things always go."

"You share rooms with ogres a lot?" His lips twitch with amusement but there's a soft lash of jealousy.

“You’re the only ogre I know.” I lick my lips. “Rule one: No touching.”

He narrows his eyes. “The bed isn’t that big.”

“No touching,” I say again and take another step. “And no sex.”

“I’m not really in the mood for sex,” he confesses, but I already knew that. Hence the ground rules. That run in with the snake changed the entire mood of our dinner. While the food was delicious, it wasn’t fun sitting in an angry ogre’s lap all night. He huffed and he puffed, and I dare say he almost blew the whole place down with his frustration.

I stop at the edge of the bed and climb on, adjusting my pillow just so before tucking my legs under the blanket. I lie on my side facing him. Orcus is looking at me with a mixture of annoyance and curiosity.

A smile tugs at my lips. “So. How was your day?”

He scoots his body down and rolls on his side, glaring at me. “Why are you acting so strange?”

“I’m not acting strange. I’m making conversation.”

“You know how my day went.”

I hum. “Do you want to talk about why the snake made you so mad?”

“No,” he grunts.

Typical.

“All right. What if I tell you a story?”

His face softens. He’s read to me so much over the past week. The least I could do is return the favor. “Fine.” His tone is clipped, but there’s a spark of interest in his navy eyes.

“Once upon a time, there was a grumpy knight—”

“I thought you said you were going to tell me a story, not tell me about my own self.”

I roll my eyes. “Well, I can’t do anything if you keep interrupting me.”

He presses his lips together.

“Right. Like I was saying, there once was a grumpy knight. He had spent his entire life being angry, but he never really knew why. One day he met a beautiful maiden whose name was—”

“Daisy?”

I shove his shoulder. “Oh my god, will you let me tell the story or not?”

“No touching.” He smirks when I growl. “Go ahead.”

I squint at him. “The beautiful maiden’s name was... Sunshine.” I pause, waiting for him to make some snarky comment, but he doesn’t say a thing. “Grumpy never knew how much he’d love Sunshine’s smile. He never knew how he’d do everything he could to make her happy, including bringing her cake and scratching her back before she fell asleep. Grumpy tried to fight his feelings, pretty stupid of him if you ask me, but he was stubborn. Anyway, Grumpy eventually fell head over heels for Sunshine and they lived happily ever after.”

“Does that even count as a story? It was so short,” he says with a laugh.

“Please, it’s a classic. It’s literally how all my favorite books go.”

“Is that so?” He studies my face. “In our case, I think I’m Sunshine.”

“Be fucking for real. There’s nothing sunshiney about you.” His face scrunches, and I point at it. “See? Sunshine would never make that face.”

His features instantly smooth. “Perhaps you have a point. I can be a little—”

“Crotchety?”

“Tell me how you really feel,” he mutters.

I bite back a laugh. “Hey, if you’re Grumpy, that means you’re the lucky one. You get me, an arguably perfect woman,

and I get Grumpy.”

“Good thing it’s a story then, eh?”

A little bit of my joy deflates. “Yeah, totally fictional” I say around a yawn. “I’m going to sleep.” I roll over and pull the blanket up to my chin, hiding my hurt sadness as best I can. Part of why I love, love stories is because of the complete and utter lack of love in my life. It was nice to imagine myself as sunshine, if only for a moment. My chest aches, that stupid organ inside of it desperate for love. Sometimes it’s so painfully obvious why I never had a boyfriend. I’m always over eager. I’m always waiting to fall. I should know by now that won’t happen for me.

Silence settles in the room, thick and uncomfortable. Minutes tick by, and I begin to regret telling that story. I should have stuck to something safe, like an arranged marriage or a stalker. It was dumb to think that whatever is happening between us would be anything like the books I enjoy. The ogre may like my vagina, but that’s a far cry from actually caring about me.

The bed shifts and Orcus’ fingers graze over my back. He drags them all the way down and then slowly back up my spine.

“What are you doing?” I whisper, voice shakier than it should be.

“Scratching your back before bed.”

My stomach flutters as his touch skates over every inch of my back. A bit of warmth seeps through the bond. He’s trying to comfort me. Embarrassment flushes up my neck. I’d forgotten that the bond is a dirty little snitch and he got a whopping dose of my own self-loathing.

“You don’t have to do that.”

“Trust me, Daisy. I don’t do anything I don’t want to do.” His fingers run up my side, and I wiggle away from the tickle. He chuckles but moves his touch to safer territory. “Go to sleep.”

“Yes, sir.”

He squeezes my side, and I grin into my pillow, relaxing into his touch and accepting his comfort. I shoot a beam of sunshine through the bond, and he releases a soft hum. We may not be in love but there's something to be said for the butterflies taking flight in my stomach. And if I dream about a certain ogre falling head over heels, it's merely a coincidence.

TWELVE

The sins of the fathers shall be visited upon the children

DAISY

Farther away from the mountain, the forest isn't as thick. There are still plenty of trees, but in the space between each one is lush grass and pretty wildflowers. Dark green vines dotted with violets curl around trunks, and insects buzz, enjoying the warmth. It's as hot as it was yesterday, and I'm thankful for my makeshift dress.

"We're close," Orcus says when he catches me peering up at him. He said the same thing yesterday when we were still a few hours away from the inn.

We've been traveling for what feels like two hours, but it could be longer for all I know. Edgar was awake long enough to eat a biscuit for breakfast but he's fallen asleep again, either from jetlag, the heat, or being bored. Orcus is brooding at the horizon. Ever since the confrontation with Basil, he's been more moody than usual. It bothers me for some reason. I can handle grumpy, but the emotions pouring down the bond are different. Frustration. Guilt. Sadness.

I rub my chest, hating his inner conflict. "Do you want to talk?"

"About?" he asks, not bothering to glance in my direction.

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe how the snake ominously told you that you had responsibilities and couldn't hide forever, or about you fighting with the king. Or maybe we can chat about the foul mood you've been in all morning."

“I’m not in a foul mood,” he snaps and cuts his navy gaze to me.

I lift an eyebrow. “Are you sure about that?”

He releases a harsh exhale. “Things are complicated.”

I frown. “And why’s that?”

“Because the king would rather put everyone in danger than admit he was wrong.”

“About what?”

His eyes drift to meet mine. “Do you really care? You want to leave.”

“I want to go home, but that doesn’t mean I can’t talk to you about the things that are bothering you. The bond has been flooded with your emotions all day and I thought it might help to get some of it out.”

“Once I help you find a way to break the bond, you don’t have to worry about my emotions.”

“Wait. Now *you* want to break it?” I’m so confused. I mean, even with Edgar here, I still want to find a way home, but Orcus was the one who kept me in the cave and wouldn’t take me to find a way to get home that first day I was here. And then last night he was so sweet and gentle. Kind. Now he’s saying this. The signals are super confusing.

“You’re not safe here.”

“What changed from yesterday?”

“Everything.”

I growl and clumsily get to my knees in his hold and grab his left tusk.

His steps slow and he searches my face. “What?”

“I’m not doing this vague-booking bullshit. Tell me what’s going on like a grown adult, er, ogre.”

“Vague-booking?” His forehead crinkles.

I wave my hand. “A dumb thing that happens on Earth. My point still stands. Please, talk to me, okay? That’s all I’m

asking.”

“You grab my tusks a lot.”

Oh shit. I do grab his tusks a lot, but they’re so grabbable.
“Does that bother you?”

He doesn’t answer. I loosen my hold. He growls and displeasure cuts through my skin. I immediately grasp it again. A hum of approval emits from his chest, the sound like a giant kitten purring. Interesting. I twist my palm around his smooth tusk right below where the gold cuff is and he grunts, nostrils flaring.

“Unless you want me to set your friend down and fuck you on the side of the path, I suggest you stop.” Per the bond, he’s not lying.

“Wow, okay.” Note to self: Tusks are an erogenous zone. “We have to talk about the mixed signals though.” I release his tusk and settle back into his arms.

“What mixed signals?”

I scoff and lower my voice to imitate him. “You’re my mate. I don’t want a mate. My daddy is a big asshole who sent you here. You’re a witch. You’re not a witch. I don’t want to break the bond. I want to break the bond. Touch my tusk, don’t touch my tusk. Make up your mind, my dude.”

“I guess that could be a bit confusing,” he admits.

“A bit?”

He sighs. “Okay, maybe a lot.”

“I mean, I know that I have to go home, but what do you want?”

“I *do* want a mate,” he says, catching me completely off guard. “It’s the issues with my father that complicate matters.”

“Him trying to force it on you?”

“That and what it means for me to finally have a mate.”

“What does it mean?”

“It means I’m ready to take the throne, but I don’t want to rule over the kingdom he’s made. I don’t want to deal with the furies. Did you know he’s the one that made them mad to begin with?” Orcus looks down at me.

My jaw drops.

“Daisy?”

I think maybe my brain is broken. “Did you say *take the throne?*”

He nods.

Holy shit. I made a wish to find a prince that could match that level of girth of the dildo and damn did the universe deliver. But, if he’s a prince, that means—

“Am I a princess?”

“Technically, yes.”

My throat constricts. I don’t even know the first thing about being a princess, let alone being a princess to monsters. Not to mention, I’m woefully underdressed in this oversized shirt turned dress. No wonder he was so pissed.

“I am so sorry, Orcus. I really didn’t mean for any of this to happen. You know that, right?”

“I do now.” He sighs. “I realized when the folk fell in my pit that you were probably telling the truth.”

“Probably?”

“It’s when you marched up to the snake, I knew you weren’t from this world. No folk in their right mind would do what you did.”

Read: no one would be that stupid.

I mean, fair. “I’m sorry for the things I did when I was hungry. So you were mad about the throne... but the furies? What about that?”

Edgar groans, and I glance at him, but he simply changes positions and falls back asleep. There’s more color in his cheeks than when he was on Earth. He’s still so frail. I don’t

want to get my hopes up, though I do hope there's some type of magic that can help him.

"The issue with the furies," Orcus finally says, "started when my father accidentally killed a group of goats. He was moving boulders to make room for a second castle near the border between our territory and the little slice of land the furies have claimed as theirs. The stones he was throwing were huge and the goats didn't survive. Instead of admitting what he did, asking for forgiveness, and bringing them an offering of peace, my father decided to pretend like it never happened."

"And the goats are important because?"

He side-eyes me. "Everyone knows the goddesses love three things: vengeance, justice, and their pet goats."

Goats are insane, but they are pretty cute. Maybe the furies do yoga. If they truly treated them like pets, then what Orcus' father did is reprehensible.

"Basically your father killed their fur babies."

"Pretty much," Orcus mutters. "Our kingdom is paying the price for his actions. It started with some illnesses and extreme weather. Things have been quiet for a while, but I don't trust it. At some point, they'll start toying with our food and water supplies until eventually monsters begin to die. They may even send others to deal with us."

A line forms between my eyebrows. "But why punish everyone for something your father did?"

"He chose not to take responsibility. I don't assume to know the minds of the gods, but since he is our king, they likely hold the kingdom responsible for his actions."

"And he wanted you to take a mate so he can give you the throne and run away from it all."

"Yup."

I wrinkle my nose. "Wow. He's a douche."

"Douche?" His navy lips test out the word, not quite getting the pronunciation.

“Um, it’s a really mean insult on Earth.”

“Ah. Then yes, he’s a douche.”

“And you retreated to your cave to avoid the wrath of the furies?”

“Yes.” His jaw muscles tick.

“Does anyone else know about what happened?”

He shakes his head. “I was the only one there that day.”

“Oh. You were with him?”

“I wasn’t throwing boulders. I was flattening the ground for the foundation.” He grimaces and peers at me between his tusks. “I heard the goats bleating in agony first.”

Ugh. That was probably a terrible thing to witness.

“I’m so sorry.”

“You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“No, but I wish none of it had happened. I wish your father would try to make things right rather than trying to force you onto the throne. Parents should protect their kids, you know?” My chest pangs with my own parental longing. My parents were emotionally absent and I’ve always felt like a fundamental piece of me was missing.

“They should, but the reality is, Basil will run to tell my father I’ve taken a mate. He will come to find us, and I won’t put you in danger. I can’t.”

That’s why he’s giving me so many mixed signals. It isn’t that he thinks I’m annoying or unworthy, he wants to protect me. That’s so sweet and a little depressing. “Will breaking the bond hurt?”

He presses his lips together. Okay. That’s a yes. I find myself at a loss for words. I don’t know what to do, but my heart aches for him. He carries this burden with him like it’s a literal weight, and I want to help him, but what good is a human against goddesses?

THIRTEEN

The village people have magic

DAISY

Uneasy silence settles between us for the rest of the journey. We stop once so I can go to the bathroom and Edgar sleeps through it all. I wish I could escape the discomfort by sleeping, but my mind is racing and excitement thrums through me. I'm about to witness magic.

Edgar has a real chance of healing the damage to his spine. There's a possibility that even magic won't work. My chest tightens.

"We're approaching the village now," Orcus says, sensing my worry through the bond. "They will help."

"Thank you for bringing us."

"You're welcome."

That may be the first time we've been intentionally polite with each other since we met. After our conversation earlier, something shifted. For me, it's knowing the weight of what he carries and how much it affects him. The guilt and fear haven't let up. Will he give in and help his father? Will he have a choice once his dad finds out about us?

What will happen to me if I can't find a way home? Will the monsters accept me as his mate?

"Halt, ogre!"

My attention moves to the gorgeous being standing in the middle of the road. Long, honey blonde hair, golden skin, kohl

lined brown eyes. The witch is wearing a gauzy white gown and flowers in her hair. She'd fit right in with the festival crowd.

"I come in peace," Orcus says, lowering to his knees. "I'm here to ask Callum for help."

She approaches us with caution. White gold flames lick up both of her arms, an impressive display of magic meant as a warning. Fuck around and find out. She stops before us, gaze moving from Orcus, the biggest threat, and then to Edgar. She narrows her eyes and slides her gaze to me. It's more than a look. She stares at me like she can easily target every weakness I have. My heart skips, and I swallow the lump in my throat.

"You're not from here."

Clearing my throat, I tip my chin. "No, I'm not."

The witch doesn't even blink at that. "Callum isn't set to arrive for a few hours. I'm sure you're aware the Moon Festival is tonight," she says to Orcus. "Hecate does not like to share our attention on this day."

Orcus bows his head. "I forgot the full moon was tonight. Please accept my apologies."

"You're Orcus, the Prince of Monsters." Her gaze rakes over him.

"I am."

"I didn't know princes knew how to apologize."

"Most don't," he admits. "But I am not like most princes."

Aw, he's not like other ogres.

She takes a step and searches his face. His brow wrinkles ever so slightly, but otherwise he remains still until she releases a soft hum. Shifting that unsettling gaze to me, her eyes narrow into slits. Something brushes at the forefront of my mind. The touch is gentle but the presence is powerful, a force that makes me gasp. Orcus strokes the bond, distracting me from that sensation. The witch hums and moves on to Edgar. His forehead pinches but he doesn't wake up.

“All right, then. You may wait for Callum in the village.”
With that, she turns and heads down the path.

“What was that?” I whisper to Orcus.

He rises to his feet, searching my face. “She scoured our minds for ill intent.”

Scoured? That sounds like an invasion of privacy, but at least now she knows we mean no harm and we came to help Edgar. Right, so she’s not bad. Not exactly good. Neutral witch? Basic witch? Something like that.



THE VILLAGE IS NOT what I expected. There are no broomsticks or bubbling cauldrons. Young children run around, laughing and playing while their parents chat among themselves. It’s a full-blown community with charming cottages, a market, and wooden swings attached to trees for the kids to play on.

We’re sitting outside of the basic witch Zyla’s home. It’s a quaint log-style cottage with a full garden. Herbs. Red, blue, purple, pink, and white flowers. Greenery. Everything is flourishing and the air is rich with different scents. Mint. Lavender. Hints of sweetness from the flowers. The cushioned lounge chair is so comfortable I may never want to get up again.

Once we explained the situation, Zyla was nice enough to give Edgar a bed to rest in. I’m starting to worry about him. He was never this tired on Earth, but after she scanned his body for anything serious, the witch assured me it was likely the portal travel and age that was causing the exhaustion and nothing serious.

“Callum will return soon, Daisy.” Zyla hands me another glass of what she calls Pinkle Berry and sits in the chair beside me.

I take a sip of the drink and hum in appreciation. Sweet with a hint of sour. A bit like lemonade. “Do you think the warlock will know how to help me find my way home?”

“He is the most powerful warlock in the land.” She doesn’t sound too happy about that. Her attention strays to Orcus and she studies him. “He’s strange,” she says, distracting me from demanding real answers.

“What do you mean?”

“Ogres generally don’t like magic users. They prefer enemies who can fight with brute force.” She rolls her wrist and magic coils around her palm and forearm before extinguishing. “I may not be a giant, but my magic is strong. As are all magical users.”

“Are you enemies?” Orcus is already worried about the furies. I really hope we don’t have to add the magic users to the list of potential enemies.

“There is a tenuous peace between our territories.” Zyla glances in my direction. “He’s the leader the monsters need.”

I shake my head. “He doesn’t want to be king.”

She takes a sip of her drink, brushing a strand of her blonde hair off her shoulder. With her flower crown and gauzy dress, she’s like a boho goddess and everything I wish I could be but never had enough energy to become. “That is why he needs to be the king.”

Does she really believe that? I glance at Orcus. He’s sitting on the ground near the garden, too big to fit into her chairs without breaking them. A butterfly-looking insect is fluttering around his head and he keeps glaring at it. It’s kind of cute how annoyed he is. He could easily smash and kill it. The insect lands on his shoulder and Orcus scowls at it then turns away, studying the village instead of giving the creature more of his attention. It’s such a strange picture. The giant monster and the tiny butterfly.

“Zyla,” I lean closer, “can you tell me a bit about this world? Orcus mentioned some things, but I honestly don’t know much.”

Her brown eyes slide over me, assessing in a way that reaches beyond the surface. I suspect Zyla knows more about me than I know about myself. “There are many territories. You are in the magic territory. A land filled with witches, warlocks, or mages.”

I hum. “What’s the difference between a witch and a mage?”

“Mages don’t identify as a witch or warlock. Though, they’re magical all the same.”

“Got it. And do the furies hate you too?”

A group of children rush by, giggling and shouting. Small spurts of magic jump from each kid and the one with black hair stumbles when it lands on his head, splatting and seeping down his strands like a cracked egg.

“No fair!” he cries as all the other kids sprint away. He releases a growl of frustration and races to catch up.

Zyla releases a soft chuckle. “They’re dodging an orb,” she explains. “They run and try not to use magic to keep up or avoid being noticed. It’s a lesson in control. Now, what was it you asked?”

“Do the furies hate the magic users too?”

“We haven’t incurred their wrath, but we respect the boundaries between what is ours and what belongs to the gods and goddesses. We try to preserve peace.”

Witches don’t like violence. That fits the whole boho-hippie vibe. Peace and love and magic.

“Then there’s the vampire territory.”

“They sound terrifying.”

She smirks. “The vampires aren’t so bad, at least not when they’re feeding off of pleasure instead of blood.”

My stomach quivers. I don’t know why these creatures frighten me given who I’m mated to, but blood makes me queasy.

“Monster, vampire, folk, magic... wolves?” I’m pretty sure Orcus mentioned something about Hecate and shifters, but I’ve been processing a lot of new information.

“The Weres. Werewolves. Werebears.”

“Werebirds?”

She grimaces. “The birds don’t survive long there.”

I was kidding, but damn. Poor things.

“How do you know all this?”

She lifts a shoulder. “School. Magic.”

“Right,” I say with an embarrassed laugh. “I forgot about the mind-reading stuff.”

“We call it scouring, but yes. That and the occasional Hecate-blessed prophecy are how I know so much. There’s also an inter-territory council that works to maintain peace.”

“Like NATO?”

“Never heard of him.” She adjusts her flower crown.

I brush my toes over the grass which is shaded by the giant tree with broad Kelly-green leaves in Zyla’s yard. The shadows move and I frown. The wind isn’t blowing, but the shadows converge, shaping into an arm that reaches out of the grass and grabs for my toes.

My heart stutters and my breath catches in my throat. I yank my foot up, barely dodging the hand.

Zyla hisses and mutters something in what sounds like Latin. Gold magic shoots out of the tip of her finger, hitting the shadow arm. The fingers contort as the hand convulses, writhing in pain. Threads of magic wrap around the darkness, criss-crossing until the shape bursts apart and the shadows dissipate.

Releasing a harsh exhale, Zyla searches me for any sign of injury. “There is another realm you should know about. The Nether Realm. Do not flirt with the unknown or it will come for you before your time.”

“I wasn’t flirting! I was just running my toes through the grass.”

Her gaze narrows on me, reprimanding. “You admired the shade so much that you wanted to touch it?”

I pause. “Okay, yes, but I didn’t wink at it or anything.”

“It would be wise for you to ignore the unknown when you see it. Once the Nether Realm claims you, there is no coming back.”

Like death? I definitely wasn’t trying to die. I side-eye the shadows but look away after a second, fearing the shadows might come back for me. My pulse flutters. A comforting heat wraps around me. My gaze finds Orcus’ and he nods, letting me know he’s here if I need him. I send a shot of sunshine down the bond in thanks.

“How will I know it’s unknown when I see it?” I ask Zyla.

Forehead wrinkling, she shakes her head. “Your world doesn’t teach you these things?”

“It’s a lot different. There is no magic, at least not like this, and the only monsters are human.”

“Hmm. Interesting.” Zyla considers this before continuing. “The unknown is the shimmer of something in the corner of your vision. It’s the darkness forming into shadow creatures. It’s the invisible hand trailing over your back. When the unknown takes an interest before your time, you ignore it. Erebus’ creatures might be curious, but they don’t claim souls unless they’re beckoned.”

“So...” I try to remember as much as I can about mythology. There’s no Heaven and Hell. “The Nether Realm is where people go when they die?”

She nods. “But the unknown cannot distinguish between a soul calling for them and a fool admiring them. All they sense is someone calling out. By Erebus’ command, they answer the call.”

“Erebus is the king?”

“Not a king,” she says. “Erebus is the god of the unknown, and your mate is named after the great shadow beast Orcus. He’s a shadow creature you never want to encounter.” She gestures to the grass. “That was a nameless wisp of shadow. Had it been one of the Elites, you wouldn’t have been able to escape.”

Cool, cool, cool. A good rule of thumb for this world? Everything is dangerous. Fear and the sudden awareness of my mortality creeps through my system. A full body shiver hits me, and I curl in on myself. The most I had to fear on earth was other humans. Now I have to watch out for shadows, monsters, vampires, were-creatures?

Orcus’ attention falls on me like a heavy weight. “Little flower?”

“I’m okay,” I assure him. “Zyla was telling me more about your world.” And it’s fucking terrifying.

“You’re safe with me.” The bond wraps around me, the promise of his words.

“He’s right,” Zyla says. “Orcus is more than capable of protecting you.”

Orcus gives Zyla a nod. “Thank you, Grand High Witch.”

That title sounds very important. Is that the magical equivalent to a queen? Why didn’t she say something? My eyes flick to the flower crown and then I glance around. None of the other witches are wearing it. I figured it was an accessory, not an actual crown.

“Callum is here.” She sets her glass down and stands. “I’ll bring him to your friend. Will you stay for the festival? The moon brings Hecate’s blessings.” Her eyes connect with mine. “You’ll need them.”

FOURTEEN

There are some smiles you won't ever want to forget

ORCUS

Callum hasn't changed a bit. Long, brown hair, half of which is braided. The witches sipping tea and sitting on the porch across from Zyla's garden gaze after him as he swaggers up to us. Zyla rolls her eyes and looks away, clenching her jaw.

"Orcus, my friend! What's it been? Four years?" He holds out his palm. Even at only six feet tall, he doesn't see me as a threat. Ogres may be big, but there's only so much we can do against magic.

"Try six, Callum." I grasp his hand and we grin at each other as he scours my mind. Zyla did it when we arrived because she wanted to protect her people. Callum does it because he's nosey. I usually take offense, but now I don't mind since it saves me the trouble of explaining who Daisy is and why we're here. "Remember the tournament?"

He laughs. "You think I'd forget that night? I think I was hungover for an entire month!"

Zyla pointedly clears her throat.

Callum casts her an appraising look. "No rest for the wicked, eh, Orcus?"

"You make it sound as though I'm forcing you to be the Grand High Warlock," Zyla grumbles. "This is what you wanted, remember?"

Turning toward her, Callum takes up what I like to call his *I'm about to do something really stupid* pose. "I remember how good you taste."

Zyla's face turns murderous, and I take a step back, scooping up Daisy in the process. She squeals and clutches my neck as the sparks begin to fly—literally, not figuratively. These are not love at first sight sparks. Daisy trembles as the bursts of magic reverberate over us.

"You're safe with me," I remind her. She relaxes, and we both peer down at Zyla and Callum.

"You arrogant. Fuck." Zyla swings her arm around, the atmosphere charges and she delivers a wallop of golden magic that sends Callum tumbling into the grass at my feet. The witches that had been ogling him run into the house.

"So you missed me?" Callum asks with a pained chuckle. He gathers his own magic, though not nearly as lethal as it could be, and carelessly lobs it in her general direction. It fizzles at Zyla's feet. He's not even trying.

Zyla snarls and prepares another attack. Knowing Callum, he did something wrong and this fight could go on all night. I step in front of my friend. Daisy's fingers dig into my skin and her fear sends my heart racing.

"Orcus! You'll get hurt."

"Worried for me, little flower?" I tease before addressing Zyla. "We need his help. Maybe you can kill him after."

Zyla huffs, but the magic sparking at her fingertips fizzles. "Fine."

I wait a minute to make sure she's serious, then gently set Daisy on the ground. My mate immediately runs to the witch, talking in a low, soothing tone that the witch smiles at. I glance back at Callum and arch an eyebrow. "Some things never change."

He swipes his arm over his brow but doesn't respond. His gaze is intent on Zyla. I turn and nudge his shoulder. Slowly, he tears his eyes from Zyla and looks at me. I've only ever seen this emotion on his face once before, and that was years

ago. He likes the witch who wants to kill him. He was always good at pissing people off.

“Not a word,” he mutters when he spots my knowing smirk.

“The folk is inside.”

At that, his features harden. “Right. Let me have a look.” He ducks inside the house, and Daisy follows after him. It’s not often I wish I were smaller, but right now, I’d give anything to be in that house with her. I’m not worried about Callum, even if he is a relentless flirt, but I am worried about her reaction to the healing magic.

“She’s stronger than she looks.” Zyla appears next to my head, using her magic to bring herself up a few feet.

“She’s fragile.”

She shrugs. “Maybe her body. Her mind is strong. For all she’s been through, your mate still knows how to love with her whole heart.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“It isn’t my story to tell.” Zyla stares at the house. “Callum may be a bastard, but he’s the strongest warlock this world has ever known.”

I don’t have the same mind reading abilities as my friend, but judging by the way he watched Zyla, there’s history and more than likely he still hasn’t figured out how to get out of his own way.

“He means well.”

She tosses me a dirty look. “He means only to please himself.”

“He helped me during a scuffle with a group of werewolves. Saved me from falling face first off the side of a mountain even though he was as drunk as I was.” That only makes her scowl deepen.

“Do you know why I let you enter?” she asks after a moment.

“Because you found no ill-intent within our minds.”

She shakes her head. “I found your thoughts to be of pure intention, but that is not why I let you enter my village.” Turning, she looks me dead in the eye. “Your burden weighs on you so heavily it’s tainting your aura. It must be released or you’ll make yourself sick.”

“How does one release the expectations of a king and father?”

“By becoming what he was always meant to be,” she says softly.

“And what’s that?”

“A king.”

I shake my head. “I don’t want that throne. You know about the furies. You’re suggesting I take his place and endure their punishment?”

Zyla narrows her eyes. “You wanted to find a way to make an offering to them.”

Sometimes I really hate scouring.

“Yes, but not by offering myself.”

“You want to keep your mate safe?” she asks.

“I do.” The answer comes without a moment of hesitation. The bond drives me to do what’s best for her, but that’s not the only thing driving me to protect her. I’d hate for this world to take her smile away. It’d be like dousing the sun.

“That throne is how you do it.”

I press my lips together, hating what she’s saying. I’ve avoided the throne for so long that taking it seems wrong. “Perhaps you’re right, but she wants to go home and that’s where she will be safest. Can you help craft a spell to send her home?” Daisy plans to ask Callum, but Zyla is equally, if not more powerful than him. Asking both of them to help can’t hurt.

“This is what you want?”

That's not an easy question to answer. I want Daisy to get what she wants, because making her happy makes me happy. At the same time, I selfishly want to keep her here. She's my mate and despite my better judgment, I'm starting to crave her company.

"It's what she wants."

"The bond will break," Zyla warns. "You should know better than anyone what that means."

It means I'll be a miserable fuck. Depressed. Loveless. Those who break the bond spend years recovering. The bond once set, while not tangible, is visceral. There are some who never recover. There are many risks, but I won't keep Daisy here if she truly wants to go home. She could have another lover for all I know. I'm a jerk for not asking.

"Some things are worth the sacrifice." I tip my chin toward the house. "Will you help me help her?"

Zyla narrows her eyes and her magic brushes through my head. I grimace. I hate scouring, but it's the only way Zyla will trust my words. Thanks to my father, ogres have a reputation for being self-centered assholes.

"All right. I'll try, though I'm not sure how a spell like that is possible." Her eyebrows pinch together. "When the folk wakes, maybe he can tell us where he got it. Either way, crafting something that requires that great of power will take time. Even Callum will need weeks." A ruthless smile cuts across her face. "Perhaps I'll beat him."

"Thank you, Zyla, but I'm afraid there's something else I need help with." I fill her in on Daisy's mysterious illness. The witch retreats into her cottage and returns with a vial of shimmering yellow liquid.

"Try this and if that doesn't work, I can scan her body and force the sarcasm out." Zyla turns toward the house, gazing at it with what I can only call pride. "Edgar is awake."

FIFTEEN

Is it really a party if no one cums?

DAISY

The Grand High Warlock is silent as he works. My ankle tingles from the vestiges of the healing spell he coiled around it. I didn't tell him I was injured, but Orcus' must've said something. Meddling ogre. Still, I'm not that mad. The sprain was bothering me more than I realized. I'd only grown accustomed to the ache.

Callum spreads a blanket of silver magic over Edgar's body. This is the third application and it shimmers with sprinkles of green and blue, the concentration of color swirling near Edgar's middle. *Come on, Edgar. Wake up.* I chew on my nails and watch the magic sink into his skin. Blood roars through my ears. Three seconds pass before the old man groans and struggles to sit.

Releasing a breath, I rush forward and help him, searching his wrinkled face for signs of pain. "Edgar, do you remember where you are?"

He releases a long, irritated sigh. "You're using your pretend-nurse voice. I hate that."

"You're my friend and I was worried," I tell him with an eye roll. "And the only reason you let me room with you is because you needed someone and the nursing companies refused to keep you as a patient. Now answer the question."

"I remember falling into a bathing pit and finding you shackled up with an ogre." His bushy eyebrows rise on his

forehead. “If I was your friend, why were you fiddling with the ogre instead of trying to help me?”

“There was no fiddling, and I asked the ogre to help me find a way home.”

Edgar harrumphs.

“Edgar,” Callum begins, “I’m the Grand High Warlock. How do your legs feel?”

“My legs?” Edgar asks, looking at me and then down at his legs. He wiggles his toes. He sucks in a shaky breath and jumps out of the bed, spry as a spring chicken. His eyes shoot to the warlock and then to me and then back down to his legs. He shimmies, shifting his weight back and forth, and chuckling. “Daisy, my legs!”

A grin spreads across my face. “I know! Isn’t it amazing?”

“No lingering pain or numbness?” Callum asks. “Are you still tired?”

“Tired? Bah. I feel amazing!” Edgar does a little dance. “This is amazing. Any chance you could fix the wrinkles?” The hopeful look he gives Callum melts my heart.

“I’m not in the beauty business,” the warlock deadpans, smirking at me. He’s been nothing but kind. I’m grateful for his help; however, a part of me worries he might not be as nice as he seems.

Zyla had been so angry when he arrived.

“Ah, that’s okay. The wrinkles are fine. Once the ladies see me back in action, they’ll forget all about being mad at me.”

“Ladies?” I ask. “Who are you talking about, and why are they mad at you?”

Edgar sighs and walks around the room. With the magic healing complete, he struts around like age is just a number. “A few lovely ladies I was dating ended up pregnant at the same time. I tried to explain I wasn’t the type of folk to be tied down and they were all okay with it. Believe it or not, I used to be a looker.”

Callum and I exchange a look.

“Anyway, our relationship changed when they all got pregnant and they were mad enough to put a bounty on my head. Hormones most likely.”

Or maybe they were tired of sharing.

“Your baby mamas tried to kill you?” Furthermore, Edgar has baby mamas? Things cannot get any stranger.

“It was years ago. Have you ever run from three pregnant folk at one time?”

I scrunch my eyebrows together. “Uh, no?”

“Trust me, it’s not fun. I found the first warlock I could pay off to help make me a spell that would take me anywhere I wished. I didn’t realize wanting to disappear meant I’d end up in another world, but I had every intention of coming back once they got over it. Then I got hurt during the fall. I decided to stay on Earth for a while and work with the doctors. I lost the amulet that he made to help me come back and then the humans decided I needed assistance.” Edgar gives me a pointed look. “I didn’t need assistance.”

“Debatable,” I say with a smile. “Remember the wasps?” He left a guest bedroom window open and wasps had built a nest on the bed. It was chaos and we both almost died.

“They were harmless.” Edgar’s wiry eyebrows jump.

I laugh but don’t try to argue. “Well, you’re home now and Callum fixed your injuries. Any chance you can tell us who made you that amulet?”

“I didn’t have a lot of time to ask questions.” Edgar glances at Callum. “You’re the smart one in the room, which warlock is powerful enough for that sort of spell?”

Pretty sure Edgar just called me dumb.

“To use that type of magic,” the warlock shakes his head, “it would take someone with access to great power.” His expression clouds and his lips press into a thin line.

“You’re super charged, right? Can you please help me get home?” I ask.

The warlock glances around the room, but his eyes are distant, contemplative. “I’ve never attempted that sort of spell... but I’ve never been one to back away from a challenge. Orcus is okay with this?”

“He said he wanted to find a way to send me home.”

Callum nods, like he already knew that but wanted me to confirm it. “All right. I can try to figure it out.”

“Thank you so much!” I move toward him to give him a hug, but he holds up his hand, halting me. “Right. Sorry. I was only excited.”

He places his hand on his chest. “You are forgiven.”

I scrunch my face. “Uh, thanks.” I turn back toward Edgar. “Does this mean you’re going to find your kids?”

“You think they’ll look like me?” he asks.

We’re both avoiding the obvious. Edgar’s ladies may not be alive. With the time difference between here and Earth, his children are probably close to his age and the chances of them forgiving him after being abandoned for the greater part of their life are low.

“Maybe? I think kids usually look like their parents.” My parents always said I looked nothing like them, but I have my mom’s green eyes and my dad’s nose. Maybe that’s how they justified how they treated me. They weren’t abusive by any means, and sometimes I feel silly for complaining, but growing up without ever knowing if your parents loved you brings its own set of problems. I rub my chest. “Did you think about them while you were gone?”

“Every day.”

“You never mentioned them...” I trail off. Edgar told me all sorts of stories about this world.

“I was ashamed, Daisy.” Edgar’s voice breaks, and he swipes at his damp cheeks. “I was an idiot, and I never meant

to be gone this long. I was going to come back. I was going to be here.”

“Hopefully they’ll forgive you.” I pause before saying, “I don’t want you to get your hopes up.”

Edgar nods and drops his gaze. “I know. But I have to try. Maybe I’ll get each of them their own barrel of ale and a new ax.”

“That sounds like a recipe for disaster,” I admit. If they’re as pissed at Edgar as I imagine, giving them weapons is a bad idea.

“Folk love weapons,” Callum says.

“What day is it?” Edgar asks him.

“It’s the night of the Moon Festival.”

“Can’t piss Hecate off by asking you to send me tonight. I’ll leave in the morning then.” Edgar slides his gaze toward me. “Do you want to come with?”

“Hmm.” I want no part in the incredibly uncomfortable, potentially dangerous, family reunion. “I’m good.”

“Not done fiddling with the ogre yet?”

I scoff. “That’s... *none* of your business.”

Callum gives me a knowing smirk. “The festival begins at dusk. You and Orcus are welcome to stay the night. I’ll craft a sleeping tent for you. And you,” he looks at Edgar. “If you promise not to hit on anyone you can stay the night.”

“I never liked witches,” Edgar says. “Too feisty for my liking.”

“Don’t I know it,” Callum mumbles. “See you all at the festival.”



THE FESTIVAL IS in full swing and the moon is high in the sky by the time Zyla leads me toward the bonfire. The village has undergone a transformation, no longer a seemingly simple community. Magical orbs of glowing blue and green lights hang a few feet above our heads and occasionally one will break away to weave through the crowd. Children are lined up to get their faces painted with magical paint that moves. A painted cat stretches and curls up on a little girl's cheek and she races to her mom to show her. There's a band near the roaring bonfire. Adults and children gather around to dance and laugh.

Zyla sighs beside me. "It'll be a good night." It almost sounds like she's trying to convince herself of that.

"Thanks for the bath and dress." I was more than happy to ditch the oversized shirt in favor of a forest green, knee length dress. A soft, braided brown belt is tied around my waist, molding the material to my curves. Zyla gave me a solid pair of leather sandals to complete the outfit. I won't be winning any marathons, but it's a hell of a lot better than trekking around barefoot.

"Your mate thanks me for it too," she says with an amused chuckle.

I follow her gaze and spot Orcus on the other side of the bonfire. He's looking—correction, staring at me like I'm made of magic. Heat crawls up my neck and Zyla hooks her arm with mine.

"You're attracted to him."

"Yes." There's no point in lying when she can read my mind.

"Then you should enjoy his company tonight. There is no better lover than one who is snared." She pauses. "Well, maybe hate can make for a comparable lover, but your mate doesn't hate you. Not in the slightest."

"He's always grumpy."

"He's an ogre."

"Solid point."

She leads me through the crowd. A blue orb drops and shifts into a wisp that toys with her hair before circling my shoulders with a soft vibration. The magic releases the tension between my shoulders and shoots away.

“The moon will rise soon. Hecate will cast her blessings across the land like the stars across the sky. Some will worship her under the light of the moon.” Zyla gives me a sly smile. “Your ogre is willing to worship you tonight.”

I blink a few times. “Sex. You mean sex.”

Nodding, she gives a wistful sigh. “There is no better way to praise Hecate and the moon than to take the seed of a lover. Where Hecate is not a lover or mother herself, the moon is both. Both matrons and lovers celebrate tonight.”

“And what about you?”

Her eyes stray to a certain warlock. “I will bask in her light alone.”

Based on the way Callum is smoldering at her, I highly doubt she will be alone.

“What’s the deal with you two?”

Zyla stiffens. “History,” is all she murmurs before carefully extracting her arm from mine. “Go see your ogre before he loses his mind.”

Glancing at Orcus, I notice his gaze is still on me, but it’s jumping over my skin, as if he can’t decide what he wants to look at. One big hand covers his lap. *Ten bucks says he’s hard.* Zyla disappears from my side, and I’m left standing alone near the fire. Heat from the flames breezes over me. Witches and warlocks and mages dance and drink all around me. Suddenly a path clears. At the goddess’s direction? Who knows, but it’s as though they part so it’s easier for me to get to Orcus.

His onyx strands are shoved to the side in a careless but sexy sweep of hair. The fire flickers over his green skin and his golden jewelry shines, but it’s the light caressing over his blue lips that steals my breath. My pulse flutters, core clenching at the blast of heat licking through the bond. The

corner of Orcus' mouth lifts into a sly smirk and he raises his hand, beckoning me with a single finger.

Come.

I shouldn't.

I should stay right where I'm at, enjoying the music and the night. I should know better than to take the first step toward an ogre that makes my heart skip. I should know better than to lick my lips as I take another step, drawing his attention to my needy mouth. I should know better than to think of all the ways we could worship each other tonight.

His gaze is locked on me. Every step I take lights a fire deep within me. The bond tugs and I stumble slightly. He releases a dark, cocky chuckle. I glare at him. His nostrils flare at the look, like he enjoys my ire. I narrow my eyes and close the distance between us. He's so much taller than me when he's sitting. I tip my head back and put my hand on my hips.

"Did you do that on purpose?"

"Maybe." His eyes are bright with mischief, but there's no missing the desire that sings across my skin as he slowly checks me out. Having this sort of rapt attention from a monster like him—a notorious warrior, the son of the king, a grumpy butthead—is intoxicating. He makes me want to find ways to keep his attention all for myself. He makes me wonder what it might be like to stay.

I arch my back a little and he releases a deep rumble of approval. Why was I mad again? His finger brushes down my bare arm, and I shiver, sucking in a breath.

"You were taking too long," he murmurs, leaning forward.

"What?"

"To come to me."

"Oh." I force my eyes to move around the party. It's not as much of a distraction as I had hoped for. If anything, I'm more aware of how he focuses on me. Full of intention and desire. "There's a lot going on," I rasp.

“Sit with me,” he says two seconds before he snatches me around the waist and places me on his lap. The ogre is far too comfortable with manhandling me.

“Orcus,” I chastise but the bond wiggles in amusement.

“How do you like the party?”

“I just got here,” I say with a shrug. Deciding there’s no point in fighting him, I settle my back against his chest.

He lays one, possessive palm across my stomach, fingers splaying wide and low. “The witches know how to celebrate.” He takes two drinks from a witch carrying a tray of cups full of shimmering blue liquid and hands me one. “Edgar is fine?”

“He’s okay.” I take a sip, rolling the sweet wine over my tongue. It fizzes with magic that releases tiny bursts of soft bitterness that complements the sugary liquid. *Oh, that’s lovely.* “Apparently he got three people pregnant around the same time and that’s why he ran.”

“Only a fool runs from that sort of responsibility.”

I don’t defend Edgar because I can’t help but agree. It was shitty of him to run away, even if he hadn’t meant to be gone for so long. “He asked me to come with him.” I’m not sure why I tell Orcus, it’s none of his business, but for some reason I want to know how he’d react.

He stiffens under me and his palm presses into my stomach, trapping me in his hold. “And what did you say?” His carefree tone is at complete odds with his possessive touch.

A couple of shouts erupt close by. Two kids are spinning around and around. Their hands break apart and they tumble to the ground, breaking into a fit of giggles. Should I go with Edgar? He was my roommate. There’s a sense of obligation to make sure he’s safe, but now that I know he’s not severely sick and he can walk, the only reason for me to go with Edgar is to run away from Orcus until Callum completes the spell that will send me home. As much as I want to leave, deep down, there’s a burning curiosity. The strongest desire to know everything there is to know about the monster.

“Daisy? What did you say?” Traces of apprehension bleed through the bond.

My stomach clenches, but I lift a shoulder in a careless shrug. “I told Edgar no.”

Releasing a harsh exhale, his muscles relax beneath me and he slowly moves his hand across my stomach. “Good. Oh, I have something for you.” In his other hand he holds a small vial of liquid.

“Is that the Kool-Aid?”

“What?”

“Never mind. What is that?”

“To heal your sarcasm. I know you said it was terminal but... Zyla is Grand High Witch and her magic should be nearly as strong as Callum’s and—”

A full body snort bursts out of me, and I slap my hand to my mouth to contain the obnoxious laughter.

He grunts. “Why are you laughing? You’re sick and this vial could heal you.”

“Uh.” I cough and try to stop laughing. “Sorry.” Nope. I laugh again but manage to say, “I don’t think this will heal the sarcasm.”

“It won’t hurt to try, right?”

This is the sweetest, strangest, and most adorable thing I’ve ever had done for me. I’m not even sure he’d believe me if I explained that sarcasm isn’t really a sickness. I take the vial and uncork it. At first sniff, it’s sweet and lemony. I guess it could be worse. I down it like a shot and hum in approval as warmth blooms in my throat and spreads to my chest. Well, whatever happens with the sarcasm, at least the medicine was great.

“Better?” His voice is full of cautious hope.

“I think it’s too soon to tell.” I pat his arm and place the vial on the ground. There are so many magical people wandering around. No one has green skin or tusks. They all

actually look like humans. They're different in their own way, but they're definitely not monsters. More than a few glance at us with open curiosity. They want to know more, and as a matter of fact, so do I.

I hardly know anything about my grumpy ogre. "What's your favorite color?"

"Red," he says without missing a beat and my stomach flutters. "You?"

"Navy blue." It used to be purple.

His fingers stroke over my abdomen and I discreetly press my thighs together. I remember all too well what those hands can do.

"Tell me your happiest memory." I run my palm over his forearm and the bumpy ridges of his blue veins. Veins have no right being so damn attractive.

"What are you doing, Daisy?"

My smile falls. He used my real name. "Trying to get to know you." I shrug. "You're my mate. It stands to reason I should know things about you."

He remains silent.

Disappointment spreads through my chest and makes me want to flee. "Never mind. It was dumb."

"My mother took me and my sisters to the sea once. We spent the day playing in the waves and basking in the sun. My father wasn't there."

His happiest memory is one without his father.

"Your turn," he whispers in my ear.

I shiver and melt deeper into his hold. His fingers flex on my stomach and all I can think about is that touch and not the fact that I'm not sure if I have a happiest memory. Whose dumb idea was it to play 21 questions?

"Daisy?"

“I... I guess one of my happiest memories is eating cake with Edgar.” On my first day, I brought him chocolate cake. He’d been so grumpy even though he was the one who put out the ad. Eventually the cake won him over and the rest is history. I try not to think about my family or the number of bad memories that race through my mind.

Orcus doesn’t respond or tell me that can’t be true, instead he says, “I wish I could take that agony from your chest and destroy it.”

“It’s fine,” I tell him.

“You’re lying.”

“Maybe,” I whisper. “My parents were fine.”

“But?”

“They never said I love you and they never hugged me.” I cringe. God, I sound like such a baby.

“Then they’re fools.” Orcus’ lips brush over the shell of my ear. “Because you’re nothing short of amazing.”

Desire and lust I can manage, but I don’t know how to handle his praise. It’s too much, and the fucked up voice inside my head says I don’t deserve any of it.

“Stop it,” I beg.

“One day you’ll understand how wonderful you are,” he murmurs. “But for now, I’ll let you hide from the truth.” His palm moves to my hip and he curls around me like a protective shield. “Tell me your favorite smell.”

The smoke from the fire is pungent, but it can’t hide the delicious musky scent that is distinctly Orcus. “You,” I confess.

That deep, rumbling pleasure reverberates over me and his hands begin to roam over every part of my body but the ones I want him to touch the most. He grazes the underside of my breast, and I suck in a sharp breath. Releasing a dark chuckle, two of his fingers trace up my thigh, pushing the borrowed dress higher and higher. I grab his wrist. There are too many people around.

“Tell me your favorite way to sleep.”

“With you in my arms,” he says softly, almost surprised he admitted it out loud. He presses his length into my ass. “With you wrapped around me.”

“What are we doing?” I ask.

SIXTEEN

Face fucking isn't for the faint of heart

DAISY

He grabs my hips and spins me around, putting us face to face. I brace myself on his chest as my legs settle around his thick hips. He's so wide I'm practically spread eagle on his lap. Based on the giant erection nudging at my center, he doesn't mind one bit.

"Do you ever say please?"

"Not when I know you want it too."

"I don't—" A sensual stroke on the bond cuts my words and I release a tiny whimper.

"Don't lie to me, little flower." He finds my ass with his hands and squeezes. "I'm trying to think of a good reason not to fuck you right here."

"Maybe the crowd?"

"They can watch. I wouldn't mind seeing the look on your face when you realize everyone is staring at you as you fall apart around my cock."

My cunt clenches. "Orcus," I breathe.

Using the grip on my hips, he presses me against his length, applying pressure to my pulsing clit. "I like when you say my name."

I sink my teeth into my bottom lip and dig my nails into his shoulder. "Kids," I blurt. "There are kids here," I say,

suddenly remembering why he shouldn't do these things out here.

“Fuck.” His hands glide to my back and I almost sob. “I need you to tell me if you don't want this, because if I stand up with you wrapped around me, I'm not letting you go.” Leaning forward, he captures my mouth with his. The kiss is hard and demanding, giving me no choice but to submit and let Orcus control me. He breaks away a moment later. “Last chance, Daisy,” he growls my real name in a way that has a deeper need unfurling, heating my core.

The bond all but demands I let this happen.

I tip my head back and gaze at the moon. Similar to Earth's, this lunar orb has a golden-white glow, but the craters are different. Instead of the man on the moon, they create the outline of a star with too many points.

Lips graze across my throat and his tusks cage me in. My fingers venture into his hair. I grasp the black strands and tug, earning a tortured groan that zings straight to my clit.

“You didn't say no,” he says against my skin.

“I didn't.” I rock against him. I could blame the moon for my decision, but this desire is 100% mine, and I want his cum dripping out of me. I want to see if his saliva can truly help me accommodate him. I want... so much. More than I should.

He stands, grabbing my ass to hold me against his body, and marches off toward the trees. I nuzzle against his neck, teasing him with feather light kisses and a little nip. Smirking at the sound that comes from his throat, I bite him again, this time taking a bit more of his skin between my teeth. A hard swat lands on my ass, but instead of screaming, I moan and writhe against his hard body.

There are far too many clothes between us. I kiss where I bit him and suck the skin into my mouth. What color will his skin bruise?

He hisses and I move my body against him again, not giving a damn that I'm dry humping his stomach as he carries me into our tent. One moment I'm pressing against every inch

of him and the next, I'm weightless and flying through the air. I release a screech right before the softest mattress in the history of any world envelopes me. Orcus lands on top of me in the next instant, wrenching my legs apart and settling his hips between mine.

"Zyla may hate me for ruining this dress," he says, tracing the neckline of the pretty fabric, but all I can focus on is that he said another woman's name.

"Don't say her name," I manage through gritted teeth. I've never considered myself a particularly jealous person, but with him between my legs and the bond rippling with irritation, I can't help it.

"She's nothing," he says, placing his hands on either side of my head, looming over me. His face is full of want and I reach up to stroke his cheek. He turns into the touch. "This," he says, slamming his hips against mine. I gasp. Even through the fabric, his cock is divine. "Is all for you. I've never been so fucking hard, Daisy."

"That's probably because of the bond," I tell him with a little grin.

"Maybe in part, but I can't stop thinking about the first time your body tried to take me. I can't stop thinking about the way you grabbed my tusks."

I move my hand to his left tusk, caressing the smooth ivory before wrapping my fingers around it and using the leverage to bring his face toward mine. He has no choice but to lean in. His eyes flash and pleasure strokes down the bond.

"Orcus?" I brush my lips over his.

"Yeah?"

"I'm going to need you to take your clothes off."

His chuckle washes over my face. I stroke the bond how I imagine I'd stroke his cock, and he stops laughing.

Tightening my grip on his tusk, I kiss him again before growling, "Now."

He claims my lips again, stealing my breath before pulling back. “You’ll have to let me go first.”

Oh. Right. I release his tusk, and he hops off the bed, roughly yanking off his clothes. I sit and reach for the end of the dress but he swats my hand away.

“Hey!”

“I want to be the one to tear this off you.” He glares at the dress like it personally offended him.

“What are you waiting for?” I ask.

His eyes lift to meet mine, the navy irises are almost non-existent now as need takes over. He grabs either end of the dress and rips it. It tears all the way to my apex.

“Fuck,” he groans at the sight of my bare pussy.

This dress deserves better than dirty underwear. I’m about to demand he finish what he started, but he runs one thick finger through my slit, and I promptly shut my mouth.

“So wet for me already?”

“Don’t sound so cocky about it,” I grouse.

He slips his finger inside of me, and I hum in approval, welcoming the intrusion. Finding my clit with his thumb, he draws a lazy circle over the bundle of nerves, and my back arches off the mattress. Every touch is electric.

“So. Tight. Can you take another?”

“Yes,” I rasp.

“Look at me.”

I do as I’m told. He holds my gaze as he adds a second finger. I breathe through the stretch as my body works to accommodate both. It’s not terrible, and I’m dying to know what it would feel like to have his cock inside of me. That desperation must seep through the bond because he shakes his head.

“You still need to be stretched before you can take me.”

“But what about your seed filling my belly?” I pout. Am I really whining? *Yes. Yes, I am.*

“There are other ways I can fill you with my seed, little flower, but first, I want to taste you.” Without further preamble, his mouth seizes my cunt, smooth tusks nestling under my thighs. His tongue slips up my center. With lazy licks, it coils around my clit a few times, and then flattens as he licks me from center to clit.

“Yes,” I say on a gasp, teasing my fingers through his hair.

His hands grip my ass and he rolls, flipping my world until he’s lying on the mattress and I’m straddling his face with his tusks urging my cunt toward his mouth. My palms press into the soft mattress as his tongue finds its way inside of me. He twists it inside of me, caressing my walls. I roll my hips then nearly die of mortification.

Here he is licking my pussy and I’m trying to smother him with it.

The fingers on my ass dig into my skin and move my hips in a mimic of the way I had moved to let me know it’s okay. My pussy glides over his tongue and mouth, coating his skin with my essence. I hum and rock myself over his face on my own. His tusks are smooth and provide slight points of pressure that complement the sensations his tongue is providing. The bond ripples with pleasure, and that’s all the approval I need.

I rock back, dragging my cunt over his tongue. He flattens it and it smooths through my slit in the most delicious way. It feels wrong to use him like this, but damn does it feel divine.

“Fuck my face, Daisy,” he growls against my cunt.

SEVENTEEN

Every last drop

ORCUS

For once, the infuriating woman listens to me. Her hips start to rock with unabashed need. I keep a steady grip on her ass and let her use my mouth and tongue. She tastes salty with a hint of sweetness and feels exquisite with her thighs clenching around my face. My tusks keep her from squirming away from me when I lap at her clit.

I lift my gaze from between her legs, watching her tits sway as she rocks over me, watching as her mouth drops open. I slide one finger inside her pulsing cunt and she moans, stuttering in her movements. Taking that as my cue, I assault her clit and add a second digit, slamming them into her until she trembles above me.

“Fuck, yessss,” she hisses.

I hum against her and scissor my fingers, stretching her while I suck on her clit. My balls fill as she screams, ready to fill her with my cum. My cock aches like it never has, but she wouldn't enjoy it if I tried to take her now. She's still not ready.

Holding her tight, I roll us again and she lands on her back, a soft puff of air leaving her body. I kiss up her stomach and pump my fingers, adding a third, watching her face scrunch ever so slightly and her walls clamp down around me in a death grip.

“That’s it,” I tell her. “You can take all three, hmm?” I slowly move them in and out of her slick heat, watching every reaction. If she can’t handle three without pain, she isn’t ready for my cock.

“Orcus.” She grabs my wrist, halting my movements with a heavy pant.

“Breathe, little flower. I’ll stop if you want me to.” I stroke her from the inside, finding a nice soft spot that has her twitching and me focusing my attention there. “Do you need me to stop?”

“Nnn-no.” She shakes her head.

“Good girl. Let your muscles relax. Stop fighting the stretch.” I rub the spot again and she makes an unintelligible noise. My erection is painfully hard, begging to be inside of her, but I need her to be ready first. I want her to be prepared to take me all the way in until her belly bulges. I want my cum so deep inside of her it can’t drip out.

Daisy forces herself to take a slow breath and she melts into the mattress. I murmur a soft approval before finger fucking her a little faster, not hard by any means, but enough of a rhythm her cunt begins to pulse around my digits. More than I want my seed inside of her, I want her whimpering my name. I want her to know who her orgasms belong to. I want her to fall apart.

“Harder?” I ask, reaching to pinch her nipple.

“Yessss.”

It isn’t enough to touch her. I lean over and suck her tit into my mouth, gently biting it as I glide my fingers almost all the way out. She pants. I roll my tongue over her peaked nipple and slam my fingers back inside of her, earning a throaty moan. White hot need shoots through the bond. Her nails find my shoulder and dig in while I thrust into her over and over. That pretty pussy is stretched so tight around my fingers, but she’s loving every second of this.

Next time she might just be ready to take me.

Her velvety walls ripple around me, and I press my thumb to her clit, furiously circling it and curling my fingers deep inside of her.

“Yes, yes, yes,” she gasps. “Pull my hair!”

My fingers dig into the fiery strands, and I roughly wrench her head back, holding her right where I want her and sucking hard on her tit at the same time. She releases a strangled cry before moaning my name.

Her limbs tremble, back arching, nails biting into my skin. She pants with every breath she takes. Pink crawls all over her sweat covered skin, and her cunt squeezes around my fingers like a vise. Fuck, that would feel so good. My dick is so engorged a bit of cum leaks out. Bursts of pleasure explode in the bond, and she shudders beneath me, gorgeous and incoherent.

“Oh my god,” Daisy whimpers. “That was amazing.”

“You’re almost ready.” I kiss her chest and push up, carefully extracting my fingers and sticking them into my mouth.

Her lips part and make a pretty O shape. Something flickers across her face. “What about you?” Propping herself on her arms, she reaches for my pants. “You need to come.”

“I’m okay,” I lie.

“Bullshit. Tell me what to do.” Her fingers brush over the head of my cock, and she drops her gaze. The shock that washes over her features has my chest swelling with pride. “Okay, yeah. I can’t fit that in my mouth, can I?”

“Fuck, Daisy,” I grunt.

Apprehension leaks over her face. “Okay, okay. I can figure something out. Lie down.”

A stronger ogre would walk away. She caresses the tip of my dick with her thumb, spreading the pre-cum over it, and I flop onto the bed. She chuckles at my eagerness and places herself between my legs, staring at my length with wide eyes.

“So big,” she whispers reverently before placing both hands on either side of me. Her fingertips barely touch. Testing out her grip, she tightens her hold and gives a solid stroke down. My hips jerk up into her hold. “You’re so hard. Does it hurt?” She gently glides her hands up, smoothing the cum seeping from the tip over the top.

“Only when you stop moving.”

“I need more lube,” she mutters a second before she places the flat of her tongue at the base of my cock. Daisy licks me from base to tip a few times, attention diligently on my cock, and her thumbs smooth over the tip. She sits back, prim and proper with a giddy grin. “There.”

And then she proceeds to stroke my cock with a chokehold grip that’s better than anything I could ever do on my own. My hips thrust up and she hums in approval.

“You like that, grumpy?” She lifts her gaze to meet mine.

“It’s perfect.”

She beams and redoubles her efforts until my length gives a hard pulse. “Oh,” she gasps, tipping her head. “I think I want to swallow it.”

“Fuck, little flower,” I say but push her hands aside and get to my knees. Daisy sits on her heels, placing herself in the perfect position to receive my cum. “Open that pretty mouth.”

Her eyes flash with heat and her mouth opens wide.

“Tongue,” I demand and she sticks it out. Fisting my cock, I place the tip on her tongue which cups part of the underside as if to support it while I jerk myself off. The way she gazes up at me with my cock on her tongue... It’s something I’ll never forget. She’s so willing, so obedient. So mine.

Daisy cups my balls, massaging and squeezing and tugging.

“You’re going to swallow every drop,” I demand.

A rush of excitement cuts through the bond and she whispers, *okay*, before ghosting her lips over my tip.

“Such a good mate.” I tighten my grip, wishing it were her hands instead, and move my fist a little faster.

She tugs on my balls again and my hips jerk forward. Her lips wrap around as much of my tip as she can and she laps her tongue over it.

“Greedy little flower. So desperate for my cum.”

Humming, she hollows out her cheeks, closing her eyes and sucking hard. That’s all I need. I slam my fist down one more time and grip her hair with my other one, holding her mouth to my cock as hot streams of my cum pour inside of her.

“Look at me while you swallow.”

Her eyes snap open and those green irises pierce through my chest as she does as she’s told, stealing my soul for the second time. I’ll never be able to come again without picturing her drinking me down. Cum dribbles down her chin, and she begins to swallow faster. Determination flares to life in the bond. She wants to please me, but there’s so much fluid. Still, my mate tries. Her throat bobs over and over until my cock jerks as the final spurt of cum pours inside of her. After a deep swallow, she proceeds to lick the tip clean, holding onto my hips while she ensures nothing is wasted. I loosen my grip on her hair and stroke my hand over her head, smoothing the mess I made.

“You should see how gorgeous you are when you take my cum.”

She hums and places a final kiss on my dick before pulling back and grinning up at me as she runs a finger around the rim of her mouth, sucking the cum off it. “That wasn’t so bad. I was worried you wouldn’t like it if it wouldn’t fit in my mouth.”

I tug her up, smashing her body against mine and claiming her lips in a harsh kiss, needing to taste me on her tongue. Together we taste so right. “With time, it’ll fit,” I tell her, breaking the kiss. “And then that pretty throat will open for me.” I stroke a finger over her neck and she shivers.

“It doesn’t seem possible.”

“My saliva—”

“Yeah, yeah, magical saliva makes sex between us a thing. It’s still mind boggling. I mean, have you seen your dick?”

“Yes.”

She bites her lip and giggles, burying her head into the crook of my neck. “You know what I mean, Orcus. You’re huge.” A bloom of her happiness fills my chest.

Mmm. My mate says all the right things. “The biggest you’ve ever had?”

She chokes on a laugh. “Uh, yeah.”

“The only ogre?” The thought of her with another makes me want to smash something.

A light slap hits my shoulder. “Of course, you possessive ogre. You’re the only green giant for me.”

My chest rumbles in approval, and I flip her onto the mattress, burying my face between her thighs again.

“Oh fuck,” she gasps, grabbing my hair without worrying this time.

Good.

EIGHTEEN

Who needs a kitten when you can have a dragon?

DAISY

I sleep hard for a few hours, but a soft snap of a twig wakes me. Every muscle in my body is beyond relaxed thanks to Orcus. I roll over to face the sleeping giant, and almost laugh at the way the sheet is snagged on his tusk. I carefully remove the fabric and smooth one finger over the ivory, admiring the golden cuffs. My gaze strays to his neck and I grin at the dark blue bruise I left on his skin. This ogre is my mate. The bond pulses hard in agreement. I have to suck in a sharp breath to keep myself from squealing at the sudden reminder of the sentient bond. I'll never get used to it.

But, I'll admit, it's nice to know that it's there. It's interesting the way I can sense Orcus' feelings and how he can sense mine. Humans are at a severe disadvantage, having to rely mostly on being able to process and then communicate feelings. Not to mention the dating scene is horrendous. Orcus can't exactly swipe right on me now that we're tied together for all of eternity.

The big ogre exhales and rolls over, flopping onto his back with a loud snore. He's lucky he's cute because that snoring is disgusting. Even with the obnoxious sounds he's making, I could stay in this bed forever, but the other sound comes again.

Snap, snap, snap.

Sitting upright, I listen for it again. Rustling. A soft, pitiful mewl. My breath catches. Something is out there and it sounds

like a kitten. I ease off the bed, not wanting to wake Orcus and send him into overprotective mode. I slip on his shirt and tiptoe to the entrance and slip out of the tent and into the early morning sun. The air is damp, heavy with the promise of rain, and the sun rays filter through the moisture in shafts of rich, golden light. The forest floor is soft beneath my bare feet, but I duck back into the tent to grab my sandals, not eager to hurt my feet.

That soft mewl sounds again.

My heart clenches. It sounds so tiny. Maybe it lost its mama?

I head toward the sound, searching the ground for a kitten. The noise comes from deeper within the trees this time, and I sigh and begin to walk a little faster. Ducking under branches, dodging jagged rocks, and looping around bushes, I chase after the sound until I come face to face with what is absolutely *not* a kitten.

A little dragon, barely one foot tall, tips its head at me and blinks its big eyes. Pretty shimmering light blue scales cover the entirety of its body and its tiny wings flap, but they're too weak to carry it into the air more than a few inches. And then it mewls. My heart is so full it might burst out of my chest. *This* is the baby? Against all better judgment, I drop to my knees and ppsps the dragon like I would a cat.

“Hi, baby,” I coo. “Are you lost?”

It mewls again before taking a step toward me. The wings help the little dragon move and the step ends up more of a cute bunny hop. I admire the scales and the faint impression of ridges over the crown of its head. Its eyes are golden, the pupils more of an oval slit than round like mine.

“That’s it. What are you doing out here all on your own?”

Another bunny hop brings it closer. Be still my baby dragon loving heart. This thing is so freaking cute! Little, too. I always figured dragon babies, if they were real, would be the size of full-grown horses. Another gentle meowing sound and I lose all sense and reach for the dragon, eager to pet it.

Its head lifts as it scents the air and me, and after a moment of indecision, the dragon baby surges forward and bumps its little head against my hand. I gasp and release an *aww* before carefully running my fingers over the top of its head. The scales are hot to the touch.

“What’s your name, hmm?” I move my fingers under its chin, hoping it’ll like being scratched, and grin when the dragon’s eyes drift half-shut and its head tips to the side. “You sweet little thing. Maybe we should name you Sweetness?”

It growls in protest.

“Well, that’s not very sweet of you now, is it?” I ask with a teasing laugh. “Hmm. No, a cutesy name won’t do. Dragons are fierce warriors, aren’t they?”

It chirps in agreement and butts its head against my palm. I smooth my hand down its back like I would a cat and think of a name. Blue scales. Golden eyes.

“Blaze is a little over done.”

The dragon blinks.

Everyone talks about Hecate all the time. “What about being named after the Greek gods? Of course we won’t do Zeus for obvious, philandering reasons, but maybe Poseidon? No, you like fire, not water.” I consider the dragon. “Do you breathe fire?”

I don’t expect an answer, not really, considering it doesn’t talk and probably doesn’t understand anything I’m saying, but it turns its head away and releases a little blast of fire.

My heart skips a beat and my eyes widen. “Oh. My. God!” I pick up the baby dragon and nuzzle it. “You’re so strong with your fire. Such a big, bad dragon,” I praise the little thing as it purrs in my lap. “Well, I guess there’s only one logical choice for a name then, isn’t that right, Prometheus? Don’t worry though, we won’t let a big, dumb himbo god chain you to a rock.”

The dragon gazes up at me in confusion.

“The Greek gods were a messy family,” I explain. To be honest, I hardly know anything about Greek mythology but Prometheus always intrigued me. “Drama on top of drama, but Prometheus is one of the good ones. For the most part. They’re all a little messy, but I like Prometheus better than Blaze. What about you?”

Like, a rasp of a voice says into my head.

My eyebrows snap together, and I peer at the dragon. “Okay, either I’m severely sleep deprived and I’m imagining things or you spoke inside my head.”

Premethos.

“No,” I say with a chuckle. “Pro-me-the-us. That’s your name.”

It purrs in approval. *Like*.

“This is bananas. Like b-a-n-a-n-a-s, *bananas*.”

Bananas, it agrees. Prometheus curls up in my lap and I pet it, closing my mouth to keep from gaping. A baby dragon is sitting in my lap. It talked to me. It’s purring. This world is unreal. And honestly, without the threat of global warming and nuclear war, it might be better than Earth. I mean, don’t get me wrong, I do miss coffee and street tacos, but when a cyclops isn’t trying to murder me, this world is pretty cool.

“Daisy?” Gut-twisting concern ruffles through the bond.

“Over here,” I call over my shoulder. “You’ll never guess what I found.”

Orcus emerges from the trees wearing only his shorts. “Trouble, no doubt,” he grumbles before he even sees what’s in my lap.

“No, not trouble,” I say with a shake of my head. “I found a baby dragon.” I beam at him and turn a little so he can see the tiny blue scaled body curled up in my lap.

The ogre stumbles to a stop and stares at the dragon before lifting his gaze to meet mine. “Please tell me you didn’t pet it.”

“Of course I pet it.” Who wouldn’t?

He gives me a look.

Okay, so Orcus wouldn’t, but he’s... him.

“Prometheus is really sweet.” I run my palm over the dragon’s body. “And sleepy, aren’t you?”

Sleepy, it agrees in my head.

Orcus doesn’t respond, and I’ve learned silence isn’t always good when it comes to the ogre. I glance at him. He’s pinching the bridge of his nose and muttering to himself. I catch the words *foolish woman* and bristle.

“I can hear you.”

“You named the dragon?” he says each word so slowly I almost laugh.

“Uh, yeah. I wasn’t going to call it *the dragon*.” Since I’m pretty sure Prometheus is asleep, I quickly braid my hair so it won’t dangle in its face.

“We have to find its family. How did it even get to this territory?” he asks himself more than me or Prometheus.

The baby stirs. *Mama*, it whines.

“Prometheus wants its mama,” I tell Orcus. “Where’s your mama, baby?” I scratch under its chin and this time it says, *Mama* a little softer.

Well, that’s not helpful. I glance at Orcus and he shrugs. “The dragons are reclusive. I have no idea why it’s here.”

“We have to help it.”

“No.” His voice is hard and firm.

I scoff. “*No?*”

He gives a hard shake of his head. Narrowing my eyes, I carefully place Prometheus on the ground. *Mama*, the dragon complains.

“I know, sweet thing.” I stand and march toward Orcus, stopping in front of him and glaring up at him.

“We’re helping.”

“No.”

“I’m sorry, I’m confused why you think you can decide this without even talking to me about it. Just because you gave me some of the best orgasms of my life doesn’t mean you get to be the only voice in this”—I gesture between our bodies—“whatever this is. Prometheus is all alone.”

His features soften ever so slightly, but his eyes are still set on no. “Daisy—”

“Listen to me, you big, stubborn ogre,” I growl. “We cannot leave a baby dragon to fend for itself. It can’t even fly yet and I like Prometheus. We’re helping.”

Prometheus chirps at my feet and rubs its body against my calf, hissing and spitting mini spurts of fire at Orcus. There’s a moment when I see him contemplate arguing with me, but when he glances at the baby dragon at my feet, he sighs and shakes his head.

“Fine, little flower. We’ll help the dragon.”

I drop the glare, grinning up at him in triumph instead. “Yay! Thank you.” I launch myself at him, wrapping my arms around his waist and hugging him, or, his crotch given the height difference, but that’s beside the point.

His hand smooths over my hair. “I’d probably do anything to see that smile,” he confesses though I don’t think he meant to say it out loud.

NINETEEN

Ogres don't like food fights

DAISY

“I guess this is goodbye?” I blink back tears and stare at Edgar. He’s been pacing around all morning waiting for this moment, and I can’t help being in awe of Callum’s healing magic. How powerful do you have to be to heal damage to someone’s spine?

Prometheus weaves in and out of my legs, rubbing its blue-scaled body against me to soothe away the sadness. The baby dragon is trying to make me feel better. It makes it a little harder to hold in the tears. Between Edgar making an astonishing turn around, the night I had with Orcus, and my new dragon friend, I’m a bit overwhelmed. I swipe at my cheeks and give the old man a watery smile.

“You’re crying over a bastard like me?” Edgar waves away the thought. “You’re too good for the likes of me, Daisy.” His eyebrows draw down hard. “Don’t be sad on my behalf.”

“Shut it, old man. These are happy tears.” I swipe at my cheeks. “Can I give you a hug?”

His features soften and he opens his arms.

Prometheus chirps and bounces after a bug. *Hungry.*

“Stay close,” I tell the dragon as I move toward Edgar. Even though the magic healed his legs, I’m still gentle as I nestle into his hold and embrace him. “Do you think they’ll have cake waiting for you?”

Edgar's laugh brushes over my hair. "I hope so, darling."

My eyes mist again, but I force myself to step back and blink them away. "Well, make sure you visit me."

"Where will you be?" he asks.

Here, I almost say, but then I realize that may not be true. If Callum can create a spell to help me travel home, I may never see Edgar again. My chest tightens at the thought of leaving him for good. He was only my roommate for a little over three months, but in that time, I grew rather fond of the prickly man. Edgar is probably why Orcus' gruff attitude doesn't faze me as much as it should.

I've simply traded one grump for another.

Edgar gives me a watery smile, understanding my turmoil better than anyone else. "When you figure it out, come to Village Hellen." His eyes light with excitement. "Maybe I have grandkids!"

"If you don't get a move on, you might croak before they get to meet you," Orcus says as he strolls up. Once Zyla gave me a new dress, he took his shirt back. Is it wrong to think his clothes look better on me?

"Orcus!" I swat his leg.

Edgar chortles. "If the ogre king saw you disrespecting his son..." He trails off with a shake of his head.

"My mate is allowed to disrespect me all she likes," Orcus grouses. "The king can mind his own business."

"From what I heard last night, he's not very good at that." Edgar arches his eyebrows. "How long until he makes you take the throne?"

Orcus is stony and silent beside me, and I don't need the frustration rippling through the bond to tell me Edgar's hit a sore spot.

"Well!" I step between the two men, creating a protective, albeit small, barrier between Orcus and Edgar. "You should head out and meet your family, hmm? Or are you chickening out?"

The old man rears back. “Don’t insult me, Daisy. I’m made of stronger stuff.”

“Is that so?” I tip my head toward where Callum is creating a portal to transport him to his village where Edgar’s family will be waiting thanks to a handy dandy—or super annoying—summoning spell. According to Callum, the portals have only ever been used to travel within this world. It’ll take time to figure out how to travel to other worlds and to make sure I end up in the right one.

I’m more than happy to wait if it means ensuring I don’t end up on a planet full of aliens. Big, green monsters? Totally cool. Tiny green, bug-eyed aliens? Nope. I’ll take my chances with my monster any day.

Prometheus singses a bug and screeches with joy. We all pause and look at the tiny creature. It makes me feel better that everyone else thinks it’s as cute as I did. Turning, I give Orcus a pointed look. He narrows his eyes. I grin and blow him a kiss. Shock ripples over his features, and I memorize the look before turning back to watch Edgar step through the portal.

“Thanks for healing me, Grand High Warlock. I’m in your debt.”

“I owed Orcus a favor. Consider the debt paid.”

What did Orcus do for Callum, a seemingly all-powerful wizard, that he couldn’t do for himself? I glance back at him, but the ogre is a vault.

“Guess I better get going.” Nervousness creeps into Edgar’s voice.

“How bad can it be?” I ask.

“I was gone for a long time,” he whispers.

“The worst will be over soon enough, Edgar. They might be mad, but explain what happened and apologize. I’m sure it’ll be okay.”

Callum gives me a confused look. “Do you know anything about folk?”

“You’re right,” Edgar says with a nod. “See you around, Daisy.” And with that, Edgar steps through the shimmering portal. His body disappears from sight but shouting and screaming come from within, and an ax slices through the portal and flies straight toward my face.

“Oh, shit,” I say, dropping to the ground. The ax whizzes over the top of my head and embeds into the trunk of a tree with a thwack.

“And that,” Callum says, “is exactly what I expected to happen.”

He and Orcus share a laugh.

I scramble to my feet. “We have to help him.”

“He’ll be okay. Folk get skittish when magic is around. Despite the ax throwing, they probably won’t hurt him,” Orcus says.

“Probably?” I screech. “Edgar!” I rush for the portal, but Orcus snatches me around the waist and holds me to his chest. “Put. Me. Down.”

“Where do you think you’re going?”

Spinning in his hold, I glare up at him. “I have to make sure he’s safe.”

Orcus squints at me, and I’m pretty sure he’s going to say no and carry me away, leaving me to never know what happened to Edgar, but he surprises me by nodding at Callum.

“All right. Only for a minute though. When you come back, I’ll send you to your cave.” Callum pulls his hands apart and the portal grows large enough for Orcus to step through.

Edgar is running from a group of folk. My eyes bug out of my head when the one at the front of the group launches an ax at his head. I start to shout to warn him, but Edgar spins around and catches it with a laugh.

“Good throw, but not good enough, Son!” Edgar launches the ax back and the group of folk all duck and laugh.

“See?” Orcus asks. “He’ll be fine.”

I look at him, forehead lining with concern. “What if they try to kill him in his sleep?”

Orcus studies me but then his attention strays over my shoulder and his mouth twitches. “I don’t think that’ll be a problem.”

Turning, I gasp when I see Edgar at the center of the group. His kids are all so different. Dark skin. Fair skin. Brown hair. Black hair. A little bit of everything must be Edgar’s type. There are tears and angry gestures, but no one is trying to chop his head off. Lines mar Edgar’s face, and he scrubs his hand over his cheek before holding his hands out to hug them. No one moves into his arms, and his face falls.

My chest aches, but I can’t even take a step before one of the kids carefully steps into the hug. Another turns and storms away. Edgar starts to cry. He’s dealing with the consequences of his actions. While hard, they’re not deadly.

“Maybe we should go.” I don’t want to intrude on his moment any more than I already have.

Orcus carries me back through the portal. Zyla is glaring at Callum when we return, but when she spots us, her expression smooths.

“So?”

“He’ll be okay.” I glance back at the portal with a frown. “He’s got some work to do to earn their forgiveness, but he can be charming in his own surly way.”

She nods. “With time, I’m sure they’ll come to love him.”

At the mention of love, Callum edges closer to Zyla, and there’s a subtle shift in her posture. A faint blush paints her cheeks. Oh, okay. Their tension is an *I’m so attracted to you but I also hate you* sort of tension. Zyla takes a step away from him and clears her throat.

“I brought you a gift.” She gestures to a witch carrying a bundle of fabric and a basket of supplies.

Orcus sets me down and takes the basket. Eyeing the clothes, I shake my head. “You didn’t have to do this.”

“You’ll need clothes for court.”

“Court?” I glance at Orcus.

Orcus releases a loud exhale. “My father knows.”

“He does.” Zyla says with a funny smirk. “And Hecate says you’ll be king soon enough or the world will live to regret it.”

“What, did the goddess text you?” I get three blank looks. “I mean, I guess it’s cool she sent you a prophecy.”

“I’m not going to court.” Orcus saves me from more awkward looks.

“Is that so?” She smirks.

“I thought Hecate brought blessings, not curses,” Orcus mutters after a moment.

“She had another message. You’ll know the exact moment to do the right thing, so don’t do it before then.”

“Well, that’s a lot of help,” Callum muses.

Her attention moves to me, and she draws me into a hug and ignores the warlock. “You’re the only one he’ll listen to,” she whispers. “Use that power for good.”

“He doesn’t listen to me,” I whisper back.

“Being naive never suited anyone,” she says, withdrawing to look me in the face. “I’ll see you soon.”

The clothes are pushed into my hands, and I clutch them to my chest. “You will?”

She grins and shrugs. “Safe travels, friend.”



NO MATTER how many times I try to engage him, Orcus remains silent and broody once we get home. The bond is rank with turmoil and my stomach aches at how strong it is.

Prometheus prances after me when I get up to make a snack of the dried meat, fruit, and bread Zyla sent with us. The basket is full of vials of tinctures in a variety of colors and various foods. The grumpy ogre glares at the stone wall.

“So is this your thing?”

Silence.

“I prefer the grunting,” I mutter to myself, dropping some meat on the ground for my little dragon friend. Once my plate is prepared, I turn and head toward the table, eyeing Orcus.

This all started after Zyla mentioned going to court. Orcus’ dad must be an epic asshole for him to shut down like this. Usually after some cajoling, he’ll pull his head out of his butt. Maybe it’s time to be a pain in the ass.

I drop the plate on the table, expecting Orcus to at least react to how careless I’m being, but he doesn’t move, doesn’t look. I sigh and snatch a grape-looking fruit from the plate and toss it at him. It splatters against the side of his head.

“What are you doing?” he growls, swiping at his face.

“Oh good. You’re talking.” I throw another piece of fruit. It hits him in the chest.

“Why are you throwing food at me?”

I pick up another grape thing. “Because I’m tired of being ignored.” This time when I throw it, he snatches it out of the air and shoves it into his mouth, glaring at me while his jaw works. “Don’t you glare at me like that. You’re the one who’s been ignoring me for hours.” I let another piece of fruit fly.

With a snarl, he grabs it out of the air and throws it back at me. The fruit hits my chest, staining the new cream-colored dress Zyla gave me.

Oh. *Hell*. No.

“That’s it,” I warn, grabbing a handful.

He lunges for me. I squeal and toss the food in his face and evade his grabby hands. Prometheus yaps like an excited

puppy. Before I can go back for another handful, Orcus catches me and hauls me up and pins me against his chest.

“Let me go!” I jerk in his hold.

“No.”

I reach back and grasp for his tusks, but he tips his head back. Bucking in his hold, I try to break free, but he’s too strong. “Orcus,” I say with a huff. “This is ridiculous.”

“Really? *This* is ridiculous?”

Okay, maybe the food bit was obnoxious, but a woman doesn’t like to be ignored, especially not by the monster who gave her the most mind-blowing orgasms of her life the night before. Especially not after I swallowed all of that cum.

“You should never ignore a lady,” I say instead of admitting I was, in fact, being ridiculous.

“Is that so?” he asks, turning me around and peering down at me. His navy eyes are so freaking gorgeous it’s enough to make me a little jealous. “You like my... attention, little flower?”

“And what if I do?” I snap, somehow now the grumpy one. Is grumpiness contagious? Maybe he should’ve asked for the antibodies for that instead of sarcasm.

Orcus smirks. “I like your attention too.”

“Good. Then stop ignoring me.”

The cocky grin falls, quickly replaced with a properly chastised look. “You’re right. I’m sorry.”

I’m at a loss for words for a few seconds. Is it sad that I expected some type of gaslighting or guilt tripping in response? “Uh, thanks for the apology.” I tuck a lock of hair that fell out of the braid behind my ear. “I’m sorry I threw the fruit at you.”

A loud clattering comes from outside the cave. One moment Orcus is holding me with an affectionate grin, and the next, he sets me down, sprinting out of the cave and growling

as he goes. The tether between us lights up with violence. I fist
my hands at my sides and frown after him.

What in the world?

TWENTY

Obligations can kiss my ass

ORCUS

There are only three people brave enough to venture up to my cave. My father, my mother, and my best friend. Everyone else stays away. That's the way I like it. That's the way I intended to keep it. If I had it my way, my father would never come, but he doesn't take kindly to being told no.

I skid to a stop at the entrance of the cave, catching Maddox before he can come inside. "What are you doing here?" I hiss.

"Miss me?" He's covered in a light sheen of sweat. If he came from the castle in the valley to the north, it would've been quite a hike.

My brow creases. "What do you want?"

"What makes you think I want anything?" He arches an eyebrow at me. Maddox is an ogre as well, but shorter and a little thinner. He's still incredibly powerful and together we trained to be the strongest warriors. As far as lying goes, he's horrible at it. I simply look at him and wait for him to break.

"Okay, fine," he says after a moment. "The King sent me."

"I already told him I wanted nothing to do with the—"

"It's not about that. There's been an incident with the vampires."

The vampires and monsters haven't had issues since the Twelve Nights of Blood. That was over two hundred years

ago. There's no reason for conflict... unless. My father. Leave it to him to not only piss off the furies but start a conflict with the blood suckers after centuries of peace.

“What's he done now?”

Maddox grimaces. “The vampires attacked first. Apparently, the furies aren't just targeting monsters.”

“Is anyone hurt?”

“About twenty dead,” he says with a grimace. “I only agreed to come get you because you're the best warrior we have and I can't do this without you.”

If he's going up against the vampires, he'll need all the help he can get. They're vicious. One would think that given our size, it would be an easy fight. One would be wrong. Very wrong. They're hard to kill and incredibly fast. Echidna made her monsters vicious and brutal. Hecate, never one to be outdone, made her creatures cunning and lethal. Deadly.

Daisy's curiosity hits me moments before she says my name. “Orcus?”

Maddox's attention drops to Daisy and his eyes widen. He sweeps his gaze over her. Nope. I step in front of her and cross my arms over my chest, releasing a low growl that has Maddox giving me a curious look.

“So it's true. You do have a mate. What's your name?”

“None of your business,” I answer for her. I don't need him wondering about her, let alone my family.

He searches my face. “So valiant, protecting your mate. Will you help or not?”

Daisy's small hand rests against my calf, but she stays behind me. The small act of trust makes my chest swell with pride. If this conflict with the vampires isn't resolved, they could slip into our territory and they could hurt her. While I'm fairly confident in my ability to fight, Daisy is too fragile. She has that fatal sarcasm disease—I still don't know if the antidote worked—and she's tiny. They'd kill her in a matter of seconds and bleed her dry.

I won't let that danger come to our cave and I can't bring her to court, no matter what Zyla thinks Hecate told her. Daisy will be safer here, with Prometheus and anonymity. I hate that she'll be alone. The attack though. There were so many needless deaths. All because of my father. No. I can't send her to court. I won't let him taint her.

"I'll help." I nod at Maddox.

His gaze drops to my legs, but Daisy is tucked behind my much larger form. "Settle things here," he says, knowing my intentions without me needing to say it. "He's expecting you by sundown."

TWENTY-ONE

I hate being alone

DAISY

A pitiful, nausea-inducing sadness roils in my stomach. “You’re leaving?” I ask to be certain I heard him correctly.

“That is what I said.” Orcus turns to finish strapping on a rather impressive looking brown leather vest. The bond is riddled with guilt which only amplifies my nausea.

Growing up, I’d gotten used to being alone. Not that I enjoyed it. I remember sitting in my bedroom, watching the shadows pass over my wall and wondering if anyone would ever love me. Some afternoons I chose to stay locked away, hoping my parents might seek me out and ask what was wrong, but they never did. They left me. And now so is Orcus.

“But what am I supposed to do?” I step over one of the many weapons scattered across the floor, forcing him to acknowledge me.

“I don’t plan to be gone long. There is food to keep you fed until I return. You’ll be safe.”

So he expects me to sit around in the cave and wait around for him? I think not. “What if I leave?”

His hands fall away from the vest and he looms over me. “You’re staying.”

“You can’t be serious. You want me to stay in the cave for who knows how long? What about getting Prometheus home?”

The dragon huffs and growls at Orcus as if to say, *yeah, what about me.*

Dropping into a squat so we're mostly at eye level, Orcus grabs the back of my neck and tugs me closer. "I thought I showed you why you need to stay." His tusks brush over my cheeks as he presses his mouth to mine. "If I had time, I'd remind you of exactly how wonderfully you fall apart, but the vampires are restless."

"Vampires?" I squeak. "Are you going to fight?"

"They're threatening our borders." He kisses me again and I find my lips parting of their own accord, submitting to the harsh demands of his tongue. "And," he says as he breaks away, "While I generally refuse to be my father's pawn, people are dying. I have to help. It's safest for you here." Determination slashes across his features.

"Why you?" I ask. "Doesn't the king have an army?"

"He does, but I'm the best warrior."

"Most humble as well," I quip, tucking my hands behind my back to hide the trembling.

He narrows his eyes. "The sarcasm is back."

"I'll be fine." I frown. "War is dangerous."

He's frustrating, but I don't want him to get hurt. The bond practically whines at the thought of him bloodied and bruised.

"Not for me," he says too quickly. "And it's not war."

"Liar, and what if it's the start of one?"

"I'll be back, little flower."

"And if you don't come back?" If something happens to him, I'll be alone. I'll lose the closest thing I've ever had to love. With the bond, he's obligated to keep me alive. Other monsters might not feel the same. I could go to the magic village but that's so far, and I'm not sure I'd survive the monster realm. The monsters kept their distance at the inn, but they were also terrified of Orcus. They won't be scared of me.

He grips my chin, and I meet his gaze. “Trust that I will. I refuse to die before I see that smile one more time and fill that sweet cunt with my seed.”

Heat swoops low in my belly, and my core clenches around nothing. I should scold him or say something, but I’m stuck picturing Orcus falling apart as he comes inside of me. My thighs press together.

“Needy little human,” he teases and smashes his lips to mine in a rough kiss.

I don’t want it to end. I clutch his tusks and pour everything I have into the kiss, hoping he’ll understand why I want him here.

He releases me and I press my lips together, reluctantly releasing his tusks. He stands and slips the last of his weapons into their holsters. I want to ask to go with, but I’m not that dumb. A human has no place in a battle between ogres and vampires. I’d be a liability. If people are dying, I can’t ask him to stay. I’m not that selfish. Though, a little part of me wishes I were. I don’t want him to go. My heart is strangely heavy as he begins to leave. The bond screams at me to run after him.

He stops halfway down the tunnel, turning back to study me for a few moments. The bond has to be swimming in my despair. Maybe he’s changing his mind. Maybe he’ll take me with. Maybe he won’t leave me alone. Maybe... who am I kidding? He’s right. I have to stay and he has to go.

Obligation weighs heavily upon him, and the hard sigh he releases is full of emotion that can’t be put to words. Regret. Anger. Responsibility. Sadness. For a breath, he lets it all take over and I see how much this decision tears him apart, how much it weighs him down, but he’s too good to let monsters die when he could help.

He shouldn’t have to choose.

“Be careful, *mate*,” I say with a little nod, letting him know I won’t hate him for doing what needs to be done.

And like that was the push he needed, all of that wariness dissipates and he pulls up to his full height. The mask of a

hardened warrior slips into place, but there's a touch of a smile on his face when he says, "I'll be back before you know it, Daisy."



ORCUS IS NOT BACK before I know it. In fact, it's been four days. The food Zyla sent is gone. The water pitcher is empty. Prometheus is pacing alongside me. We're both hungry. I'm tired of pooping in the strange bathroom. The cave itself is far too big for a human and her baby dragon. The giant table, bed, bath, kitchen, fire, none of it makes sense without him. Orcus should be here.

Anxiety ripples through me. I search for the bond, trying to send a signal to him, but I get nothing in return. He said he'd be back, and while I hardly know him, I'm fairly certain he wouldn't abandon me. Something is wrong. I don't know how I know it, but I do.

"All right, Prometheus. We're going to find the castle... do ogres have castles with spires and turrets?"

Prometheus blinks. *Castel.*

"Castle, sweet baby. Castle. Either way, we're going to find it."

Grumpy. The dragon's golden eyes narrow.

I laugh. "Yes. And the grumpy ogre. Are you ready for an adventure?"

A tiny blast of fire signals yes. Heart in my throat, I quickly pack a few changes of clothes, grabbing the dagger that Orcus had left behind and pulling on my new sandals. They're not practical for a big journey, but it is what it is at this point. I douse the fire, not that it could burn the stone fortress down, and click my tongue at Prometheus.

I take a few steps and glance at the dragon. It's sitting on its butt. I click again. "Come on."

Mama.

“I know, but I can’t find the dragon nest without Orcus. Grumpy first, then mama. Okay?”

Mama.

I nod. “Orcus, then mama. Come on, sweet thing.”

Slowly, grudgingly, the baby gets on all fours and pads forward. There are traces of apprehension pulling at its features. I get it. I’m not exactly the first person I’d pick to go with on a dangerous adventure and as a general rule, I love myself.

“It’ll be okay.” I give a big grin and point at my face. “See this? This is a secret weapon. Everything will be fine.” Tugging on the pack, I secure it on my back.

The dragon chirps and it sounds strikingly similar to *yeah, right*. Shaking off the doubt from my littlest companion, I steel myself for the journey.

What’s the worst that could happen?

TWENTY-TWO

Forrest doesn't have shit on me

DAISY

“Oh, shit! Run, Prometheus, run!” I scream and drop to my stomach as a cyclops aims the log it’s using as a bat at my head. My heart pounds so hard my ribs hurt and my bladder threatens to give out.

The ugly, no seriously, really freaking ugly, monster garbles something I don’t understand but I’m too busy rolling around, dodging the wood that slams into the ground like a mallet chasing moles at an arcade. I hit the edge of a short cliff and barrel roll down it with a scream.

Prometheus screeches.

I land on my back and the pack of clothes deflates with a soft puff. The few bushes that run up the mountain side do nothing to cushion the fall. Small, sharp rocks dig into my arms and palms as I scramble to get ahold of something. Anything. The incline suddenly levels out and I land on my stomach and the air whooshes out of my lungs. There are angry dragon sounds coming from the top of the ridge.

I glance up the twenty or so feet I fell and spy a tiny dragon bouncing around and growling like an angry chihuahua. “Go, Prometheus!” I have no idea what I’m going to do, but I’m not about to be the reason a baby is smashed to death.

The ground shakes as the cyclops lumbers after me. I scramble to my knees and glance over my shoulder. The thing

is practically leaping down the mountain. Is it the same one Orcus saved me from? Its head is smashed in on one side, and I'm pretty sure he wants to bludgeon me to death.

“My mountain!” it shouts.

“You can have it!” I scream back, staggering to my feet and running diagonally toward the path and the stubborn baby dragon. Pulse fluttering, I take short, heaving breaths.

“Mine!”

“I heard you the first time,” I say on a pant. Three giant lunging steps later, I scoop Prometheus up and pivot, sprinting down the path. The wooden mallet brushes over my hair. “Fuck, fuck, fuck.”

Prometheus growls and scrambles to my shoulder. Hissing and spitting tiny puffs of smoke and fire at the cyclops. I use one hand to pin the dragon in place while the other pumps at my side, desperately trying to help my legs go faster.

“My mountain,” it growls. The ground shakes under the assault of its heavy feet.

“I said you can have the mountain. Take it, you big, one-eyed jackass. It's yours!” My side aches, but I don't slow down, and I definitely don't glance behind me. I can't afford to trip.

Prometheus nuzzles my cheek.

“Not now, baby. We have to run from the giant monster who wants to kill us,” I say but then realize the ground isn't shaking anymore. Hazarding a look over my shoulder, I check to see how close it is, but it's nowhere to be seen. I skid to a stop and suck in a sharp breath of thin mountain air and swipe my arm over my forehead. A soft breeze rolls over my skin, and I shiver despite the sweat covering my body. Even with the sun out, it's a little chilly up here.

The ground trembles, and my heart skips. “Time to go,” I tell Prometheus and start running again.



RUNNING down a mountain isn't as bad as it seems. Momentum carries me most of the way, but when I finally decide to stop, that's where the trouble comes. The sandals aren't exactly skid proof, and I start to fall back, but Prometheus' talons dig into the fabric of my shirt, and it flaps its wings. By a tiny feat of strength, the little thing saves me from a sore bottom.

"You're so strong," I coo, running my palm over its head as it perches on my shoulder. My muscles twitch from overuse. I don't think I've ever run this far in my entire life. My skin is slick and grimy from sweat and dirt. The thundering of my heart makes it impossible to tell if the base of the mountain is shaking. I suck in much needed oxygen, waiting to see if the cyclops charges around the final curve of the path. It doesn't. I release a full body sigh.

Good. We're safe for now.

Glancing up, I take note of the sun's position. From what I've observed, time, while it passes by faster, is generally the same here as it is on Earth, so it should be around noon—or whatever they call it here.

The tree laden path shoots to the left and the right. The magic village is to the right. I turn and head left, hoping I'm not making a bad decision. Prometheus nudges my cheek. *Hungry*. I grimace. We're out of food. I've never foraged in my life and I'd probably end up poisoning us. A bird swoops past and Prometheus growls at it.

"I have an idea." I grab the dragon around the middle and hold it out in front of me. "Wait for another bird, and when one flies by, imagine you're the biggest dragon there is with the biggest flame, okay?"

Hungry.

“Yup. Give it a moment.” I stay as still as I can, only moving my gaze around. A bug zips in front of Prometheus, and the dragon snatches it out of the air with its talons and shoves it into its mouth.

Well. I guess that works too.

The good thing about traveling through the forest is there are plenty of insects. Prometheus catches a few more bugs and purrs in contentment. We’ll have to try the manifesting big dragon fire later. I reposition the baby and continue walking. The pad of my foot rubs over the sandals. The last thing I need is blisters. I could take them off, but then there’s no telling what I might step on. While they weren’t made for long excursions, I’ll have to deal with it. I can’t end up with shredded feet, or worse, some type of monstrous poison oak.

The soft tinkle of wind chimes stops me a little while later. I tip my head and listen. The chime grows louder. A lump lodges in my throat. Someone is coming. The only other monsters I’ve encountered have either wanted me dead or wanted to argue with my mate about obligations. Unsure of what to expect, I dart off the path and into the trees, tucking myself behind the largest trunk.

“Oi, you!” The accent is oddly reminiscent of UK punks and I half expect to find Johnny Rotten charging after me.

I peek out from behind the tree, glance around, and draw away from the trunk with a scrunched face. There’s no one there.

“Oi!”

My gaze snaps to the creature with vibrant green hair who stands no more than a foot tall. Straps from the wagon are fastened to its overalls and there are little pans dangling from the side of the cart.

“Yeah, I’m talking to ya, folk,” it says with a scoff. “What’re ya doin’ runnin’ off from me like that? Got somethin’ against trolls?”

The lines on my forehead deepen. “Trolls?”

“Slap my ass and call me Coco, how many times do I have to explain this to yer type? We’re trulls, not trolls. Trolls are garish creatures with hardly any fat. Not to mention they’re ugly and bald. Trulls have hair and are cute and tiny. And—” It slaps its round belly. “See that, eh?” it asks, turning to the side to show me how its belly ripples from the smack. “That is 100% trull.”

“It *is* a nice belly,” I admit.

“That’s a lass!” The trull flashes sharp teeth at me. “Now, answer my question or I’ll gouge yer eyes out with my big toe nail.”

Taking a few steps back, I distance myself from the trull. “Jesus,” I mutter.

“Why were ya runnin’?”

“I was afraid you might be a bad monster. We were chased off a mountain by a cyclops.” Adjusting my pack, I shift from one foot to the other. This monster may be little, but that doesn’t mean it isn’t dangerous. Maybe I could throw the pack of clothes at it as a distraction and make a run for it.

“Ah, those mindless things are nothing but kittens.” The trull considers me. “Are ya insultin’ me?”

“What?”

“Ya said you thought I might be a bad monster, but now yer out here talkin’ to me. Ya don’t think I could flay your skin from yer bones?” There’s a gleam of malice in his gaze as it flits over my body. “I’ve skinned bigger beasts than ya, *folk*.”

Note to self: In the land of monsters, it’s not good to be folk.

“Okay, first, I’m not a folk. I’m human and from a different planet. Second, I didn’t mean to cast doubt on your flaying abilities, I only hoped you might see that I look much better unflayed than I do flayed.” I shrug and smile like what he’s saying is no big deal.

Prometheus releases a snore and a little puff of smoke from its nostrils.

The trull startles and takes a step back, bumping into its mini cart. “Are ya mad? What’re ya doin’ with a baby dragon?”

I glance at the little thing and run my hand over the ridges of its blue scales. “Prometheus is harmless. Speaking of, what’s your name?”

A ripple of shock washes over the trull’s face, like he’s never been asked that question before. “Harald.”

“Harald. That’s a great name.”

The trull nods. “I was named after my father.” His gaze shifts back to the dragon sleeping on my shoulder. “Does it speak to ya?”

“Sort of. It mostly just says mama.”

Harald’s eyes widen. “Ya have no idea what yer doin’, do ya?”

“Is it that obvious?” I ask with a breezy laugh. “I’m trying to get to the castle.”

He slices his hand through the air. “Bah, ya don’t want to go there.”

“Oh? Why not?”

“Bunch of ogres thinking they’re better than smaller monsters like me. If ya plan on settling in this realm, think again. The king taxes us when we breathe. Are ya prepared to be taxed to death?”

The king sounds like a real piece of work.

“Do you know where the castle is?”

Harald squints at me. “Ya said yer human but ya ask questions like the folk.”

Is he calling me stupid?

“I have to get to the castle... my mate is there.”

“Ya have a mate at the castle?” Harald throws his head back and laughs, but with his size it sounds more like a squeaky toy.

“Uh, yes?”

“What’s their name then?”

“Orcus,” I say, bristling at the insinuation that I’m lying. “He’s my mate and the crown prince.”

Harald stops laughing. “I heard the big bastard had taken a mate, and the rumors all say she’s half his size.”

I ignore the fact that I’m now the subject of gossip within the monster realm. “He went to deal with something a few days ago and he hasn’t come back. I’m worried something is wrong.” That and I can’t even sense him through the bond. My heart skips a beat. If he were hurt, I’d feel it. If he were mad, I’d feel it. The fact that there’s nothing at all is disconcerting.

“Please, Harald. Will you take me to the castle? I don’t have any money or food, but you’d have my undying gratitude.”

“Keep yer gratitude, lass. I want a favor.”

I’ll give him whatever he wants so long as I get to Orcus. “Done.”

He scoffs. “Yer not even goin’ to ask what it is?”

“Oh. That’s probably a good idea. What is the favor?”

“Oi. The future queen, my fellow monsters, ain’t she a sharp one?”

Queen? Orcus is the crown prince. I’m his mate, which makes me a princess and once he takes the throne, I’ll be his queen. All of this information was slotted into my brain, but the reality of it just bitch slapped me across the face. “Oh crap.”

“Are ya going to stand there all day or are ya coming?” Harald calls over his shoulders. The little cart rolls along behind him, pans clanking and tinkling together.

I take a single step to catch up. “Would it be rude to offer to carry you?”

Harald tips his head up and side-eyes me. “Yer not afraid?”

“No. How will you get your favor if you flay me?” I arch an eyebrow and dare him to argue with my logic. “I’m not the king, I promise not to tax you.”

Harald grunts. “Fine. Ya can carry me, but I don’t want that dragon near my cart.”

“Okay,” I say, slowly kneeling down so I don’t wake Prometheus. “I’m going to have to pick you up.”

“I’m not the dumb one, so why are ya talking to me like I am?”

“As your future queen and favor giver, you should really consider being nicer to me.” I carefully wrap my fingers around his torso. His stomach is squishy and his rib cage is tiny. Handling him like I might a baby bird, I grab his cart as well and stand, positioning him in the crook of my arm. “Comfortable?”

His head rears back in surprise, but he quickly covers the reaction. “It’s better than walking,” Harald admits then adds, “My Queen,” and gives an exaggerated bow.

I’m not sure that’s better than being called dumb, but I’ll take it. “Good. Now, tell me what to do.”

TWENTY-THREE

Never insult a trull

DAISY

Whatever is in Harald's cart smells awful. The pans clank together as we walk, like a disjointed soundtrack for our journey. Even though the path is mostly shaded by the clusters of trees, sweat slips down the side of my face. Summer in this world is no joke. I swipe the back of my hand over my forehead. The movement stirs up more of that horrid stench. I breathe through my mouth and try not to side-eye the cart too much, but eventually I have to ask.

"What's in the cart?"

"The skins of my enemies," he says with a laugh. "What's in my cart? It's rude to ask a trull what's in their cart."

"Right, sorry. I've only noticed a smell is all."

"That'll be the skins. They take a few weeks to stop smelling."

Oh... that's... disconcerting. I thought he was kidding. "Did they at least deserve it?"

He shrugs. "Depends on who you ask. Take the next path on the right and then the castle is a few miles after that."

I'm surprised we haven't run into anyone on our walk, but according to Harald, there aren't a lot of people who voluntarily head out to the castle. It's probably only been a little over an hour. I'm more than ready to get out of this heat. The humidity from all the greenery is killing me.

“What’s a thing like ya doing with Orcus? Heard he’s a mean son of an ogre.”

Bristling, I swallow the lecture about being called a *thing*. I don’t want to end up as part of the stink in his cart, and I clear my throat. “He’s not mean.”

“Ha! He’s an ogre. His father once made three of my cousins carry a giant boulder because it made him laugh.”

“How far did they have to go?”

“They didn’t make it but four steps before they were crushed to death.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” I shake my head and press my lips together. What kind of fucked up torture is that? “But Orcus isn’t cruel like that.”

“Maybe ya just don’t know him well enough, eh? Who’s to say he hasn’t gone and abandoned ya for another lass?”

The bond rankles. “He hasn’t abandoned me.”

“Guess we’ll see about that now, won’t we? I’ll skin him, but it’ll cost ya.” Harald pulls out a tiny toothpick and pops it into his mouth.

“If you skin him, I won’t have anything to give you.”

Harald tugs on a lock of my hair.

“Ow!”

“Two handfuls of this’ll cover the cost. I’m running low on thread.”

I don’t even want to know what he uses the thread for. Besides, I’m not going to want Orcus skinned. He wouldn’t betray me. He didn’t even want a mate to begin with. I have a feeling he’d probably snarl and growl at anyone who tried to seduce him. I bite back a smile.

The road Harald had mentioned comes into view. I turn down the path, heading out of the forest and into a valley. Long green grass sways as a stifling breeze coasts over my skin. Out from under the shade of the trees, it’s even hotter. I eye the giant stone structure that’s barely visible in the

distance. Jutting up from the valley in jagged peaks, it looks more like a mountain than a castle. Prometheus releases a dramatic yawn and nuzzles my neck.

“Hey, sleepy.”

Food.

“Yeah, we still don’t have any. I’ll get you some food when we get to the castle, hmm?”

“Ya shouldn’t talk to it,” Harald mutters.

Prometheus growls from its spot on my shoulder, leaning his face toward the trull.

“I ain’t scared of a little birdie like ya, ya hear me?” Harald places a protective hand over his cart. “Stay away from my skins.”

A puff of fire catches the cloth cover and I squeal and quickly blow it out but not before I catch the scent of cooked meat. My stomach turns as I realize cloth isn’t covering the cart. It’s skin.

“Don’t go barfing on me,” Harald says with a laugh. “Are you a plant eater?”

I cover a gag with a cough. “No.”

“Why are ya so green in the face then?” Harald smirks. “Too much ogre cock?”

“Uh, that’s none of your business, and I eat meat, but I’m fairly certain that’s not beef.”

“Beef? No, the cover is made out of banshee. Their skin is soft but durable.”

A bird flits by and Prometheus flies off my shoulder, shrieking as it chases after the creature. The bird squawks and zips away faster than the baby can fly.

“Prometheus! You’re flying!”

Harald pulls out the toothpick and points at the dragon. “Ya think it doesn’t know that?”

I glare down at Harald. “It’s exciting. Prometheus hasn’t flown before. Don’t ruin the moment with your attitude.”

The trull’s cheeks turn pink. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine,” I tell him, softening. “I didn’t mean to be rude.”

Harald studies me with a wrinkle above his nose, then glances away and falls silent. I release a soft sigh. Prometheus flies around my head, providing a welcome distraction, and I watch as the baby shows off with little chirps and chatters.

“That’s it, you cute little dragon. You’re big. You’re strong. You’ll catch a bird in no time!”

Prometheus preens under my praise and zooms down the path. I laugh and quicken my pace to keep up. Harald is still silent, but I decide it might be better to give him some time before I try to apologize again.

By the time we make it to the gates, the sun is setting. The castle is so big it could house at least a hundred ogres. The smooth gray stone is imposing and blocks out most of the light and horizon. There are no turrets or spires. Despite the lack of familiarity, there’s no mistaking this brutish piece of architecture is important. Two navy banners hang on either side of the gate.

The minotaur guard perks up as we approach and narrows his cow-like eyes. He’s wearing a navy uniform—shirt and pants—with an embroidered M on the left side of the collar of the shirt. His hooves poke out from the bottom of the pants, no need for boots. He takes in Prometheus who is flying, albeit a little unsteady, before shifting his attention to me.

“Folk aren’t allowed at the castle,” the minotaur gruffs. Its hide is a darker shade of brown than the one from the inn and there’s a tiny spot of white covering its left ear.

“Good thing she isn’t folk then, eh?” Harald snaps, standing on my forearm. He’s so short his head stops at my chin. “This here is yer PRINCESS,” Harald shouts the title so all the guards can hear, “and ya better move out of the way before I cut those horns from yer body with a dull knife.”

The minotaur startles at the burst of anger that spews out of the trull I'm carrying. He takes a quick step back. "I don't want any trouble."

Harald scoffs. "I couldn't tell from the way ya were talking to Daisy."

"Daisy?" The minotaur gives me a wide-eyed look. "Orcus' mate."

"Uh. Yeah. How do you know my name?" I ask as Prometheus circles around me. The little dragon is getting tired, dipping low and swooping high as it tries to muster up more energy.

"Everyone knows who you are." The minotaur bows low to the ground, horns tipping down. "Forgive me, Your Highness."

This is so awkward. "It's not a big deal."

Harald tosses a glare over his shoulder. "It's a big deal when he insulted you. The king'll have his hide, but I'm willing to take his horns if you want them."

"Oh, that's not really necessary, is it? He was only trying to do his job and..." I try to think of something to keep the trull calm. "His horns aren't exactly nice. Orcus' tusks are pure ivory, beautiful and smooth. His horns are a little too rough and a little too yellow. Besides, I'm tired from all the walking. Maybe we can find ourselves some rooms and you can settle in for a nice bath?"

The minotaur makes an undistinguishable sound—maybe offended that I insulted his horns—and the trull considers me with a long, squinted look. "Ya'd offer me a room?"

"Of course," I say, then quickly add, "so long as the king is okay with it, but you're my travel companion. I don't really see how he can say no."

Harald's face softens and his eyes water. "Companion?"

Do trulls not make friends? I guess it might be a little hard to befriend other monsters if you're always threatening to skin them or gouge their eyeballs out.

“Yes,” I say with gusto. “As long as you don’t threaten me, Prometheus, or Orcus, I think we can be friends.”

“You can’t be friends with a tru—” the minotaur’s words are cut off by a miniature dagger embedded in his tongue.

I gasp. Harald pulled it out and threw it before I could even comprehend what was happening. His gaze is still on me and he places his hand over his heart. “Daisy, I mean, Princess, I pledge myself to you as the Fifth Trull of the Mullen line.” He palms another tiny dagger and slashes it across my forearm, carving a small T into my skin.

“Ow!”

“It’ll pass.” Harald returns the dagger to its rightful place before plopping down to sit on my arm next to the little mark he made.

“Give a woman a little warning next time,” I grumble at the vicious little monster before smiling up at the petrified minotaur with a knife still stuck in his tongue. He doesn’t seem willing to move. With a heavy sigh, I step forward. “May I?” I gesture toward his mouth and he nods.

The dagger may be little, but a gush of blood fills the minotaur’s mouth as I carefully extract it from his tongue. He reels back from me like I was the one who stabbed him and swallows the blood, keeping his attention on Harald.

“Is Orcus here?” I ask.

“He’s”—the minotaur winces in pain but continues—“in the infirmary.”

My heart skips and the bond zings with unease. “Will you take me to him?” Prometheus drops onto my shoulder with a heavy pant and blinks up at me. I give the dragon a reassuring pet. The little wound Harald left behind hurts but nothing matters right now except finding my mate.

“Right away, Your Highness.” He catches the attention of another guard down, this one with the grayish skin and build of what I assume is a gargoyle, and that one climbs down from his spot at the top of the gate to take the one the minotaur

abandons. He's wearing the same uniform except he has shiny black boots.

"Medical wing. Isn't too far," the minotaur explains with a pained look before setting off at a clipped pace, whether to be rid of us or get back to his post, that's unknown. Honestly, I don't know how he's not crying after being stabbed in the tongue, but I cry when I throw up, so I'm not exactly what most people would consider tough.

In fact, if all the soldiers are this tough, I'm impressed.

But if they're all brutally strong, how did Orcus end up hurt? My chest tightens as we're led into the entrance hall and immediately directed to the right. The inside of the castle walls are smoothed and appear as though someone carved elegant designs where crown molding usually exists. We pass uniformed creatures stationed throughout the castle as the minotaur guides the way. Some with wings, some with hooves, and a few with those unsettling snake-eyes, though none are the same vibrant yellow of Basil's. Each uniform is customized to fit the needs of the individual monsters. The ones with wings wear tops with slits cut into the back, allowing their webbed appendages to spread out behind them.

It's all fascinating, but I can't focus on them for long. Orcus is close and I still can't get a sense of him through the bond. We take a few more turns and end up in the infirmary. My nose wrinkles at the scent of strong herbs and spices. Aside from the smell, the medical wing is essentially what you'd expect. Beds for patients, though wider and longer. Various tools—some somewhat identifiable and some not. Curtains are pulled shut around certain beds, and a centaur with a long mane steps out of one. A long medical jacket is draped over the monster's shoulders and buttoned closed at the bottom of its neck, leaving the horse half of its body exposed.

Its eyes narrow on Harald. "Absolutely not. Take the trull somewhere else."

"What is it with you monsters hating on trulls?" I ask, shifting to shield Harald from the centaur's glare.

“Avery. This is Daisy. Orcus’ mate and the *princess*,” the guard says. “The trull is her companion.”

Avery’s gaze whips to meet mine. “I’m so sorry, Princess. Forgive my tone. I’m Avery, they/them, and the castle’s primary healer.” Shifting on its hooves, the human half hinges forward into a bow.

“It’s fine, but you should really apologize to Harald.”

“Right.” Their eyebrows pinch together as they straighten. “I’m sorry,” they say this to Harald who harrumphs and ignores them.

Oi, he’s so dramatic.

“Right. Now that that’s settled. Where’s my mate?”

Avery scurries a few beds over, mane swaying and hooves clacking on the stone floor, and whips a curtain back.

“Oh my god.”

TWENTY-FOUR

Accidental erections

DAISY

Orcus' face is black and blue, covered in bruises. Dark red blood is dried along a nasty split in his bottom lip. There are more than a few fang marks decorating his skin. My chest aches and the bond fills with worry in response to my concern. It's so strange that it seems to have emotions as well, or perhaps it simply amplifies my emotions. With trembling fingers covering my lips, I rush to his side. He doesn't even stir as I plop down beside his sleeping form and stare at him.

Orcus is so strong it's difficult seeing him like this. Not normal at all. Prometheus whimpers and nuzzles the side of my face.

"What happened?" I whisper the question and study the fingerprint shaped marks around part of his throat. My own aches, an invisible hand clamping around my neck as if to let me experience exactly what Orcus had.

"Vampires." Avery's tone is grim as if that should offer me all the information I need.

Harald, still sitting on one arm, grabs hold of his cart and hops onto the bed with a tiny thump. He marches toward Avery. "Ya better start using yer words before I find a way to pry them out of ya. My princess asked ya a question."

"Right, of course, I'm so sorry," Avery says in a panicked breath. "From what I understand, our soldiers were helping evacuate a small village just east of the border between our

land and the vampires. The blood suckers came without warning. Orcus and a few others barely made it out alive.” They move to the other side of the bed to check his pulse. “He’s been asleep like this since he got here.”

“When was that?” I ask.

“Two days ago. He lost a lot of blood.” Avery sighs. “He’s healing, though. The swelling has gone down on its own. I’ve given him some medicine as well. He should be awake, but every time I try to rouse him, he grumbles and whispers your name before falling back into a deep sleep.”

“Is it his head or something? Like a concussion?” I don’t know anything about medicine.

“He didn’t hit his head, but the worst of it is in his ribs. He broke three of them. That coupled with the blood he lost when he was bitten aren’t helping his recovery.”

Holy shit. Tears well in my eyes and I swipe at my cheek, sniffing loudly.

“Well? What are ya still standing there for? Give the princess a minute, ya dolt!”

“Harald,” I say softly. “They’re fine. I’m overwhelmed.” I’ve never seen anyone I care about this badly hurt and the bond is amplifying everything I feel to the point where I can’t tell if these are my tears or the bonds.

“If I may suggest something,” Avery begins but pauses, waiting for my consent.

“Go ahead.”

“The mate bond is powerful, more so than any medicine I might be able to give him. If I were a witch, well then, I’d be able to do more but obviously I’m not. Anyway, the bond might be able to force him awake.”

“How?” I tentatively place my palm against his, frowning when he doesn’t automatically grasp it like he would if he were awake. The little T Harald carved pulses on my arm but the wound wasn’t deep enough for blood to dribble down it.

Avery's hooves clack as they shift to study me. "I can't explain it, but I've seen it before. The mate who's awake somehow reaches into the bond and brings the other to the surface of their consciousness."

"Did you come to see me as well?" a familiar voice says from a bed over. Maddox peeks his head through the curtain and gives me a rueful smile. His tusks are shorter than Orcus' and his skin is a lighter shade of green. The bruises covering his body stand out in stark contrast. "Hello, Daisy."

Last time I saw him, he was convincing Orcus to join this stupid fight. If I were petty, I'd blame him for Orcus' current state, but I'm not. I'm a grown woman. I'd never stoop as low to say, "This is your fault."

Shit. Okay, that wasn't what I meant to say.

Maddox drops his gaze to the ground. "I know."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean that." I shake my head. "It's not your fault. It's his father's."

Avery sucks in a sharp breath and takes three steps back, muttering something about treason.

"You're right." Maddox lifts his gaze to meet mine then moves his attention to Orcus. "I've never seen him like this."

"Yes, well, apparently vampires are violent, vicious things." I squeeze Orcus' hand, willing him to squeeze back. He doesn't. Despair weighs heavy on my chest. "You were there?"

"Me and a few soldiers were all that made it out thanks to Orcus."

I glare at the sleeping ogre. "What did you do?"

"He told us all to retreat, and we thought he'd come too, but the idiot stayed and tried to take on three on his own. Had I not looked back to see him getting the absolute shit beat out of him, he would've died."

I pinch my eyes shut and try to block out the image Maddox has painted, but it's too late. The bond pulses with sorrow and pain, like we've truly lost him. It steals my breath.

For a minute, all I can do is breathe, existing in the agony of theoretically losing him. In the depths of that feeling is darkness, like someone stole the light of the sun and all the stars. I don't like it.

I *hate* it.

And then the sensation relents and the crushing weight in my chest abates. I glance at Maddox, and he grimaces, rubbing a hand on the back of his neck.

"The bond?" he asks.

I nod. "It doesn't like this, and neither do I."

"You might be able to wake him," Avery gently prompts, coming back to my side now that I'm not insulting the king.

Right. Pulling in a deep breath, I focus on my mate and the bond. I gently stroke it, prod it, caress it. Nothing works. I switch tactics and send images of us together, of his head buried between my legs.

"Good Marline and Foggerty! What are ya doing to the lad?" Harald shouts.

Avery stifles a giggle. I glance back at the two of them only to stop short at the sight of Orcus' very erect cock making a tent of the hospital fabric. I blush and Maddox has the good sense to avoid eye contact.

"I was trying to wake him up," I explain.

"Ya woke somethin' up!" Harald says with a chortle.

Avery releases a peal of laughter and their eyes widen. They spin and rush away on four hooves.

"Try something else," Maddox suggests.

The trull snickers and shakes his head. "I'm going to find something to eat."

"No murdering anyone," I say.

"Calm yerself. I don't plan on killin' anyone. An arm or leg'll do just fine."

"Harald," I warn.

“Yeah, yeah. I hear ya, Princess. I’ll behave. Swear it on my mum’s grave.”

I don’t know anything about trull culture or even if he has a mom he cares about enough to keep his promises. I squint at him and he glares right back.

“Trulls don’t swear on their parent’s graves unless they mean what they say,” Maddox says. “Besides, as murderous and deadly as he may be, even this little lad isn’t dumb enough to risk angering the king.”

“Call me a little lad again,” Harald dares.

Maddox’s eyes light with challenge, and he starts to say it again, but I quickly cut in with a harsh, “Enough.”

The fight flees both of their bodies.

“Sorry,” Maddox mumbles.

“I’m not,” Harald snaps. “I’ll skin him alive if he says it again. Ogre skin makes mighty fine clothes.”

Maddox scoffs. “*You’ve* killed an ogre?”

These two are going to drive me crazy. “Hey, both of you, shut up! I need to focus on waking up Orcus and I can’t do that with you two having a pissing contest!”

The trull blinks at me. “Who in their right mind would compete with piss?”

“Yeah, that’s gross,” Maddox adds.

I drop my head into my hands and groan. “Please, just go eat.”

“Well, all right, Princess. No need to get all grumpy about it,” Harald says with a huff, like I’m the one being the pain in the ass.



DOZENS OF ATTEMPTS and what feels like three hours later, I still haven't been able to wake Orcus. Maddox has fallen asleep, knocked out by the meds the doctor gave him for his own broken ribs. Avery gave Harald one of the empty beds, and he's happily counting the many skins from his cart, lovingly stroking them. I try not to pay attention to that. If I think about it for too long, I might throw up.

Prometheus is curled up between Orcus' feet, having had a full meal of some meat Avery brought for it. My own meal sits untouched beside the bed. I drop my head onto Orcus' chest in defeat. I've tried everything, but aside from his cock getting hard, he hasn't so much as wiggled a toe.

"Perhaps you should rest," Avery suggests. "You've been at it for a while and you've had a long journey. I've managed to keep the king at bay, but he won't listen to me for much longer. I think you might like to sleep before you meet him."

I swallow. What does the king want to meet me for? I'm nothing special. I'm his son's mate, sure, but it's not like I'm some Disney princess without a family... *oh*. Maybe I am more like a Disney princess than I thought.

Sitting up, I cover a yawn. "Can I stay with him?"

"Of course." Avery places a hand on my shoulder. "I'll get you a blanket."

"No need. I can share with him."

Their face softens in understanding. "All right, honey. The night nurse will be here soon. She'll be in the office if you need anything, and I'll be back in the morning." Avery gives me a gentle squeeze before stepping away.

"Thanks, Avery." I smile at the centaur, realizing that the monster didn't even faze me. I've been in this world long enough to expect the strange and unusual. Nothing could be worse than the cyclops. I slip under the blankets, molding myself to Orcus' side. I carefully set one leg over his much larger thigh but keep my arm off his torso. I've never had broken ribs, but according to Harald, they're incredibly

painful. I tuck one arm beneath my head and interlace my free hand with his.

“You have to wake up,” I tell him. “I didn’t sign up to be a widow.” He doesn’t answer. I didn’t expect him to. “I made friends with a trull. He’s nice, if not a little scary, but I think he means well. Apparently trulls are super stabby. I kind of think he’s cute,” I whisper the last part. “Reminds me of the troll dolls back home.”

I study the stone ceiling, wondering how I came to this point in my life. Back home, I’d always felt somewhat adrift with the way I grew up. Working at the call center and taking care of Edgar gave me purpose; I was doing good, but there wasn’t much outside of that. The few friends I had were all settling down and having kids.

I was alone. I ached to be loved. I dreamed about a romance that would sweep me off my feet and make my heart skip beats. I pined after the princes in my books who would do anything for their chosen. I wished I were a princess—wait.

Maybe he needs a kiss!

I’m not an actual Disney princess. He is a prince, though, and there are more than a few movies and tales that require true love’s kiss. I don’t know that I love Orcus, but I am his mate. I sit up and lean over him, carefully placing my palm on the side of his warm and bruised cheek.

Even beaten, Orcus is strikingly handsome.

Slowly, I bring my lips to meet his, kissing him before eagerly pulling back and searching his face. Nothing.

“What are ya doin’ diddling a sleeping ogre, Princess?”

Startling at the trull’s voice, I whip my head around. Harald’s face is scrunched in disgust and he gives me a judging once over, making me feel like an absolute creep for trying the kiss.

I scowl. “I’m not diddling.”

“That right there is a weird kink.”

“Says the trull who pets his skins,” I counter with an arched eyebrow.

“My skins are my prizes,” he retorts. “They’re precious.”

“If you say so.” I shake my head and turn back to Orcus. “See what I have to deal with? I need you to wake up.” I settle back on the mattress and release a puff of air. “I’m tired of being alone.”

TWENTY-FIVE

Trulls and their threats

ORCUS

I wake up cradling Daisy. Her cheek is pressed into my arm, smooshing the side of her face, and her mouth is slightly parted. With her leg tossed over mine, every inch of her body caresses me. It dulls the pain radiating in my side to see this fragile lady boldly claiming me in front of others, even if we're only in the medical wing.

The absolute agony riddling my body gave it away more than the bed and familiar ceiling gave away our location. That and the fact that I'm alive. Flashes of the battle play out in my mind. We'd been evacuating a village of centaurs near the border when the vamps attacked. None of our scouts realized they were already within our territory. Their attention had been focused outward, but the attack came from within.

Three fucking vampires.

I'm lucky I'm alive.

Daisy shifts and releases a tiny puff of air that tickles my side. I gaze down at her, brushing the fiery strands of hair away from her face. Her delicate lips beg for a kiss. Shifting, I attempt to do that but sharp, breath stealing pain lances through me. I grunt and collapse back onto the bed with a moan.

"AH!" Daisy shouts as she slips off the side of the mattress onto the stone floor. "Ow. My ass," she groans.

"Is very beautiful, little flower."

She gasps and scrambles off the floor. “Orcus?” Scanning me with wide eyes, she clutches her chest.

I nod. “Daisy.”

“If you weren’t in a hospital, I’d smother you! What were you thinking taking on three vampires all by yourself?” She sits at my side and glares down at me. “Don’t answer that, I already know. You were trying to save people.”

“What else was I supposed to do?”

“Oh, I don’t know, run with everyone else?” She fists the sheet on my bed in her hands.

“They would’ve caught up.” I reach up and cup her face. “I couldn’t let them die.”

Her eyes bounce between mine, and the little bit of anger in her gaze fades and she releases a resigned sigh. “I know, big guy. I know.” She leans toward me then winces. “Ow. Has the king ever considered carpet? It’s a lot more forgiving if you fall on your ass.”

She’s so fragile that a simple fall hurts her. A vampire would kill her in a second—if he didn’t have other plans for her that is. The blood suckers do love to steal brides, and I’m sure they wouldn’t hesitate to try and take my mate.

Daisy has to go home.

I won’t be responsible for her death. I’ll weather years of pain from the bond before I’ll see her skin coated in crimson.

“Uh-oh. You have that crease between your eyebrows.”

“What crease?”

She grins and leans forward, this time without a flinch, and brushes her thumb over a hard crease in my skin. The muscles relax under her touch and she hums in approval. “Here I thought you’d be happy to see me.” Her face hovers over mine and there’s so much in that gaze.

Trust. Worry. Affection. Desire. The bond flutters.

My chest aches and I grab the back of her neck and bring her lips to meet mine, stealing a kiss. Soft as pillows, her lips

move against mine, and when I brush my tongue over the seam of her lips, she opens for me like a beautiful flower. Her skin heats beneath my fingers and trickles of lust flow through the bond. I love how responsive she is. Other parts of me begin to stir.

How mad would Avery be if I put Daisy on my cock?

“Would ya get a room? Some of us are tryin’ to rest in peace.”

I immediately recognize a trull accent and growl, ripping my lips from Daisy and using my arm to guide her to the head of the bed. I may be laid up, but I’ll be damned if I let a trull skin my mate.

“Orcus,” Daisy says, but I ignore her and focus on the twelve-inch tall trull with green hair on the bed across from us.

“What are you doing here?” Trulls are mercenaries, but they’re also not above murdering for fun or because someone they care for asked them too. I’d squash him like a bug if I could.

The trull bristles. “Is that anyway to treat the trull who’s been tendin’ to yer mate?”

“Don’t tell me lies, *trull*.”

“Orcus, this is Harald, my friend and the only reason I made it to the castle. Harald, this is Orcus, my mate and grumpy ogre.”

“Grumpy is right. Ya sure ya want to mate with him?”

“A little too late now,” Daisy says with a tinkling laugh. “He’s my mate, no take backs.”

I stiffen at the sound. The trull made my mate laugh. A beautiful, mesmerizing sound. Trulls aren’t funny. Then I notice the nearly invisible T marked across her forearm. Shock rocks through my system. The trull pledged himself to her?

“Well, good luck to ya. If he bothers ya, let me know and I’ll turn his green skin into a pretty dress for ya.” A small but razor-sharp dagger appears in the trull’s hand and there’s a glint of promise in his gaze.

He'd well and truly skin me for Daisy. I'm not sure why or how, but Harald cares for her. Which means somehow, probably some dangerous actions, led Daisy to charming him. Though, if anyone were to charm a trull, it would be Daisy. It's the way she looks at you. Like you're the only person she wants to talk to. Like she cares. Like she only wants to find the best in the world.

And the warmth of her smile brings me to my knees.

I cough and the pain that follows is a reminder that all *I* can bring her is the worst.

"Oh good, you're awake!" Avery, the centaur doctor, appears with Zyla and Callum in tow. "Care for some magical healing?"



THE BABY DRAGON is fluttering around the trull, mocking him with tiny puffs of fire. I swear the trull would've already taken care of the pest if not for being enamored with my mate.

Daisy and Callum stand off to the side, chatting in voices low enough that I can't hear. A warm palm presses against my ribs, and I grunt. Zyla shushes me and a tingling sensation seeps into my skin and wraps around my bones. This isn't my first time being healed by magic, but usually Callum does it. He hands something to Daisy before I can ask why he's handed me off to Zyla. The witch blocks part of my vision, and I stifle a huff of annoyance and tip my head to the side.

Daisy stares at whatever is in her palm and then lifts her gaze to meet mine. Guilt lines her face, almost as though I've caught her doing something naughty. Now I'm really curious, but Zyla steps in the way, completely cutting Daisy out of my line of sight.

Deep lines of concern cover Zyla's forehead. "How are your ribs feeling?"

“Better,” I tell her, trying to see around her, but she grabs my face.

“Good. I’m almost done then you can get up and carry your mate away from Callum. Though, you should know he’d never do anything to betray your trust.”

I lift my gaze to meet Zyla’s. Her eyes are set on mine, serious and pointed. She’s defending Callum. That’s a first. Usually those two are at each other’s throat.

I cross my arms over my chest. “I wasn’t worried about him.”

She arches an eyebrow. “If you say so. He may be arrogant and cocky, but he’s loyal to those he cares about.” The look on her face tells me she doesn’t consider herself part of that group. Her magic washes over my face and the side of my head. I take a deep breath, checking for traces of pain.

It’s gone.

“That was a nasty gash,” she murmurs, touching the freshly healed skin. Her magic is still working to heal that injury, so I patiently wait for her to finish. Lips pressed together, she studies every injury she’s healed before bringing her gaze to meet mine. “How close were you to dying?”

“Too close,” I admit.

Her scrutinizing gaze returns to mine. “There are two paths heading your way, Orcus. I pray to Hecate you’re smart enough to take the correct one.”

Ah. No wonder she’s healing me. She had a message to deliver.

“No hint as to which direction I should go?”

“That’s not how it works. It all depends on what you do next.” She glances over her shoulder at Daisy before returning to face me with grave lines creasing her forehead. “I like her and she deserves the best.”

I nod. “I agree.” And that’s why I plan on sending her home as soon as I can. “Did you find a way to create the spell I asked for?”

“Maybe.” Zyla removes her hands from my face and clasps them in her lap. “You’re sure this is what you want?” She mentioned at the moon festival her concern for my ability to cope with severing the bond.

“She can’t stay here,” I say. “It’s too dangerous.”

“She seems to be doing fine.” Zyla stands to reveal Daisy chastising the trull for something he’d done while I was busy being healed.

Callum shoots me a disbelieving grin and tries to stifle his laughter.

Daisy is lucky. Most would already be skinned for daring to talk to a trull like that. Yet there my mate is, berating the little bloodthirsty creature like he’s a babe in need of correction.

A smile tugs at my lips.

Zyla turns back to me. “Give me a few weeks.”

The smile disappears.

TWENTY-SIX

All hail the king.

DAISY

The charm Callum pressed into my palm is like a thousand-pound weight. Knowing that if I wanted, I could invoke the activation word and return to Earth, crushes me with indecision. All I wanted from the moment I fell on Orcus' cock was to get back. I was so certain that's what I needed to do.

Now, as I stare at Orcus as Zyla tends to him, I can't help but wonder if maybe I should stay. He clearly can't keep himself out of trouble. Besides, I can't leave now. Prometheus still needs to find its way back to the dragon nest and I have to ensure that Harald and the obnoxious taxes the king makes his people pay are taken care of.

The only way to do that is to go all in.

I walked so far to find Orcus because I hated him being gone. My heart nearly collapsed in on itself when he startled me awake. Whether the feelings are driven by the bond or the part of me that's always wanted to belong and be loved, it doesn't really matter. And while he may be grumpy, I can handle it. I've dealt with worse and now that I know what's caused the bitterness to seep inside that giant body, I want to eradicate it.

Avery's hooves pound against the stone floor. "The king is on his way." They release a heavy pant. "I tried to give more time but he threatened to behead me."

“I’ll speak with him,” Orcus says. “Your head is safe. He’s not used to being told no is all.” All traces of his injuries are now gone.

Zyla draws back to Callum’s side, and the wizard’s eyes track over every inch of her body. The witch ignores him, possibly oblivious to his attention, and looks at me.

“I told you we’d meet again.” Her brown irises sparkle with mischief. She’s not wearing her crown but there’s something about her aura that screams *boss bitch*.

I laugh and tuck the charm into my pocket, saving it for another day. “Indeed. You could have let me know what was going to happen,” I say.

“Part of knowing is a curse. I’ve conveyed the future before, but it caused more trouble than the original vision.” She shakes her head. “Vague guidance is the best I’m willing to give now whenever Hecate blesses me with a prophecy.”

“What happened?”

“She caused a war between the werecats and vampires, and the cats were nearly hunted to extinction,” Callum supplies.

Zyla sucks in a sharp breath and glares at him. “It wasn’t meant to go that way.”

“You told the vampires that their children were in danger if they continued to fight with the werecats and that they needed to end it.”

“And they were! There was too much bloodshed on either side,” Zyla tells me. “But apparently they took it as my permission to attempt to eliminate the werecats.”

“Maybe you should’ve been more specific. Like mentioning peace and love or something?” I don’t know the first thing about politics in this world but I can see how the vampires might’ve misinterpreted her message.

“She tried that too, but it turns out when the future is known, people still make the wrong choice.” Callum runs his hand up her arm. “You tried your best,” he attempts to reassure her. “And I was able to fix it.”

“Callum.” The way Orcus says his name is a warning the warlock doesn’t heed.

“What? It was easy. I just created a little sanctuary the vampires couldn’t get to and provided a safe place for the werecats to repopulate. My making the werecats disappear stopped the bloodshed.” He may not notice the clouds darkening Zyla’s features, but there’s a storm brewing, and he’s about to get struck by lightning if he’s not careful. “That wasn’t the last time I had to help her.” Dropping his arm around her shoulder, he pulls her against his body and beams at her.

This situation sounds really complicated, but one thing is absolutely clear. Callum is an idiot.

Zyla’s gaze narrows, taking his words as a jab, and she jerks out from under his arm. “You’re an asshole.” She storms away from him and magical fire crackles in her palms. Her shoulders heave as she sucks in a few deep breaths, trying to calm herself.

Callum’s face cracks, and a slip of an emotion seeps through that cocky façade, hurt, maybe regret, but he conceals it before she glares in his direction again.

“You should go. I’m going to make sure Daisy is settled. In time, I’ll return to the village. We don’t need you.” She pauses. “*I don’t need you.*”

“So eager to get rid of me, Zy?” Callum teases, expertly hiding his true feelings as he saunters toward her. “If you want me gone, I’ll go.” He tugs on a strand of her blonde hair and heat flashes in her gaze but she doubles down.

“I want you to go,” she snaps.

Their relationship is so complicated it’s making me dizzy.

“Where’s my son?” a loud voice booms through the infirmary and cuts through the tension filling the room. Dread zings through the bond.

Great. Time to meet the parents.



THE KING OOZES malice and pride. My skin crawls and my hackles rise as he comes to stand before us. The king's tusks are adorned with several golden cuffs. The opulent decorations might be beautiful, but I've learned too much about the ogre to admire him in any respect. The story Orcus told was horrible, but I have a feeling this ogre has done a lot more than accidentally destroy a village. A hawk like gaze cuts through the room, slicing through me on the way to Orcus who is rising from the bed. How Orcus doesn't falter beneath that scrutinizing glare is beyond me.

Every instinct is telling me he's not good, and I've learned to listen to my gut. I inch closer to Zyla and Callum, but Orcus notices and shakes his head. Soft, soothing sensations flit down the bond.

Apparently, I'm meant to stay where I am.

"I was told you were still injured," his dad says, tone almost bored.

"He was, Your Majesty. The Grand High Witch helped heal his wounds." Avery scurries to the side to keep from being kicked as the king steps toward Orcus.

Prometheus releases a tiny, petrified squeak. *Scared.*

The dragon is tucked behind Harald, a surprising turn of events, and the trull's chest puffs with pride. I'm shocked, considering Prometheus has been taunting him. I also know without a doubt the trull will protect my dragon while the king is here.

Face to face, Orcus is slightly taller and a little wider than the king, but that's not to say the king isn't a giant in his own right. They're both huge, and seeing two ogres together has my little human heart clenching in fear. Logically I know I'm not in danger, but there are predators and then there are prey. In the land of monsters, I'm the prey, and even though I'm

Orcus' mate, my body and mind refuse to let me forget that fact. I take a deep breath to slow my racing heart.

Another wave of calming sensations races through the bond. My eyes jump to Orcus' and he nods at me before looking at his father.

"If you're better, you can head back to the front of the line. We're preparing a counter attack. No one plans an attack on my land and gets away with it."

That's what he's worried about? Not the fact that his son was almost killed? There's no way Orcus can go fight. He may be healed, but I don't want to see him hurt again.

Orcus shakes his head. "I'm not going."

His father growls. "I am your king and when I say—"

"You misunderstand me. The attack can wait. My mate is here and I think it's time I do what you've always wanted." Orcus lips kick up at the corners, but it's not a kind smile.

"I thought you didn't want the throne. Something about burden and wanting to live your life for yourself." His father tips his head and sneers at Orcus like he's nothing more than scum between his toes. "The vampire attack changed your mind then?"

"Daisy," Orcus says, ignoring his father. "Come."

Well, when he asks so nicely... I stay rooted to the spot and drop my hands to my hips. I send a snap of reprimand in Orcus' direction. His father looks around, trying to find who his son is talking to. Suddenly his gaze finds me. I keep my spine straight even though my first instinct is to crawl into a hole.

"Daisy." Orcus' jaw is clenched now.

"Yes?"

Orcus crooks his fingers. "Come."

Has being around his father made him dumb? I'm not a dog, and I refuse to be called like one, even with the king watching.

“Please.”

“What?” Orcus asks.

“I think you mean to say, Daisy, my sweet, wonderful Daisy, will you *please* come here?”

Those navy irises flash with warning, but he clenches his fists and says very slowly, “Daisy, will you please come here?”

That’s better. With all of the confidence I don’t feel, I take my time walking toward Orcus. My breath trembles in my chest, but I keep my chin high. When I’m within grabbing distance, Orcus snatches me off the ground and plasters me to his chest. I swat at him and lean back. “I can stand on my own.”

“She’s mouthy.”

Orcus peers down at me. A hint of a grin tugs at the corner of his mouth. “She’s my mate.”

“Don’t talk to me like I’m a pet,” I tell him.

“Ladies don’t like to be told what to do,” he says with a sigh, remembering something I’d told him days ago.

“Only in certain circumstances,” I whisper, wrapping my fingers around his tusk and using the hold to pull myself up to brush my lips over his. “I’m tired,” I lie.

Orcus’ eyebrows scrunch, but I give him a *go with it* look and his features smooth. “My mate is tired. We can discuss the arrangements for coronation later.”

“What if I’m not ready to give up the throne?” his father asks.

“You’ve already written it into law. What did it say? When the first son of the king takes a mate, he will inherit the throne.” Orcus begins to walk away. “And we both know that you’ve been waiting for a chance to escape accountability for all the problems you’ve caused.”

“Be careful with your words, Son,” he says to Orcus’ back.

I peer around my mate and meet the king's gaze. Something shifts in my peripheral vision. Harald is holding one of his miniature daggers. Having caught my attention, the trull points to the king and pretends to drag the blade across his throat. Zyla's watching him with terror slamming her eyebrows into her hairline. I shake my head and Harald deflates, tossing the little knife onto the mattress.

TWENTY-SEVEN

Ladies don't like break ups

DAISY

The walls of the castle are all stone, but there are a few long, navy tapestries that run from floor to ceiling. Staff, centaurs, a few minotaurs, and other monsters I can't name, bustle about as they start their morning chores. A minotaur dressed in a plain gray gown is dusting things in the hall. A centaur with a bright red mane and a simple black shirt pushes a cart of food. The monster with orange, snake-like eyes and a faint ripple of brown scales down either of its arms is carrying a large basket of laundry to be washed. They're all so busy they simply spare Orcus a hurried bow before scurrying along. Orcus isn't offended and I'm glad he's not the type to demand they show him proper respect.

Despite my claim of being tired, part of me wishes we could spend all day exploring the castle. It's not traditional per Earth's standards, but even I can tell this place was built for a king. Gold isn't dripping from the walls. Instead, there are ornate decorations with various gems and multicolored glass sprinkled throughout. The vases on excessively tall pedestals hold fresh flowers and fill the castle with the faint scent of lavender and jasmine, and the intricate carvings along the top of the walls are beautiful enough to warrant admiration.

"What about Prometheus and Harald?" I ask once we're safely away from the heat of the king's glower.

"Callum and Zyla will take them to my suite."

"They will?"

Orcus nods. "Callum spoke into my mind."

"That's... a whole new meaning to intrusive thoughts."

"He doesn't do it often. My father doesn't really like the magic folk, but he shouldn't hurt them."

"Shouldn't?" I squeak. "We have to go back."

Orcus arches an eyebrow. "They may be small, but Zyla and Callum are forces to be reckoned with. My father would be foolish to take them both on at the same time."

"So... you want to take the—"

"We'll talk about that later," he cuts me off. "There are too many listening ears."

Right. In all my books, court life is always alight with gossip. I wouldn't expect it to be much different in real life.

Orcus has a suite of five rooms. A small gathering of guards jolt to attention upon our arrival. Three minotaurs and two gargoyles. The minotaur on the right opens the double doors to a room, blanching at the sight of Zyla, Callum, Prometheus, and Harald.

"How—"

"They're fine. Leave us." Orcus marches into the room.

The warlock smirks at the guards and twists his hand in the air, manipulating the wind and slamming the doors in their faces.

Orcus carefully sets me down and Prometheus zooms at me.

I catch the dragon with a laugh. "I'm sorry I left without you."

Hungry, it says, golden eyes shimmering.

"We'll get food soon." I smooth my hand over the blue scales and glance at Zyla. "Thank you for bringing my friends."

Zyla waves off my appreciation. "It was no problem. Orcus, do you mind if I stay for a bit to help Daisy adjust?"

“Not at all. You can stay in one of my rooms.” Orcus glances at the warlock. “I guess I’ll see you soon.”

“Indeed. It seems I’ve been dismissed,” Callum says with a grin but there’s traces of sadness in his eyes as he glances at Zyla. “Besides, there’s a sick witchling in need of my services. I’m sure we’ll meet again soon.” He turns to me and bows. “Princess.” He swirls his hands around and disappears, leaving behind a fine silvery mist.

I suck in a breath. “Holy crap.”

“He’s a show off,” Zyla mutters.

“Kind of cute though,” I say, wagging my eyebrows at the witch.

She scowls at me. “If you’re into arrogant and self-centered.”

“Nah. Grumpy is more my style.”

“She’s always insulting me,” Orcus grumbles.

“Well, I’ll leave you two alone. I’m sure you have a lot to talk about.” She tickles underneath Prometheus’ chin. “How about you come with me for a bit, hmm? I’ll order you a nice plate of fresh meat.”

“What about me, eh? Yer goin’ to leave me with the love birds?”

Zyla casts him a wary glance. “Are you going to threaten to kill, skin, or otherwise hurt me or the baby dragon?”

“Name’s Prometheus,” Harald says with a grunt. “And any witch who’s a friend of Daisy’s is safe.”

“The company you keep is quite interesting,” Zyla tells me, eyeing the mark on my arm. It’s faint and the lightest shade of pink, but it may as well be dark red on my pale skin. “All right then, trull. Let’s go find some beds and food. Maybe we can even sort out that rot that’s taking over your skins.”

Harald bristles. “Rot? They’re not rotten.”

“They smell rotten,” Zyla shoots back.

“It’s part of my aesthetic,” Harald defends.

“Well. At the very least I’ll need to contain the smell. Otherwise, I may throw up.”

“All right, all right. No need to fuss so much.” Harald raises his eyebrows at me. “Witches are a fickle bunch.”

I shrug. “She’s not wrong. They do have a certain odor.”

“If ya can’t accept me for who I am—”

“No, no,” I say quickly. “I accept you and all your stabby ways. Thank you for letting Zyla do a containment spell.”

He harrumphs but doesn’t continue the argument.

Zyla nods at me and then gestures for Harald to follow her. The doors sweep open with a flick of her wrist and the guards startle. Orcus informs them which room to show Zyla and then the doors snap shut.

Orcus is standing in the middle of the room, but I delay the inevitable conversation and walk around, studying his princely bedroom. It’s not much different from the cave. There are no decorations on the walls. A few books lie on a table between two oversized chairs sitting before a fire. The bed is a huge four poster with blue velvet curtains which are tied back to reveal a dozen pillows and a fancy comforter. I trace my finger over the stone wall and glance at Orcus.

His gaze burns into me. I don’t think he’s moved, or even taken a breath, since Zyla left with Prometheus and Harald.

“So, you want to be king now?”

“No.”

I frown. “But you said—”

“I know, but I was buying time. You need to go home. Zyla is working on a spell, and if we can give her a few weeks, we’ll have a way to get you to safety.”

The shock of what he’s saying slaps me in the face. He wants me to leave after I’ve decided to stay? That’s not how this works.

“If I wanted to leave,” I reach into my pocket and pull out the charm, “I could go now. Callum gave this to me.” I search Orcus’ face. “One word is all it’ll take, and then I’ll be gone.”

His features darken as he stares at the gem. It’s so similar to the one I used at Edgar’s, I can’t help but wonder if Callum had been the one to craft the one he had used, but he’s too young for that to be true. Plus he seemed perplexed by the story Edgar had told. Almost like he’d seen a ghost.

“You had planned to leave all along.”

“At first, yeah, but you went and left me and I freaked out. Then I find you here, in this stupid stone castle, with more injuries than I can count.”

He steps toward me. “And that bothered you?”

“No, I was happy.” I throw my hands into the air. “Of course it bothered me.”

He takes another step, and I tip my head to maintain eye contact. “And now that you have the charm, what do you want?”

“I want to stay. Not that it matters, you’re ready to send me away.” If I pout, it’s merely a coincidence.

“It’s not safe. You saw my wounds. I’m an ogre. You’re so breakable.”

“Oh, so what? You’re deciding for me?”

“I wasn’t deciding for you. I was trying to keep you safe.”

I wish I could throw something at his big stubborn ogre head, but he’s too tall and my aim is terrible. “What if I want to stay regardless of the danger? Have you ever thought of that?”

“Why would you want to stay? This world, the monster territory especially, isn’t where you belong. Not to mention the anger of the furies. There’s a good chance you might die. I might die.”

“Like hell you will. If I’m not allowed to be here, then you’re not allowed to die.”

His lips twitch. “That’s not how it works.”

I nod. “Exactly. So it’s settled then.”

“What?” The way his face scrunches is honestly so cute.

“I’m staying.”

Those dark blue irises flash. “Little flower—”

“Don’t *little flower* me when you’re trying to break up with me. I’m staying. If you want me to leave, you will have to physically remove me from this world yourself and seeing as I’m the only one with the activation word, you can’t. Sorry, grumpy, you’re stuck with me.”

“Zyla is still crafting her spell for me.”

“But it won’t be ready for weeks, right?”

He nods.

“Good. Then give me until then to prove that I can fit into your world. I might be human, but I’m chronically optimistic and my new bestie is a serial killer. He may be tiny, but he is mighty. I bet he’d give any vampire a run for his money.”

“That he would,” Orcus murmurs. He pulls away and starts to pace. “I told him I wanted the throne.”

“Yup, and I’ve always wanted to marry a prince.” I flop onto his bed and watch him spiral.

“My mother and sisters will be unbearable. They’ll demand to spend time with you. They’ll dress you up like a doll.” He pivots and walks in the other direction.

“I love dressing up,” I say, though I don’t really think he’s talking to me.

He pivots. “There’s no guarantee the fighting won’t escalate within a few weeks.”

“So let them come. Worst case, we both die. Or here’s a novel idea, why don’t you try talking to them?”

“The time for talking is done. My father should have confessed... he—”

“But you’re about to become king, yeah? Maybe *you* should do the things he was too cowardly to do.”

Orcus turns again, and I have to look away before I get nauseous. His gaze jumps to meet mine. “They wouldn’t listen to me.”

“Maybe they would if you told them what happened, apologized, and gave them something to make up for the mistake.”

Orcus hums. “My father.”

“What? No. I meant like cookies or your mom’s fair winning pie.”

“They’d just kill him,” Orcus says as if that’s any better.

“He’s your father.”

“Yes and he’s responsible for countless problems and now deaths. If this will prevent more innocent monsters from dying, then so be it.”

“I did not expect this conversation to take a turn to patricide. This conversation is treasonous, right? Maybe we pause on that thought for now. I’m not about to become the next Anne Boleyn.”

“Who?”

I wave my hand. “Never mind. I’m hungry, are you hungry?”

“You really want to stay? I basically offered you up to become the next queen without even asking you if that’s what you wanted.”

“Your concern is sweet, but becoming a queen is the least of my concerns.” My stomach grumbles. “The immediate threat is my hunger and the resulting anger. We can figure out the ruling the world bit later.”



THE FOOD ORCUS ordered is delicious, and I sigh and relax back into the soft cushions of the oversized chair. There's nothing quite like the comfort of sitting with Orcus and enjoying a good meal. He rubs my back with one hand and reaches for the final plate, lifting the silver cover and revealing a large piece of chocolate cake with chocolate filling, frosting, and shavings.

“Dessert just for you, sunshine.”

My breath catches. “You remembered?”

“Well, I've already scratched your back.” He slides the plate toward me and grabs a scoop with a fork. “First taste goes to the lady.”

“If you're trying to make me forget about being mad at you for putting yourself in danger, it's maybe working.” Leaning forward, I take the bite of cake. Rich and fluffy and oh so decadent. Oh he's good. I hum in approval and we share the dessert with goofy grins.

Orcus keeps sneaking glances in my direction as he eats. His eyes slip over me again and I laugh.

“What are you thinking, grumpy?”

“That there's no one else I'd want by my side as I take the throne.” He reaches toward me and brushes his thumb at the corner of my mouth and I melt into the touch, that is until he pulls back and shows me the bit of cake he's cleaned off my face. “Ladies are intriguing.”

“Yes, well, we do try. I was saving that for later.” I grin and grab his hand, licking the frosting off his thumb.

He watches my tongue lap at his skin and desire flits down the bond, hot and throbbing, followed by a sudden rush of concern. “Wait. How's the sarcasm?”

I chortle—like a right proper lady—and then cover my mouth as I fall apart in a fit of laughter.

“Avery is a great doctor. Zyla can probably get some more potion if we need it. I should have already asked them, but I'd forgotten about it until now.”

“I’m fine,” I say around a laugh. “The sarcasm is well in hand.”

“So you don’t need a doctor?”

I shake my head. Time to fess up. “I was teasing you when I said it was an illness. Sarcasm is a horrible human trait, but it’s not deadly. Well, some might actually say it is. That’s beside the point. I’m fine. I’m not sick. I will probably still be sarcastic, but I’ll try not to be.”

“I don’t want you to change.”

“I swear you were written by a woman,” I mutter. “What do we do now?” I ask, changing the subject.

“Whatever we want.”

“Such responsibility.” Shit. Sarcasm. “Uh, I mean... is that an en suite bathroom? Is there a bath?”

He nods. “The stone castle was built around dozens of hot springs.”

“That sounds divine.” I’m filthy from the journey and there are still flakes of blood where the gash in his head was. I stand and hold my hand out to him. “Come along, mate.”

“Please.”

Oh snap. Is he calling me out?

“We’ll have to do something about that memory of yours. *Please* come along, mate.”

“You’re so demanding for a lady.” He places his hand in mine and stands, my arm begins to stretch and I start to second guess the decision to lead him. As if sensing this, he scoops me into his arms and starts toward the bathroom.

“Now who’s being sarcastic.” I brace my palm on his chest. “I told you it was contagious.”

“That you did.” He steps into the bathroom.

Light filters through strategically placed breaks in the stone configuration, illuminating the space. The bathing pit

here is rimmed by twelve rows of rubies. There's a private room for the toilet, which is really a circle of rocks above a pit.

I glance at Orcus. "It doesn't smell."

"Long ago the kingdom commissioned a spell to move the waste away and send freshwater in its place."

"Fascinating." I eye the circle of rocks with new appreciation. One thing I for sure miss about Earth is the plumbing. This is as close as I'm going to get and I'm not complaining.

A cabinet with a sink and a jewel encrusted mirror displays various items—lotions, essential oils, soaps, towels— all neatly organized. I clutch Orcus' shirt as he sets me on the floor. I kick off my shoes, bracing for cold stone to greet my skin, but the smooth rocks are warm beneath my feet.

"Streams of hot water feed each bathing pit and heat the stones," Orcus explains at my look of surprise.

"Yeah, I can definitely get used to being a princess." I boldly remove the rest of my clothes. He's already seen me naked. "Well?" I ask when I notice he hasn't stripped. "Don't leave your future queen waiting," I tease and make my way to the tub, adding an extra sway to my hips.

The soft sound of clothes dropping onto the floor comes from behind me. Like the bathing pit in Orcus' cave, it's deep and long enough to comfortably fit two ogres. I ease into the bath, finding makeshift stairs, and settle on one that keeps me neck deep in the water. Only then do I let my eyes stray to ogle Orcus.

Grecian statues have nothing on an ogre in his prime. Those cheekbones are to die for and the thick eyelashes surrounding his navy eyes are enviable. His tusks are pearly white and that neck. I've never considered necks hot, but his might just qualify. Corded arms, solid torso. Orcus' thighs are thick, but when he takes a step the lines of the muscles are clearly on display. The absolute hammer of a cock between his legs is what snares me though.

Every part of him screams beast and my core clenches, begging to be his beauty.

“You like what you see, little flower?”

I lick my lips and nod as he comes to stand next to where I sit in the bath. The corner of his mouth pulls into a devastatingly handsome smirk and he places one foot in the water. His erect cock swings above my head like a pendulum.

He fists his length and gives it a hard stroke. “Would you like to kiss it?”

TWENTY-EIGHT

A kiss will do

DAISY

Is he kidding? I'd like to find a way to fit it all in my mouth without breaking my jaw but I'm not brave enough to try that. A kiss will have to do. I rise onto my feet, bracing my hands against his thighs. Orcus holds his cock, and I go onto my tip-toes and press my lips to his weeping tip. I dash my tongue over the slit, hungrily swallowing what belongs to me.

A tug of longing pulls the tether between us taut.

He grabs my arms and hoists me up, dropping me onto his tusks and shoving his tongue into my center. I hook my ankles behind his head and grasp his hair. A contented sigh slips past my lips as he laps at my cunt like an ogre starved. This might be my favorite place to sit. My clit pulses, and I carefully rock my hips against his face, finding the friction I need. He growls and thrusts his tongue. My walls stretch around the thick muscle.

He pulls back long enough to scold me. "Stop worrying about me and grind that sweet pussy on my face." Flattening his tongue, he glides it through my slit and then sinks that thick length back deep inside of me. He pinches my nipples, and I gasp at the rush of pain.

God bless ogres.

I buck, demanding more. Orcus immediately responds, placing one hand on my ass to help me grind against him while he tongue fucks me. "Yes, Orcus. *Fuck. Yes.*"

Curling inside me, he laps my g-spot until the only thing I can do is hang on and gasp for air. The orgasm is small, but the night is far from over. Orcus hauls me off his tusks and sets my ass onto the stone.

“Lie back,” he demands.

I comply and the warm floor greets my skin a second later. “What about yo—”

“This is about me,” he says, stepping into the hot spring and wrenching my legs apart. “I’m going to have you wrapped around my cock, but first you need to be ready.” He shoves two fingers into his mouth and sucks them clean, using the other hand to cup my breasts.

Those two fingers glide into me with ease, Orcus’ saliva and our prior stretching sessions more than readying me for three. The third finger immediately follows. It’s tight, but not uncomfortable.

“I’m ready.”

“Daisy?”

“Yeah?”

“Be quiet and let me take care of you.”

Oh. Okay then. My palms rest against the stone, and when Orcus’ thumb circles my clit, I curl my fingers, searching for something to hang onto as the sensations build. He strokes his fingers over that spot deep inside of me right as he presses his thumb down and I arch my back in response. The feeling is so good and too much all at the same time. I want more but part of me wants it to stop.

“Breathe.”

That suggestion comes right when I need it. I suck in a breath and the desire to retreat fades.

“I’m going to fill this cunt with so much cum it’ll drip out of you for days.” He glides his three fingers almost all the way out and then slams them into me. “My scent will be all over you. Every ogre in this castle will know who your mate is.”

The ministrations around my clit quicken. “My beautiful, selfless, sexy, mate.”

So many compliments all at once.

“Say it.”

“Yes,” I rasp.

“No. Say you’re my mate.”

“I’m your mate.”

“That’s right, little flower. Now come on my fingers.” With his impossibly large hand, he’s able to press on my clit and g-spot at the same time, and fire lights up inside of me. The constant stroking of his fingers and the hard grinding of his thumb relentlessly burn through me until my toes curl. I arch my back off the stone once more and every muscle in my body constricts. My orgasm comes as a small rush of fluid as I squirt all over him. Orcus purrs in approval, leaning down to steal my essence with his tongue as he eases his fingers out of me.

“Oh. My. God.” I pant and hold myself up on my elbows, watching Orcus glare up from between my legs.

“I don’t.” He circles his tongue over my clit then pulls back. “Know which God you speak of.” He flattens his tongue and runs through my folds then pulls back. “But I’m going to find him.” He straightens and brings his face to mine. “And kill him.”

I chuckle and grab his tusks, pulling him in for a rough kiss. “It’s only an expression,” I say after we break apart. “And I won’t say it again if you don’t like it.” My hold on the tusks loosens, and I stroke my hands up and down the smooth, pearly length of them.

“Such a good mate, hmm? Always thinking of me.” He brushes his nose over mine. “The next time you come,” his lips capture mine for a soft kiss. “I want you screaming my name, not his.”

“Yes, sir,” I whisper, tracing my tongue over his bottom lip before gently biting it. My core is so empty and I hate it.

“Orcus?”

“Hmm?”

“I need you inside of me.”

“So impatient,” he teases, placing his palms on either side of my head and crawling out of the tub. I’m so little underneath him like this, but I kind of love it. Without needing to be told, I scoot up on the stone, not worrying about scratches since the surface is so smooth, and position my hips right where they need to be.

His cock hangs heavy between his legs. Hard and veined and a delicious shade of green, it’s quite possibly the most beautiful dick I’ve ever seen. It’s so big and I’m still not sure it’ll feel good, but I’m willing to try because I want everything he wants. I want his cum. I want him to lose control because he’s inside of me. I want him to feel everything he’s made me feel these past few weeks. I reach between us and wrap both hands around it, gently squeezing and moving them up and down his length.

He grunts and bucks into my hands. “Fuck, Daisy.”

Boldly taking what I want, I guide him to my center, bracing for pain. His tip spreads me, but there’s no pain. Orcus gives me a moment to adjust to that stretch before giving me another inch. My hands fall away and make their way to his tusks. I glance up at him to make sure it’s okay, and he simply nods, staring at me as he gives me a bit more.

My lips part as my body molds around him, stretching in a way that is both wonderful and mesmerizing. His tusks are silky smooth beneath my touch, and he gives me another inch. Clamping around him, my walls tighten against his intrusion. My thighs tense, but then I remember to breathe.

“That’s it, Daisy. You can take it.”

I nod and force my body to relax. Parting my thighs again, I gaze at him and lift up to kiss him. He rocks into me, keeping only a few inches of his cock inside of me while he helps my body relax and adjust to more dick than I’ve ever taken. Another inch and I gasp against his lips.

“You’re doing so good,” he murmurs against my lips. “Let’s see if you can take a little more, hmm?”

“Yes,” I gasp, and he slides in even further, thrusting at this depth to see how I do. So much. His cock. The veins that rib his length. “More. I want more.”

He chuckles softly. “There she is,” he purrs, giving me three more inches. His saliva helps my anatomy move, and instead of pain as he hits my cervix, it’s only blissful fullness. Another inch. I suck in a breath, determined to take everything. He brings his mouth to mine, claiming a kiss and giving me a moment to adjust to the new fullness. My pussy soaks his cock, providing the lubrication he needs to sink three more inches inside of me. He shifts a little deeper. His balls slap against my ass and my walls clamp around his girth.

“Oh,” I whisper as I glance between us and see the way my stomach slightly protrudes. “That’s different.”

“Look at how pretty you are when you’re full of my cock.” He slides out ever so slightly and thrusts in. “Taking it like I knew you would.” He jerks his hips again. “My little mate, always so giving.” This time when he rears back, he thrusts hard. “Fuuuuck.”

I yank on his tusks and bring his lips to me, stealing the rest of his praise and making it mine. I wrap my legs around his torso, resting my ankles over his hips and pulling him into me with more force than he’s giving. He grunts and takes that as permission.

Rippling around his length, my pussy pulses as he ruts into me, filling me until there’s nothing left between us. No space. No air. We’re practically one being and nothing has ever felt so right. He growls into my mouth and rips his lips away. My fingers release his tusks as his find my hair, wrenching my head back and exposing my throat. A moment later his teeth are on my neck. Nibbling and teasing. Biting. Marking. Claiming.

I want him to have every piece of me until there’s nothing left to give.

He pounds into me, giving me everything I'm demanding, and I roll my hips, keeping time with him while his length begins to pulse. The blood rushes through those thick veins, almost vibrating inside of me. It's different but I love that sensation. I love knowing I'm the reason he's about to fall apart.

A sharp bite has me yelping but then his hips slap against mine, forcing pleasure into my system. My nails dig into his biceps. He eases almost all the way out. My core is so hollow without him.

Empty.

I hate it.

“Orcus,” I whine.

He hums against my throat, sucking at the skin he'd bitten and slams into me. Stars burst across my vision and then the world goes dark for a moment. When I return from oblivion, Orcus is grinding into me. His balls rub over my ass. They're so very full. All that cum is for me?

Orcus kisses up my neck before taking my mouth with his. I grip his arms and tug him closer, needing to feel crushed beneath the force of him. I need to feel him pressing down on me as he fills me. I need every inch of my body to touch his. I need, I need.

I need.

Bracing himself on his forearms, Orcus cradles my head with his hands and finds a steady rhythm. A perfect combination of stretching and thrusting.

His lips move to my ear and his left tusk brushes my cheek. “Say it,” he demands.

“I'm your mate,” I gasp, clinging to him.

“That's right, little flower. You're my mate and my cum is only for your sweet cunt.” His pace quickens. “I need you to come with me, Daisy. Feel me inside of you?”

I nod as my skin flushes and heat races up my spine.

“See how perfect we are?” He pulls out and with one hard thrust, sheaths himself fully inside of me.

“Yes,” I rasp.

“Mmm. Such a pretty lady drenching my cock.” Somehow, he finds the same rhythm from before, only this time thrusting deeper.

My walls clamp around him and his veins shudder. He’s nearly there. I need his cum. I want it. I want him to fill me so full. I want it to coat my thighs for days to come.

“Just like that,” he rasps. “Show me how much you want it.” His lower stomach slaps against my clit and he stays deep inside of me, grinding against that spot over and over.

“Orcus,” I moan. “Fuck, it feels so good.”

“You were made for me, little flower. This cunt is mine.” And then he takes the rest of my sanity with wild and uncontrolled thrusting, growling into my ear as my pussy milks his cock.

Sensations collide inside of my body. Pleasure. Heat. Friction. Everything. His touch. His kiss. Our bodies together. The way I tremble beneath him. The way his body weighs against mine. The way his fingers tug at my hair at the right moment, giving me some pain to counter the overwhelming pleasure. More and more and more until it feels like too much and yet not enough all at the same time.

Tingles race over my skin and my core heats until I’m left shouting his name. He claims the cry with his lips and thrusts once, twice, three times before holding himself deep inside of me. Hot, ropey bursts of cum fill me and his entire length ripples as he empties everything he has inside of me.

Nothing will ever feel this good. Nothing will ever feel so right. *So perfect.*

Pride swells inside my chest. I did it. There were no crazy positions, but for our first time together, it was amazing. His tongue strokes over mine before he retreats, resting his forehead against mine with a heavy pant.

“That is my new favorite thing,” he murmurs.

Laughing, I hug his body to mine. Nothing else matters when he’s on top of me.

“I’m going to crush you,” he warns.

“I like it.” I hum in approval when he rests more of his weight on me. “I can feel your cum inside of me.”

His navy eyes shine. “Good. How do you feel?”

“Me? I feel fucking amazing. You?”

“Happy.”

That means more to me than he’ll ever know. He’s always so grumpy. Always so weighed down by everything. I love being the one to bring him happiness. I love this moment between us. This time when sunshine beams through the bond, it’s him showing me exactly how he feels. My heart melts, and I kiss him again.

I’m so happy he’s my mate.

TWENTY-NINE

Sisters are a curse and a blessing

ORCUS

My mother and sisters wait until dinner before they begin demanding Daisy and I venture out of our room. I'm tempted to deny their request, but knowing my mother, she'd storm in and drag me out of the room by my ear. My lobe never recovered from the last time I thought it was a good idea to ignore her.

"There are some things you need to know," I say with a sigh, running my hand over Daisy's thigh. We're lying in bed, facing one another, and Daisy's cheeks are still flushed from all the orgasms I've been showering her with. Maybe another before dinner?

She swats my hand away from her crotch. "Don't try to distract me. What do I need to know?" She bats her eyelashes and gives me that smile she knows I can't deny.

"Where do I begin?" I flop back onto the mattress, and she curls against my side, resting her head on my chest and wrapping her arm around as much of my torso as she can. "Well, to start, my mother is the pushiest person I know, but I love her. She's always so sweet and caring—except when she's dragging me or my siblings around by our ears, but if I'm being honest, we always deserve it." A grin tugs at my lips.

"How many siblings do you have again?"

"Four sisters."

“Five kids? Jesus, Holy Catholic ogres.”

“What?”

“Nothing,” she says quickly. “Okay. Tell me about your sisters.”

“Orana is eleven and the youngest. She’s cute but also watch your hair around her. She’s been known to give surprise haircuts.” Daisy giggles and the sound zings straight to my heart. “Right, then there’s Oraya. She’s sixteen... no seventeen now. She’s smart. Doesn’t talk much but she’ll have you figured out within the first night of meeting you. Oretta’s twenty and loves fashion. She’s a princess through and through. And Orlena is the oldest sister at twenty-four. She’s the complete opposite of Oretta, but that’s because she grew up with me and my friends years before Oretta was born.”

“How old are you?” Daisy rests her chin on my chest and stares at me. “I can’t believe we’ve had sex and I don’t even know how old you are. What if you’re like five-hundred?”

My eyebrows rise. “Five-hundred?”

“Like a dusty old vampire waiting to hook up with a seventeen-year-old human. Bella was never the same.”

“What are you on about?”

“Never mind, back to you. How old are you?”

“Thirty-one.”

She releases a puff of air. “Oh, thank god.”

“That name,” I growl.

“I can’t say: *Oh, thank Orcus*. That’s weird.” She rolls her eyes.

I bury my fingers into her hair and draw her up for a rough kiss. “I think it sounds great,” I say once we break apart.

“Of course you do. You’re a prince and the only boy. Geez. Five kids? Your poor mom,” Daisy says with a strained laugh.

“Nah, she loves it. I’ve never seen a woman so happy as when all her kids are running around. It’s settled down some

now that we're getting older, but she's always so excited when we're together."

"She sounds great..." Daisy trails off.

"But?"

"No but, more of a how?"

"Okay. How what?"

"How did she end up with your dad?"

My mood darkens. I wish I had a romantic story for her. My parents are mates, but that doesn't mean they love each other, at least not in the way most people think. After so many years together, there's a natural sort of loyalty that develops. When we were younger, I never saw my father kiss my mother. I never saw him make her laugh. All I saw was my mother desperately seeking his attention and constantly being denied. In a way, I think having so many kids with him was part of her yearning for his love and partly so she'd be able to surround herself with people who gave a shit about her.

Now that I have a mate, I don't know how my father could be so cold. Daisy's pain is unbearable. You'd have to be heartless to ignore those feelings from your mate.

Daisy sits up. "I need something to wear."

Bless her for changing the subject to spare my feelings, but I won't be the type of ogre that denies my mate anything. "I'm not sure how they ended up together, all I know is she's too good for him."

Daisy glances at me over her shoulder. "Then let's not keep her waiting."



THE KING IS NOTICEABLY absent from the dinner my mother planned. Heady relief sweeps through my system. I already know I'll be on high alert trying to protect Daisy from

the women in my family, I don't need to worry about my father as well.

The private dining room is bustling with workers who are busy filling drinks for my family. My sister Oraya notices us first, but I'm not surprised by that. She's an observer. Her lips tip up when our eyes meet and then her gaze slides down to Daisy, widening as she studies her.

"She's so little," Oraya murmurs, though I don't think she meant to say it out loud.

The rest of my family turns to stare, and I bristle, half tempted to step in front of Daisy, but she places her palm on my thigh, keeping me at bay. There's no real threat here. Still, I get overwhelmed with my family. I can't imagine how Daisy must feel as they all silently take her in.

My mother rises from the table, her salt and pepper hair swept back into an elegant updo, ever the queen, and gestures to the open seats. "Daisy, is it? Please, come eat with us."

"Thank you," Daisy says, marching toward one of the oversize chairs.

I reach over her head and scoot it out. Daisy climbs into the chair with a slight struggle. I don't pick her up because I don't want to embarrass her. The seat is large, but not large enough that she can't get into it alone. I also don't want to make her seem weak.

Once Daisy is settled in the seat, sitting on her heels, I push the chair in. Her head barely reaches over the table and her pretty green eyes fill with panic.

"Will you please fetch Daisy a booster?" my mother asks one of the centaur servers waiting near the door to the private kitchen.

"I'm okay—" Daisy begins, but my mother shushes her.

"We're giant ogres and you, my dear, are a cute little folk. There's no shame in needing a booster. Orcus used one for years."

“Mom,” I warn, but she sends me her signature *shut up* glare. My mouth snaps shut.

I take my seat beside Daisy and the centaur returns a moment later. Daisy shifts to the side so the booster can be placed in the seat and then she hops onto that, shooting me a nervous look.

“Better?” I ask.

She nods and tucks her hands into her lap, glancing around the table. Her pulse jumps in her neck. Trepidation seeps through the bond. I send as much reassurance to her as I can. I’m not worried about the fear. It’s natural for her to be a little afraid of being surrounded by so many monsters, especially ones that are much, much bigger than her. I’d be more concerned if she wasn’t a little nervous.

“Now, let me get a proper look at you,” my mother says, leaning forward to peer at Daisy. “My, you *are* a beauty. Such soft skin and pretty hair. Those eyes... almost doe like, wouldn’t you say?”

I groan.

“Uh.” Daisy shrugs. “I guess?”

“And that nose! Cute as a button,” my mother continues her appraisal.

“Wow, Mom. Let’s just examine everything about her to make her feel welcome,” Oretta drawls. “Sorry about her, she’s never had a daughter-in-law before.” Oretta’s pink dress is over the top with frills, lace, and an unholy number of gems. It’s a miracle the chair hasn’t collapsed beneath the weight of that garment.

“Let me guess. You’re Oretta?” Daisy asks.

Delight flashes over Oretta’s face. “Yes! He’s talked about me? Don’t believe a thing he says, I’m the best sister.”

Orlena elbows her, hard. “I’m the best and you know it.”

“Ow.” Oretta rubs her side. “Orlena, that hurt.”

“Sorry, *Princess*,” Orlena says with a smirk before focusing on Daisy. “Do you fight?”

Daisy shakes her head. “No.”

Orlena hums. “Well, it’s never too late to learn.”

“You’re not teaching her how to fight,” I say.

“And why not? Everyone should know how to properly defend themselves. You’d deny her the chance to learn?” Orlena leans toward me. “Or is that how you like your mate? Fragile and defenseless.”

Ire licks up my spine. “Watch your mouth, sister. I can still kick your ass.”

“I’d like to see you try. Heard you’ve been wasting away up there in the cave, hiding. Maybe that’s why the vampires got the drop on you,” she taunts me with a twinkle in her eye. Orlena is itching to spar, probably tired of being told she has no place in real battle, and it seems she’s decided to take it out on me.

“He almost died to save everyone else,” Daisy inserts herself into our conversation. “Are you really going to give him crap for that?”

Orlena sits back and rolls her lips together, properly censured. My mother beams at Daisy and Oretta tries not to giggle.

“Are you going to have babies?” Orana asks.

“Orana.” My mother releases an exasperated breath. “Honestly, all of you. Let’s give Daisy a chance to breathe and eat. My son’s kept her locked in his room all day and I’m sure she’s famished.” The glare sent in my direction makes my ear ache.

Never keep your mate hungry.

That’s what she always used to tell me when preparing me for the moment I’d eventually find a partner. The first thing I did when I got Daisy alone was feed her, but I don’t bother defending myself.

“Where’s the king?”

“He said he had business to discuss.” Mother gives me a careful once over. “Is it true you’re demanding to take the throne?”

“I’m not demanding.” Maybe I am, but I was trying to buy time. “What business is he discussing?”

Mother shrugs. “You’d have to ask him.”

I frown. If there’s important matters related to the kingdom, I need to be a part of the conversation. I should go find him. I can’t leave Daisy to fend for herself. Already my sisters are proving to be insufferable.

“You should go,” Daisy says softly enough for only me to hear. “I’ll be okay.”

“I can’t leave you. You’ll never survive.”

She arches her eyebrow. “If I can survive a few days in a cave with a grumpy ogre, I think I can handle your family.”

Is that her way of telling me I’m difficult?

Her eyes crinkle in the corner and she tips her head toward my family. Swinging my gaze around the table, I take in the amused and expectant faces of the only females I’ve ever loved. Daisy wants to stay, even after meeting my father, mother, and sisters, and that does something funny to my insides.

“I suppose I don’t have much of a choice now,” I grumble though I’m anything but upset by her suggestion.

“Have fun with daddy, grumpy,” she teases.

To be an ass, I sensually stroke the bond. She chokes on her water. I’m the only one that sees her thighs clamp together and senses the fire licking through the bond. Grinning, I caress the bond again then kiss the top of her head and make a run for it. Another second in the room with her and I would’ve stripped her bare and rutted into her at the table. I’d never recover from doing that in front of my family.

That woman has a hold on me, and I don’t hate it.

THIRTY

How does it fit?

DAISY

The laughter that erupted after Orcus tucked tail and ran eventually dies down and all eyes fall on me. Orana gives me a smile that's so childlike I remember that she's the youngest. Eleven, was it? She's already bigger than me, but definitely smaller than the rest of her siblings. The other sisters are all well over eight feet tall and broader than Orana. Orcus' mother is only slightly bigger than them, but still a giant all the same.

This ogre family hit the genetic jackpot, because the tone of their green skin is rich and their cheekbones are all cut and defined. Their brunette hair is beautiful, though not all straight like Orcus', and the shades are all different. Oraya's is a touch lighter than Orana's. Orlena's is nearly as dark as her brother's but curly, and Oretta's has hints of copper. The thing that surprised me the most was their tusks. I don't know why I expected the women to all be these soft, short creatures in comparison to Orcus, but I did. I was wrong. Each woman has their own set of tusks, a bit shorter than Orcus', though still pearly white and shiny. Orcus' mother has two elegant cuffs at the base of hers, pretty red gems surrounded by gold.

"So," she begins when the staring has grown uncomfortable, "when can we meet your family?"

The question is so innocent. Normal, even. No matter how many times I've heard it, that immediate, gut-wrenching emptiness always steals my words for a few moments. The

smile I'm wearing stays in place, and I take a breath, pretending like nothing is wrong.

"Oh, I don't have any," I eventually manage, grin still in place. It's easier than saying my parents would rather do anything than meet her. They probably haven't even noticed I'm gone.

"I'm so sorry," Orcus' mom says.

Those words slice through me deeper than the original question.

"Don't be, they've been gone for a long time. Your family is lovely," I say to hide the fact that I'm a little jealous that despite having five kids, she still loves them and my parents couldn't even love one.

"They're a handful." Her eyebrows jump on her forehead. "Oh, I don't think I've introduced myself. I'm Orshana."

This family and their O names.

"Is that a trull mark on your arm?" Oraya asks, voice almost a whisper.

Oh. I glance down at the T on my forearm. "Harald pledged himself to me... I'm not sure what that means, but he was nice about it."

"Trulls are very dangerous if crossed, but to have one on your side is an honor not many receive." Orshana studies the mark.

"How does it fit in her, Mommy?" Orana asks, face scrunched.

Orshana and I share a confused look but understanding dawns on us at the same time. Where's a hole to hide in when you need it? Orshana gives her youngest daughter a reproachful side-eye.

"What? You said we shouldn't be ashamed to talk about sex or puberty." Orana slides her gaze around the table.

"Orana," she warns.

Oretta giggles then slaps her hand to her mouth to smother the sound, but that makes Orlena cackle. Oraya's soft laugh is unmistakable. I bite my lip and study my hands in my lap, desperately trying not to laugh when Orshana is doing her mom thing, but then Orana says, "Will he break her?" and I lose it.

"My children," Orshana says to no one in particular. "No, my sweet child. He won't break her. Remember the special preparations we discussed? It will work the same for Daisy and Orcus."

"Okay," Orana says. "Wait. *EW!*"

Oretta's fit of giggles turns into wheezing and Orlena joins her with a loud burst of laughter. Embarrassed beyond belief, I drop my face into my hands. I do not want to talk to Orcus' family about the mechanics of sex.

"Stop, the lot of you!" Orshana demands. "The dinner place is no table to talk about these things."

"The. Dinner place," Oretta says around a laugh. "Don't you mean the *dinner table* is no place to talk about magic saliva?"

"You know what I meant," Orshana retorts. "If you scare Daisy off, your brother will really never come back."

While the comment is made lightly, there's a deeper-seated fear in those words. I slide my hands from my face and meet her gaze. Her children are all still laughing, but the mother looking back at me is anything but tickled. There's hope in the way she watches me, like I might be the one to bring her son back, and the longing scrawled across her face hits me square in the chest, reminding me too much of my own pain.

"So about this whole taking the throne thing," I say louder than necessary to catch the attention of the sisters. "What does it involve?"

Orshana's features soften. "You two would need to complete the bonding ceremony."

"We're bonded already."

“Oh, yes, but this is more celebratory in nature. The ceremony is a way of formally announcing newly paired mates to the world. The ceremony will happen before Orcus can truly take the throne.”

Okay, so one royal wedding. No big deal.

The rest of dinner flies by as they all take turns telling stories about Orcus and his friends. Apparently, they were more than a little out of control. Thick as thieves. The more his family talks, the more I realize how much Orcus must've missed everyone while he was alone in his cave. But now he's here, doing everything he wanted to avoid because of me. That thought niggles away in the back of my mind while we eat and laugh.

After dessert, Orshana shoos the sisters away and asks me to join her for a walk in her garden. I follow after her, scurrying to keep up with her stride. She slows when she notices my struggles, but I still have to take three quick steps for every one of hers. Luckily, the gardens aren't far from the dining room.

The flowers are in full bloom, and while the sun has dipped below the horizon, a soft glow of light brushes over the vibrant purple, pink, red, yellow, orange, and blue petals. There are some that resemble roses, and others that don't look like any flower I've seen before with their unique shapes and textures. The path winding through the sprawling garden grounds is covered in small pebbles that crunch beneath our feet.

“So, Daisy, how do you find my son?”

I pull my attention away from a beautiful yellow bloom. “He's great. A little grumpy, but he's good to me. He's caring.” I smile at the memory of him scolding me after my first run in with the cyclops. I haven't even told him about the second run in. He'd probably be furious. “He's a good ogre,” I tell her. “And I suppose I have you to thank for that.”

“He's always worrying about other people, so it's nice for him to have someone to worry about him.”

A cramp hits my thigh, but I don't falter. This conversation is important and I won't let a little ache ruin it. "I hope our being mates isn't... disappointing to you."

"Disappointing? Why would I be disappointed? It's clear to me that you two were meant to be. It's been a long time since I've seen him smile the way he does when he looks at you, like he's actually happy. Hecate was wise to make the match, but with everything happening..." She trails off.

Silence settles between us as we acknowledge that which can't be said aloud. The furies. The vampires. His father. Does she know what her husband's done? Does she agree with him? If she doesn't, there's no way she'd tell me. I look up and study the small lines of displeasure pinching around her eyes and mouth. No. I don't think Orshana approves, but who is she to tell the king what to do?

"I wanted to ask you if it would be all right for me and the girls to be a part of the planning for the bond ceremony. I understand if this is something you'd rather do on your own."

"Oh, no. You're more than welcome to help me. I honestly have no idea what to do for a bond ceremony... I never exactly expected to find a mate." Or a husband. Or even a boyfriend. I'd been prepared to live out my days alone on Earth.

A beautiful grin breaks across her face and she gazes down at me. "Thank you, Daisy. The girls will be thrilled." The twinkle in her eyes tells me she is as well. "We'll start tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?"

"Yes," she says, shifting her attention across the horizon. "You wouldn't believe the amount of coordination that goes into these things."

Orshana begins to rattle off everything that needs to be done before the next full moon. The more she mentions, the more out of depth I feel. A simple event sounds better to me, but this is her first child's bonding ceremony and she's so

happy. With Orcus' family helping plan things, it can't be that bad.

THIRTY-ONE

Father of mine

ORCUS

I find my father and Maddox in the war room, standing over the stone table that acts as a map of the territories. Little pieces with red paint dripping down the tops serve as vampires and large green pieces represent our side.

“I see you’ve started without me.” My carefree tone is at odds with the frustration churning in my chest.

My father doesn’t bother looking up from where he’s repositioning pieces. “You’ve been hiding in a cave. I didn’t think you’d want to be involved.”

Maddox glances at me, eyebrows pulling together. He’s wearing armor. Zyla healed his broken ribs, but he has deep, burrowing lines on his forehead that weren’t there before I left. As second in command of the army, it seems he didn’t avoid the brunt of the king’s demands while I was away. Guilt creeps through me.

I shouldn’t have left him alone with my father.

Clearing my throat, I take the high road and say, “If I’m to be king, I should be involved.”

“You won’t be king for at least a month.” My father braces his hands on the table and glares at me. “Or have you decided to dethrone me today?”

“Weren’t you the one who wanted to give me the throne? Isn’t that why you put that law into place after the incident and

desperately tried to find me a mate?”

“I was ensuring the succession was secure.”

“The succession was always secure,” I snap. “You only want to avoid responsibility. Tell me, Father, how many people have suffered because of you?”

“I’m still your king,” he bellows, and the echoes of the unspoken threat reverberate off the stone walls.

Scoffing, I shake my head. He’s being ridiculous. “If you want to keep the throne, change the law.”

My father’s lips press together, and he scowls at me. There. That look tells me all I need to know. He still wants to run away to avoid culpability, but to do so means leaving the lavish life he’s learned to love. It means giving up the power he’s wielded, and we both know more than the riches, it’s the power he struggles to relinquish.

“Right, then,” I say with a growl. “Tell me what you’re doing.”

The corners of his lips cut toward his ears in a vicious grin. “A show of power to put the vampires in their place.”

Dread slams into my gut as he begins to lay out his plan in three stages. The attacks won’t happen until after I’m crowned king, but the pieces on the board are already moving and I’m helpless to stop them.

“This is your idea?” I ask once he’s done explaining the morally reprehensible plan. He wants to attack the vampires during the day, when they’re at their weakest, and kill them all. I glance at Maddox and he grimaces but says nothing. It’s not his place to challenge the king.

“Yes.” My father gazes across the mock battlefield, chest swollen with pride. “They attacked my territory first.”

“Because you started something with the furies and now those goddesses won’t stop until we’re all dead! You need to apologize and send them an offering, beg them for forgiveness.” Zyla said that me becoming king would

somehow save us, but it's my father who needs to plead for their mercy.

Maddox winces but stays quiet. Clearly this revelation comes as no surprise to him. I guess in my absence my father shared what happened. Part of me wants to put my friend on the spot and ask him if he thinks this attack is truly smart, but I'd never put him in the position of choosing between our friendship and his sworn loyalty to my father.

The king's features darken. "Are you truly stupid enough to think that an apology would've made this all go away?"

"No," I say between gritted teeth, "but it would've avoided a lot of unnecessary bloodshed. You could have done everything in your power to make amends with the furies for YOUR mistake. You're avoiding all responsibility."

"You ran away from your people, hid in a cave for fuck's sake." His eyes drill into mine, full of anger and disappointment. "You're no better than me, *Son*."

Every word is like a slap in the face. He's right. I ran away to avoid becoming a pawn. I ran away to save myself, but what about everyone else I left behind? What about those who died? I'm responsible for that.

"It's too late to hope for a peaceful resolution. You're at least smart enough to see that, aren't you? The furies may have been toying with us, but the vampires killed our people. When is it enough to ease your conscience, Orcus? When will you sleep peacefully? Regardless of how it started, we are here," he jams his finger onto the stone tabletop, "do you think I should try to make amends now? Do you think the furies would even listen?"

I don't have an answer for him. I don't know. More than anything he said, not knowing if the furies would even consider forgiving him has my mouth pressed shut.

He releases a soft breath of laughter that's worse than any other insult he could add. "If you're done questioning my morals, let's go over the plan again."



AFTER HOURS of pouring over various scenarios, I leave the war room with an angry line gouged across my forehead. My skin aches from the scowl that's making itself at home on my face. No amount of forced relaxation gets rid of the line. I'm in a foul mood, and while Daisy's mentioned being able to handle grumpy monsters, I don't want her to see me this way.

Or maybe I don't want to see her smiling face after I pointed out the flaws in my father's plans and helped ensure the next moves were perfect. I all but signed the death warrants on countless vampires. I'm terrified if I go to Daisy now, she'll see the truth and hate me for it.

Instead, I take a secret corridor to one of my favorite places. A hidden cave and pool of water. My skin grows damp from the humidity alone. Dropping onto the stone floor, I stick my feet into the water. I'm not in the mood for swimming. I'm not in the mood for much of anything but fighting, the problem is the only person I want to fight is the king. I may be the crown prince, but attacking the king would be treason, and despite my father's insults, I'm not dumb enough to get myself thrown in jail.

The soft whisper of feet alerts me to Oraya's presence seconds before she takes a seat beside me, her pants are already rolled up her calf and she dips her toes into the water, like she was here all along. She has an uncanny ability to sneak up on me.

She subtly sniffs the air. "Brine and vinegar. You're mad," she says softly. Oraya doesn't make eye contact, but she doesn't have to look at me to observe. Where most people ignore how useful other senses can be, Oraya embraces it. She can scent emotions. She can feel the change in the air around her. She can hear the way you breathe and needle her way inside your head.

It's quite frankly unnerving, but she's my sister and I love her.

"Are you surprised?" I eventually ask, studying her. When I left, she was only fifteen. Two years haven't changed her much, but enough. She's taller. Her face isn't so childlike anymore. Her brunette hair is plaited down her back and unlike Oretta with her frilly dresses and Orlena with her fatigues, Oraya wears a simple, but fine pair of pants and a simple shirt.

"No."

I scoff. "Am I really always mad?"

She swirls her feet in the water. "No, but Dad is planning something bad."

"Oraya," I say, holding myself as still as possible, "are you spying?"

"Do you love your mate?" Her navy eyes, filled with curiosity, flick to mine.

The question is meant to distract me, and it works. Do I love Daisy? We've only known each other for a short while, but the mate bond makes it so that I can't help but care for her.

"My mate is the sweetest person I've ever met," I explain. "She makes me smile... and she makes me happy."

"Does she make your heart race?"

"I suppose so."

"And do you think about her all the time?"

"Yes." I search her face. "Why are you asking me these things?"

"Before you left, Dad wanted you to take a mate." She moves her gaze from mine. "But they wouldn't have made you smile. Is that why you left? Did you know Hecate had a mate waiting for you out there?"

I sigh and shake my head. "No, Oraya. Don't romanticize my decision to leave. I left because I didn't want to take the throne. I think it's safe for me to assume you've been sneaking

around enough to learn what made the furies mad in the first place?”

She swallows and tips her head down, glaring at her feet before nodding.

“Right. Well, our father wanted me to take the throne because he wanted to escape accountability.” I shrug like guilt isn’t threatening to break my spine. “My leaving was selfish. I didn’t want the accountability either.”

Oraya doesn’t speak for a few minutes. I try to dissect her reaction, but it’s impossible. Aside from the way her eyebrow’s pinch together, I can’t tell how she feels. Eventually, she turns and looks at me; her eyes are so similar to our mother’s with a splash of white around her irises, that for a moment I see her in front of me instead of Oraya.

“Are you going to help him execute the vampires?”

“You need to be careful with your spying,” I warn her. “You’re good but that doesn’t mean you won’t get caught some day.”

“Are you going to help?”

“I don’t have a choice.”

“Change the plans,” she says.

“It’s not that easy.”

“Why?”

“Because...” I trail off. *It’s complicated* sounds cheap. I was so certain I was right when I left. I hadn’t truly considered how it would all play out. “Because he might be right, Oraya. The time for amends has passed.”

She narrows her eyes. “You sound like him.”

“What would you have me do instead?”

“Don’t give up.”

“Oraya, when I was your age—”

She releases a tiny growl and hops up, walking away, then turning back and glaring at me. “You know why you’re my

favorite sibling?”

I shake my head.

“Because you never treat me like a little girl. Don’t start treating me like one now. I’m not some naive seventeen-year-old. I’m smart.”

“I know you are.”

She tips her chin, looking down at me. “I have more to say, but I’m too mad right now to talk to you without being rude.”

That’s very honest and mature for her to be so in tune with her emotions. And it makes me feel even worse for trying to pull the *when I was your age* card. Oraya *is* smart.

I put my hand on my chest. “I’m sorry, Oraya.”

“Apology accepted.” She turns and leaves.

The cave was meant to make me feel better, but after the way I messed up the conversation with Oraya, I’m in an even worse mood. With a heavy sigh, I pull my feet from the pool and head to the room, hoping that Daisy is already asleep by the time I return.

THIRTY-TWO

Pleasure doms & cyclops nightmares

DAISY

It's the middle of the night when Orcus finally makes his way into bed. Relief washes over me, and I turn to face him. Pain shoots up my leg. I hurt myself trying to keep up with his mother, but the agony was worth it. I scoot as close to him as I can and rest my palm on his cheek. Frustration is etched across his features and my chest clenches at the sight. He'd left dinner with a smile on his face.

"Are you okay?" I whisper, smoothing my thumb over his skin.

"Not in the slightest," he admits.

"The vampires?" I guess.

He sighs. "That. My father. Oraya." Orcus reaches and strokes the soft material of the midnight blue nightgown I'd found on the bed when I returned to the room. "This is nice."

"I found it when I got back. It's better than being naked."

"That's debatable."

I lift my eyebrows. "What happened with Oraya?"

"I might've pissed her off."

"She's a teenager. They're almost always pissed off," I say.

He laughs. "True, but I said something I shouldn't have."

"Did you apologize?"

“I did.” He turns into my touch. “But she’s still upset. We were talking and I tried to tell her something about when I was her age—”

I suck in a sharp breath. “That was a poor decision.”

“I know,” he groans. “But she accepted the apology and I think we’ll be fine tomorrow, it only made my bad mood even worse.”

“Do you want to talk about what happened with your dad?”

“I do, but I’m still mad at my father and I don’t think I’m ready to discuss it with you yet.”

I think I hate the king. “It’s okay. I’m here to listen whenever you’re ready. Or to support you. I know how you feel about what happened with the furies, and I know you’ll make better choices when you’re king.”

His eyes pinch shut, and I can’t help but feel that I said the wrong thing. I move my hand to his tusk and gently tug on it.

“Hey, grumpy, did I say too much?”

“No, little flower. You think I’m better than I really am.”

I roll my eyes. “Maybe you shouldn’t be so hard on yourself.”

“I kind of wish I saw the world the way you do.”

“And how’s that?” I trace the length of his tusk with my fingers. It still amazes me that they’re so smooth.

“Like there’s still good.”

My smile fades and I chew on my cheek, trying to find the words to make things better, but nothing comes to mind. That part of me that needs to nurture him demands I fix whatever is bothering him, but what good am I with the current set of problems? I’m human. The vampires and furies would destroy me.

Pinching my eyebrows together, I stroke the smooth surface of his left tusk. “I wish I could help.”

“You are,” he says, wrapping his arm around me and pulling me toward him. “Whenever I’m with you, I feel better.”

“Probably because when we’re together we’re usually having sex or doing something that involves pleasure.”

He chuckles under his breath. “That’s not all we do. We talk. I brought you cake. You berate me. You call me names.”

“And that makes you feel better?” I ask.

“Yes.” The answer is so final, so definite, that I can’t help but grin.

I lean in and brush my lips over his, keeping hold of his tusk and stroking it. “Well, I like hanging out with you too.”

He hums and holds me even tighter. “I hope that never changes.”

“It won’t,” I tell him.

“We’ll see.”

“Is there another ... another ogre or female?” Wow. Okay. I said that out loud. *Way to throw your insecurities out there like confetti, Daisy.*

“No.”

“Would you ever cheat on me?”

“No,” he growls, running his nails up my spine.

I kiss those grumpy lips. “Good. Then it won’t change.” Despite my reassurances, I feel his apprehension filtering through the bond. I hate it and decide to make it my mission to let him know how much I mean what I say.



THE CYCLOPS IS CLOSING IN. *No matter how fast I run, it's faster. I don't want to die. I have so much to do. Prometheus needs to find its mom. I have to fulfill my promise*

to Harald. I have to get fitted for dresses for the ceremony. Being killed by a cyclops isn't part of my plans.

"MY MOUNTAIN!" it screams and I hear the sound of its makeshift bat swinging back.

I'm too close. I can't outrun that bat and there's no way I'll survive. The bat whistles through the air as it sails toward my head.

"No!" I jolt up, heart hammering in my chest. I grip the sheets beneath me and pinching my eyes shut in anticipation of life ending pain.

Wait.

Sheets. Bed. No mountain.

"Daisy? What's wrong?" The concern in Orcus' voice drags me fully back to reality. He's guarding me on the bed and searching for any sign of threat.

My cheeks flame. It wasn't real. I'm safe. It takes another few seconds for my heart to get the message. I scrub my hands over my face to erase the last vestiges of the cyclops nightmare. "I had a bad dream," I say into my palms.

"You're okay?" he half-growls the question.

I move my hands and peer up at him. He's kneeling on the bed, hair mussed, and chest heaving. Great. My silly nightmare got him all worked up too. I smile and hold my arms out for a hug. "I'm okay."

He yanks me from my seat and smashes me against his chest. "Thank fuck. You screamed like you were in pain."

"Sorry," I mumble into his chest. "A cyclops was chasing me in my dreams and it felt so real. I thought for sure I was going to die."

"I should've killed him," Orcus grouses, referring to my first encounter with the cyclops.

He doesn't even know about the second.

"Um. About that. I kind of... maybe... ran into another, or the same, I don't know, but what I'm trying to say is when

Prometheus and I came to find you, another cyclops tried to take us out.”

Orcus goes preternaturally still. Every molecule in my body goes on high alert. A lash of rage snaps through the bond, but then like it never happened, the emotion is gone. *He stonewalled me*, I realize. Capped his emotions to keep me from feeling them.

“Orcus?”

“Don’t. Talk.”

“Um, ex-squeeze-me?” Right, the rational mind would be screaming that now is not the time to push the giant ogre when he’s already clearly pissed, but there’s a tiny devil inside my head who heard *don’t talk* and is running full out at Orcus with both hands poised to shove him. “I know you’re my mate and all, but you can’t talk to me like that.”

“Daisy,” he growls.

“Orcus,” I growl right back and push away from his chest, grabbing hold of his tusks and attempting to use them as a pull up bar, but I have no upper body strength. I push off his arms with my feet instead. My thigh screams in protest and I wince. A deep, displeased sound rumbles inside his chest. Once we’re nearly face to face, I squint. “I’m serious, grumpy. I’m not the type of woman you tell to shut up.”

“I didn’t tell you to shut up.”

“Don’t try to semantic your way out of this argument,” I whisper though I’m anything but calm.

His navy eyes bore into me. For a moment, I think he’ll try to fight with me, but then he relents with a simple nod. “All right, little flower. I won’t tell you to shut up.”

“Good.”

A hard crease forms between his eyebrows. “I need you to tell me about the cyclops.”

“Are you going to get mad at me?”

“No.”

“Liar.”

He sighs. “I won’t be mad at *you*. I’ll be mad at past you for not taking better care of yourself so future you could be here with me now.”

“I mean, I’m here, right? I think past me did pretty good.” Is there a smug grin on my face? Maybe. Does Orcus appreciate my sense of humor? Absolutely not.

“Explain. Now,” he growls.

There’s no reason not to tell him other than knowing he gets unreasonably upset when I’m any way in danger. *There are worse things than having a mate who cares for you.* There’s something about that protectiveness that I want to cling to. For so long, I didn’t have anyone.

“Okay, okay.” I release his tusks and a moment later my back is slamming into the mattress. I gasp in surprise as the ogre comes down on top of me, hands on either side of my head and hips pinning mine. “I thought you wanted me to talk.”

“I do,” he says, rubbing his erection against me. “Start talking, Daisy.”

My body has other ideas. I wrap my legs around his hips. Orcus shoves them away and glares at me, lifting up and taking that thick cock away from me.

“Talk.”

“You never came back.” I arch my eyebrows at him, reminding him of his promise and why I even left the cave in the first place. “Food ran out. I was worried. The bond was worried. Prometheus and I decided to come find the castle. There was a cyclops. We escaped. Then we met Harald and he led us here. Happy?”

“Not even close,” he says, shoving the nightgown up my body and sucking in a sharp breath. He stares at my bare pussy like it’s a national treasure. “No underwear?”

“Have you ever had a wedgie in the middle of the night?”

“No?”

I chuckle and reach for him but he bats my hands away. "Orcus," I whine.

"You're not done with your story yet." He shifts back on the bed and lowers his head. With his large hands grabbing two handfuls of ass, he lifts my hips up enough to hook his tusks underneath me, anchoring me to him. The curved ivory presses into my ass, but it's not painful. My stomach flips in anticipation. I'm completely at his mercy like this. I've never been more excited. His tongue slowly slides up my slit and circles my clit, but then he stops and glances at me. "Tell me everything that happened with the cyclops."

I stare at him between my legs. "This is cruel."

His grin is wicked. "Start talking."

"Tease," I grumble before launching into the story. The more descriptive I am, the more I'm rewarded. That thick tongue is my new favorite thing. Orcus takes his time devouring me with slow licks and gentle sucks, like I'm a dish meant to be savored. I trail off when his tongue pushes inside of me. Relief accompanies the stretch, and I tip my hips, giving him better access. He hums in approval and pinches my nipples.

My hands dive into his hair and I try to continue. "And I fell down the side of the mountain."

He growls, but despite his obvious disapproval, he redoubles his efforts and curls his tongue, caressing my g-spot.

"Orcus," I breathe, clenching my thighs around his face and dropping my head back onto the mattress. Sensations I can't begin to describe ripple over my skin and everything grows taut. I'm on the precipice of something mind shattering.

His tongue stops.

"No, no, no," I whimper. "I'm so close." I look down at him and find his eyes set on me. I pout and shamelessly rub myself against him. "Please?"

A slow, teasing twist of his tongue over my g-spot.

"That's what you want to hear?" I ask.

He slides his tongue out of me, running it up my slit. The flat length forces me to part around him so he can taste every inch of me. He stops just shy of my clit to ask, “And then what happened?”

If I had it my way, he’d give me the best orgasm of my life, but I know the stubborn ogre won’t until I complete the story. Life is so unfair. Cruel, even.

“The cyclops ran after me, but after I stopped falling, I got up and ran toward the ridge. I scooped Prometheus up and we sprinted down the mountain and didn’t stop running until we were off it.”

“That was dangerous.”

“I realize that.” I bite my lip and lift my hips.

He narrows his eyes. “And is that why your leg hurts?”

I avert my gaze. “No.”

“No?” he growls before viciously tonguing my clit, pulling back again right before I come.

“Orcus, please,” I beg. “I’m so close.”

“How did you hurt your leg?” He unhooks his tusks and dips two fingers inside of me, moving his mouth to my tit. Suckling, he pumps in and out of me before adding a third finger and stealing most of my cognitive function.

“I was on a walk with someone bigger than me and I was struggling to keep up.” I purposefully avoid mentioning who because I’m not about to have my orgasms taken away.

He bites down on my nipple and I yelp, but his thumb strokes my clit and any pain I felt is quickly replaced by need. “I think.” He kisses my left tit then moves to my right, swirling his tongue over my nipple. A shiver rolls down my spine. “I want to hear you beg for forgiveness.”

My core clenches around his fingers.

“What?” I revel in his attention. I’m not sure I understand what makes his saliva so special, but I’ve never been so grateful for spit.

“You heard me.” He wraps his plump lips around my nipple and sucks hard.

“I’m sorry?” I ask half-heartedly.

He slips his fingers out of me and slaps my pussy. “You can do better.” The bed shifts as he nips up my neck and he tosses his shorts onto the floor, settling that perfect cock atop my wet and ready center. Part of his length glides through my slit. “Tell me how sorry you are for getting yourself hurt.”

“Are you serious?”

His lips claim mine and he steals my breath. “I’m dead serious, little flower.” Those thick veins pulse against my skin.

“That’s *my* cum,” I warn him.

“If you want it, I need to hear you say what I want you to say.”

“I’m sorry for putting myself in danger.”

The tip of his length presses into me, slowly stretching me. “More.”

I begin to rock my hips to let him all the way in, but his hands shove them back onto the mattress.

God. Dammit.

“I’m sorry!” I shout. “I’m sorry for putting myself in danger and I’m sorry for getting hurt!”

“And you won’t do it again?”

“No, now will you stop teasing me and f—”

He thrusts hard and fast, burying himself balls deep. A throaty *yes* rasps out of my throat and before I can recover, his hips pull back and he slams into me again. His hips slap against mine. Everything shifts to accommodate him. My entire body is his to use as he pleases. It doesn’t hurt one bit and I am already dreading the moment he pulls out, but for now, I have him right where I need him. Grabbing his tusks, I yank him down on top of me and run my tongue over his bottom lip, sucking it into my mouth before kissing him like my life depends on it.

There's no time to think about anything but the way my body opens for him. The time for being careful is over. Orcus fucks me as a punishment for not taking better care of myself, he shows no mercy when I begin to tremble and gasp for air. He's relentless as my nails bite into his skin, and he's vindictive in taking care of me. Wave after wave of pleasure crashes down on me until I have no choice but to succumb.

"One more, little flower." He pulls out and flips me over, yanking my hips up into the air.

I grasp at the sheets as his cock slips into me, coated in my essence. At this angle he's deeper inside of me, invading every inch of me that he can. Those veins pulse and ripple. His hands grip my hips and yank me back until my ass slaps against his hips, reminding me that in this moment, I have no control. Orcus hits every spot in just the right way until I bury my face in the sheets and scream his name. He grunts and pulls all the way out before spearing into me again. His length shudders inside of me as he comes.

"Fuuuuck," he moans.

Panting, I grasp the sheets until my legs stop shaking. Once the trembling stops, Orcus smooths his palm up my spine and slowly eases out of me. I clamp around him to try and stop his retreat.

"You're so greedy," he says with a chuckle. "First we eat, then you can have your way with me."

I groan in protest as he slides all the way out of me. Cum drips down my thigh and he swipes two fingers up my leg to gather what was lost and pushes it back inside of me. I collapse onto the bed and roll over to peer up at him.

"Am I grounded?"

"What's grounded?"

"Like being in trouble."

"Oh." He considers this with a grin. "As much as I'd love to continue punishing you, I think you've learned your lesson."

I nod. "I'll definitely have to hurt myself more often."

He growls and crawls on top of me. I laugh and try to squirm out from under him. Grabbing my wrists, he pins my hands above my head and brushes his nose against mine.

"Is that what you learned?"

"No," I confess. "It's the sarcasm again."

"That *illness* is annoying."

I pretend to be offended. "It's a condition, Orcus. I can't help it."

"Who knew my mate would be so infuriating?"

"Hey!" I try to buck him off but it's no use. My legs are like jelly. "I'm not infuriating. I'm the best mate you've ever had."

He smirks then steals another kiss. My body melts beneath him and he hums in approval, taking all the fight out of me with that claiming. We break apart and he stares at me, forehead lined with concern.

"I'm okay," I promise. "I should probably stretch, and it wasn't only the walk with your mom. I've done a lot of walking in those sandals Zyla gave me and they're not exactly meant for travel." I lift up and brush my lips over each of his cheeks. "Thank you for caring about me."

"Someone has to," he grumbles.

A huge smile bursts across my face right as my stomach growls obnoxiously loud. Orcus closes his eyes and sighs. "You're hungry."

"Aren't you?" I ask with a laugh. "We haven't had breakfast yet." He gives me a look that screams it's unacceptable for me to feel hunger, and I laugh again. "Okay, okay, grumpy. What are we having for breakfast?"

"I have an idea," he says, dropping his hips to meet mine and rocking his erection over my cunt. "First, I'll fill that pretty mouth with my seed, then I'll feed you sweet stacks."

"Pancakes?"

“No, sweet stacks.”

“Fluffy little circles with syrup?” I ask with an arched brow.

“Yes.”

I nod. “Pancakes, but first, cum.”

THIRTY-THREE

Suction cup pussy

DAISY

Two blissful days pass holed up in Orcus' room. My monster feeds me, fucks me, makes love to me, kisses me. He gives me everything and I give back everything I can. Eventually though, my body is too sore to continue our lovefest.

I snuggle against his body as he lays beside me and sigh, relishing in the way my legs are absolutely covered in our cum. We haven't taken a bath yet today, but it's only a matter of time before Orcus decides I need one. I'll admit, at first it was strange to have someone get so upset at the thought of me not taking care of myself, but now I understand.

This is what love is like.

Or at least, the beginning stages of it.

And it's not only him worrying about me. I make every attempt to care for him while we're together. Sometimes though, taking care of him means letting him take care of me. Am I the world's most spoiled brat? Yes. Do I love it? Also yes. So as our little vacation from reality comes to an end, my chest aches.

There's so much going on that it would be selfish to stay here. We've already been selfish enough, but I'm thankful for the time.

"You're sad," he murmurs, tugging me on top of him. My thighs part and my dripping pussy suctions to his stomach. His

eyes darken, not at all grossed out, and his fingers grip my ass, sliding my body up and down his torso, coating himself in our combined essence. “Why are you sad?” he asks once he’s sufficiently covered.

“I don’t want to leave.”

“Me either,” he admits. “But there’s so much going on.”

I hum in agreement and stare at him. His hair is a mess, but it’s a delicious reminder of how my fingers claimed those strands when his face was buried between my legs. Those navy lips kick up and he grips my ass a little tighter.

“You can’t look at me like that when you’re so sore.”

I pout. “Maybe one more time?” My vagina shrivels up at the thought of more sex and I sigh. “Okay, maybe not.” I shake my head. “I don’t think I’ve ever been this horny. I don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

“I’m irresistible,” he says with a little shrug.

I wrinkle my nose and make a face. “And oh so humble.”

“If it’s any consolation, I’ve never been so horny either. I didn’t know I had so much cum.”

“And now it’s all mine,” I say and then a thought hits me. “Do you regret the bond?”

Yanking my wet cunt up his body, he asks, “Does it seem like I regret it?” seconds before he drops me on his face. His tusks help hold me up and his tongue lashes my clit, reprimanding me. I grip the golden headboard and grind against him. Orcus knows all the right ways to make me come and he takes advantage of that knowledge, delivering the world’s fastest orgasm.

The ogre makes a good point, I think as I moan.



LATER THAT DAY, I find Zyla, Prometheus, and Harald in a small garden. Harald is sorting various things from his cart. As soon as I realize what he's holding up isn't a cute blanket, I avert my gaze. At least it doesn't smell.

“Morning, Harald.”

A grunt is my only response.

Prometheus is flitting about, scorching bugs and gobbling them up with happy noises.

“Well, look who's blushing.” Zyla smirks and waggles her eyebrows. Her long blonde locks are braided back Viking-warrior style and the thin line of eyeliner—kohl?—highlights the various shades of brown in her irises.

I put my hands on my cheeks and grin. “I think I love having a mate.”

“I'm happy he's good to you.” Zyla pats the bench and I plop down beside her.

Prometheus growls at a particularly fast bug and zips about. Something is different about the baby. I tip my head to the side and try to figure out what exactly has changed. A blast of fire finally catches the bug and the dragon snatches it out of the air and lands next to a small rose bush, head peeking over the top.

Holy crap on a cracker.

“Prometheus is bigger!”

“I thought it was my imagination, but I swear the little dragon grew four inches overnight.”

The dragon snaps its head in our direction, spots me, squeaks with half of a dead bug's body still hanging out of its mouth, and launches toward me. I catch Prometheus with an *oomph* and Zyla's arm around my back is the only thing that keeps me from falling to the ground.

“Whoa there!” I laugh. “Look at how big you are now! And you're an expert bug killer,” I commend.

Prometheus chirps and licks my cheek. I almost gag but swallow the urge because one does not gag after a literal baby dragon gives you a kiss on the cheek. I'll wash the bug guts off later.

"I guess we should find your family, huh?"

Prometheus starts to cough and I pat its back, completely unsure of what to do, but the coughing fit is over before I can really worry. Extending a saliva-soaked claw toward me, Prometheus offers me one of the bugs it had swallowed.

I don't know if I can hold back a gag.

"Oh, no thank you, Prometheus. I'm so full." I rub between its eyebrows.

The dragon shoves the bug back into its mouth and swallows it whole. *Mama.*

"Mama. Your family, I know. I'm sorry. I'll talk to Orcus about going to the nest."

"Fascinating," Zyla whispers.

I shoot her a look. "What?"

Mama, Prometheus says in my mind again, nuzzling my neck.

"It's calling you mama?"

"No. I said we could find the dragons so Prometheus could find its family. With everything that's going on, I forgot, but I'm truly sorry," I say the last part to Prometheus.

Mama.

"Dragons only offer food to their family."

Family.

"How do you know that?" I ask, arching an eyebrow as I run my palm over Prometheus' back. The blue scales are warm to the touch. The dragon begins to purr like an oversized kitten.

"Because it's my job to know things. I think Prometheus thinks you're its mom."

“That’s ridiculous.” I look at Harald who is still solely focused on sorting his skins. Right. He’s not going to help me make a case. “Prometheus wants to go home.”

“You’ve bonded with the dragon,” Zyla says. “Regardless of whether the dragon thinks you’re its mom—which it does—it won’t leave your side for long. There are legends of dragon riders, those with magical ties to the dragons.”

I shake my head. “I’m not riding a dragon.” I’m afraid of heights and Prometheus, while bigger, is still so little.

“We’ll see about that,” Zyla says. “Tell me about what you’ve been up to, aside from copious amounts of sex.”

“Don’t ya talk about sex around me,” Harald gruffs.

I glance at him, avoiding the item placed in his lap. “Nice of you to join the conversation.”

“Maybe if ya weren’t so appalled by my bounty, I woulda said hello.” The trull glares at me. “Yer lucky I like ya or I’d have yer eyes.”

“I’m squeamish,” I say with a shrug.

“Thought yer name was Daisy.” The trull places the skin in the cart and closes the door, finished with his sorting or admiring or whatever he was doing.

Zyla chuckles. “I think it means she gets sick easily.”

I nod. “Definitely that. And I didn’t mean to insult you.”

“It’s fine.” Harald looks at the ground, almost like he’s sad.

“Hey, what’s going on?”

“All this talk about mom’s has me missing mine,” he says with a hard sniff. “She fought three cyclops with nothing more than the toe nail from her right big toe.”

“I’m so sorry,” I murmur softly.

He rears back and pulls a face. “What are ya sorry for?”

“Uh, because she died?”

“Bah, she didn’t die. Skinned the three of them while they were still alive and made me and my brothers and sisters

blankets.”

That’s a new level of demented.

“So she’s not dead?” Zyla asks.

“Nope.” He smiles to himself. “Still maiming. Best flayer I’ve ever seen.” He swipes at his cheeks. “Just miss her is all.”

“How long has it been since you’ve seen her?”

“A year.”

As terrifying as his mother sounds, he clearly loves and misses her. The hole in my chest gapes a little wider, but I ignore it and say, “You should invite her.”

He sniffs and gazes at me through watery eyes. “Ya mean it?”

“Of course.”

“In that case, I forgive ya for insulting my bounty.” He scrubs his hand over his face. “Any chance yer mate told you where they keep the messenger chickens?”

“Chickens?” I ask.

“Aye, chickens.”

“He didn’t tell me, but I have to see this.” I stand up, awkwardly holding Prometheus. The dragon is almost too big for me to carry now. It chirps and I pause, glancing at Zyla. “Do you think the dragon would eat the chickens?”

“It might try.” She takes the dragon from my hold, grunting as she takes the brunt of the baby’s weight. Prometheus screeches in protest, but Zyla murmurs something under her breath and it instantly settles, resting its head on her shoulder.

“The dragon whisperer.”

“I’m a witch,” she says with a shrug. “Go find the chickens with Harald. I’ll see you at dinner.”

“Oh, did Orcus plan something?”

Her lips twitch. “Someone did.”

“Is this the whole, *I know the future and I’m going to tease you with it but never actually give it up* bit?”

“See you later, Daisy.” She turns to leave and looks over her shoulder as she walks away. “Oh and I like green.”

“Cool? Navy blue is my favorite color.”

She laughs and leaves me with the trull.

Harald side-eyes me. “Witches are a strange bunch.”

Says the trull with a wagon full of skin. I bite back a laugh and hold out my hand for him to step on to. “Chickens?”

“Aye. Chickens.” Harald settles in my hold with his cart in his lap and I set off to find these birds.



“*THAT IS NOT A CHICKEN.*”

“What are ya going on about?” Harald asks after he gives the centaur minding the... birds... the message he wants the not-chicken to take to his mom.

“I thought you said they were chickens.” I stare at what can only be a dinosaur. It’s giant and has a pterodactyl beak. The only thing chicken about it is the bright orange feathers.

“Does the prince know yer not very smart?” Harald peers up at me from the ground. With his big personality, it’s easy to forget he’s only a foot tall.

“Wow, that was rude.”

“It’s a reasonable question,” he asserts. “Yer about to become queen.” He gestures for me to pick him up.

“Aw. You want uppies?”

“Are ya making fun of me?”

“A bit,” I admit, picking him up and walking to the platform that overlooks the kingdom. The not-chicken struts

shoves off the stone and sets into the air with two powerful strokes of its wings. Once it's high in the sky, it releases a shrill sound. Definitely a pterodactyl.

“Do you think she'll come?”

“Maybe. She doesn't like the king,” Harald says then glares at the centaur who balks. “Say a word and I'll turn yer hide into my next set of pajamas.”

“Harald,” I scold and shoot the centaur an apologetic look. “He's teasing.”

“No, I'm not,” Harald shouts. “I'll skin ya before you can so much as whisper treason, ya hear me?” His tiny body trembles with rage.

The centaur poops. Oh Jesus. Harald scared the shit out of the centaur. Pterodactyls are chickens. This world is ridiculous.

“Right. We'll be going then. Thank you so much for letting us send a message. We truly appreciate it,” I slather the centaur with gratitude and all but jog from the room.

“Slow down, will ya?”

“I would slow down if you weren't threatening to kill everyone.”

“Who said kill? I said I'd make his hide into pajamas. With proper care, he'd be fine. Maybe.”

“You're missing the point,” I grumble and head toward our rooms.

Harald winces. “Yer mad at me?”

I sigh. He's a trull and they're apparently notorious for being murderous. Can I truly be upset with him for being who he is? This world doesn't have the same rules as Earth, but maybe I can try to convince him to be less... stabby.

“I'm not mad. I'm disappointed.”

Harald pauses. “That's worse.”

I nod. “The centaur helped us.”

“He heard me say something bad about the king,” he whispers.

“Yes, but maybe you should be more careful with where you say such things.” I give him a pointed look. “Like maybe not in his castle?”

“Ya might have a point.”

I roll my eyes. “Of course I do. I’m going to ask you to please not threaten people who are helping us.”

“Sounds a bit like tellin’ to me.”

“*Harald.*”

He grunts. “Fine.” His eyes go misty again. “Ya remind me of my mother when ya say my name like that.”

“I hope you’ll get to see her soon.”

He considers me. “Why are ya nice to me?”

“Because I want to be.” I shrug. “And while I’m not used to your skins, we’re still friends. Friends are nice to one another.”

“I wish I had more friends,” he says after a moment.

“Have you tried to make friends?”

“Trulls don’t have friends.” He harrumphs like that’s that.

“Well, this trull has a friend.” I poke his arm and he glares at me. I’m pretty sure he wants to skin me, but he promised not to. “Do you need anything? Clothes?”

“No. I have more than enough. The ogres are being nice?” There’s a hard edge to his question.

“Yes, they’re all being nice.”

“Tell me if they’re not. I’ll make ya a nice dress.”

“That’s sweet,” I say while scrunching my face. I can’t see any reason I’d wear a dress made of ogre skin, but it’s his way of showing he cares.

“There you are,” Orcus’ voice comes from the end of the hall.

I turn and face him. The floor trembles as he strides toward me. He's so big and powerful and so *mine*. My gaze roves over his body. He's wearing a fitted top and shorts that do nothing to hide those thick ogre thighs. The golden cuffs all but sparkle, wrapped around his tusks in a way that make my fingers itch to hold them. His black hair is effortlessly styled and those plump, navy lips kick into a smug smirk. God, my mate is hot.

"For fuck's sake, put me down before ya start drooling," Harald grumbles.

I bite my lip and carefully place him on the ground. "Where are you going?" I ask his retreating back.

"To find me a needle and thread."

"What for?"

"I need a new outfit for yer ceremony."

I don't need to ask where he's getting the fabric. Remembering all the skins in his wagon, I shudder. Thankfully, he's marching in the opposite direction and doesn't see it.

Orcus sweeps me into his arms, and I grab hold of his tusks, claiming his lips before he can kiss me. He hums in approval and uses his hold on me as an excuse to feel my ass up before breaking away.

"As much as I like where this is going," he says, kissing me again. "My mom and sisters are expecting you."

"For?"

"They said something about a makeover."

Excitement zings through me. I've never had a makeover, let alone a royal one. This is going to be fun.

THIRTY-FOUR

Fashion is overrated

DAISY

The Princess Diaries and all those other *average girl becomes a princess* movies, hell even my favorite books, lied. Makeovers are the worst. First, I was treated to a spa treatment where I was scrubbed until my skin hurt. I'm a redhead and incredibly pale—my skin is prone to redness already but right now, I look like a lobster and I'm not sure I'll ever recover.

After assaulting me with a bristle brush, the crown's hair stylist did my hair. The simple but chic braided headband and loose curls are elegant, but I'm pretty sure I can feel the hair being ripped from my head every time I so much as breathe. This is why I don't do my hair.

Then there's the dresses. I'm sure Zyla thinks she's a real comedian. *I like green*. Red, blue, purple, pink, or green, it doesn't matter. These dresses are all a disaster of corsets made of obnoxiously strong bone, tulle that's as rough as sandpaper, and lace that's more suited to strangling someone than being artfully draped over cleavage.

"Oh my," Orshana says when I step out from behind the dressing wall. "That's lovely on you."

I half-grimace half-smile as I stare in the mirror and take in the orange monstrosity. Paired with my red skin, it's the ugliest thing I've ever seen. Zero stars. Would not recommend. Plus, it's not me. I prefer comfort to fashion, but even when I dress up, it's cute and casual. Simple. Whoever Orshana commissioned to make all these dresses in my size obviously

has a thing for the impractical. How am I meant to run away from a cyclops in this?

“She hates it,” Oraya says. “She’s hated them all.”

“No,” I lie.

“This one is the latest fashion,” Oretta says, and she would know. She’s wearing her own version with a purple bodice and a black skirt. On her it looks great. On me... it’s not right.

“Maybe she can go naked,” Orlena drawls. After forty minutes of trying on dresses, I’ve well worn out her patience.

“I’m sorry. It isn’t quite right.” I scrunch my face and take in the way my armpits bulge over the top of the corset.

“I think there are still a few more left,” Orshana says. She’s been the picture of patience and has been at least kind enough to have these options prepared. “Why don’t you try another?”

“Okay.” I slip back behind the dressing wall and release a breath as one of the centaurs-in-waiting helps me out of the top. The next dress is almost identical to the last one I tried on, but this one is midnight blue instead of orange. At least the color is better. Once I step out of the other dress and into the new one, the centaur laces the corset and I grunt as my body is deprived of oxygen.

I hate this.

His mother is so excited. So are his siblings. They’ve all been really patient and here to support me. It’s one night. Does the dress really matter? The centaur gives one last tug on the strings before tying them. I’m pretty sure my ribs are creaking, but I step out and model the dress, smiling.

“That’s the one!” Oretta claps.

“You look amazing,” Orshana says. “My son is so lucky to have you for a mate. Do you love it?”

“Oh.” I titter. “I think it’s my favorite so far.” It’s not a lie if I didn’t answer the question.

The eldest sister stands. “Great. Are we done?”

“Orlena,” her mother snaps at her.

“It’s okay!” I smooth my hands over the skirt and try not to shudder at the texture scraping across my palms. “This is the dress.”

“You’re sure?” Oraya asks.

I glance at the quiet sister, noting the way her eyes pinch around the corners as she scrutinizes me. “1000% sure.” I pause to take a much-needed breath. “This is it.”

Oretta, the most princess of the group, squeals. “Time for makeup then. Tell me, how do you feel about magenta?”

“Um. Not good?”

Orlena barks out a laugh and pats me on the shoulder. I stumble under the weight of her hand. “Sorry, Daisy. You’re so little.”

I rub the pain away. “No worries.”

“I’m going to go... do something,” she adds with a shrug, dropping her hand onto the pommel of the sword strapped around her waist. “Good luck with the makeup.”

“You should stay, Orlena,” her mother calls to her retreating back.

“I stayed for the dresses. I’m not staying to watch Oretta destroy Daisy’s face.”

Oretta gasps. “Hey! I’m great with makeup.”

“Did you look in the mirror today?” Orlena tosses a smirk over her shoulder then sets off at a run before her mother can scold her. The ground shakes but no one seems bothered or worried about the rocks crumbling down on top of us.

“She better not be late for the announcement,” Orshana mutters. She gives me a wry smile. “Are we overwhelming you?”

“It’s okay,” I say and sit in the seat Oretta directs me toward.

“You’re very amenable.” Oraya again with the astute observations.

“I’m just so happy you all aren’t awful and mean. Thank you again for being so kind,” I say to Orcus’ mom.

“Please, it’s the least we can do for Orcus’ mate.”

“Magenta eyeshadow with a touch of kohl around the eye. Maybe some subtle pink lipstick. Blush?” Oretta holds up a tin of pink powder.

“No blush,” I say, firmly opposed to that idea.

“Your cheeks are rosy enough already anyway.” Oretta organizes her things like a soldier might sort his weapons. She squints and studies my face before grabbing the smallest brush and the bright pink eyeshadow. “Do you trust me?”

“Please don’t make me look like a clown,” I whisper, eyeing the magenta palette.

She blinks. “What’s that?”

“A really silly looking person.”

“I promise not to make you look like a clown, but if the color scares you, we can go more subtle.”

“That would be nice.”

She grins. “Close your eyes and let me work.”



ORETTA BACKED OFF SOME, switching from a vibrant pink to subtle shades that complement my green eyes and the kohl lining them. I check myself over once more, finally having the room to myself, and smile despite the lack of oxygen. It may not be my style, but I definitely look like a princess. The makeup is my favorite part. That and the fact that I don’t have to wear heels. The dress is long enough to cover my feet and the simple sandals Zyla gave me, while well worn, are comfortable.

I still don't see myself running from a cyclops, but I'm hoping Orcus will save me in the event of any cyclops encounters. My heart jumps into my throat at the thought of yet another run in.

Who knew I'd develop a cyclops-phobia?

Orcus knocks as he enters the room. The ogre version of a tux is a nice, blue, silk shirt and black pants. He's barefoot, but not even those big green toes can ruin the hot monster vibe he has going on. His black strands are artfully swept back and the corners of his mouth kick up into a devastating smirk.

A soft caress strokes down the bond and my feet carry me toward him without me telling them to.

"Orcus," I warn.

"Little flower," he whispers back. "Forgive me, you were taking too long to come to me."

I roll my eyes and take over walking, trying to be as casual as possible with the corset. "You look hot."

"What is this dress?" he asks.

"It's *fashion*, Orcus. Look it up."

His eyebrows draw down and he gives me a once over. "Well..." He trails off and frowns. "I hate it."

"Oh thank god. Can I change?"

"You want to change? I thought it was *fashion*." The way his mouth shapes around the word is hilarious.

"It is, and I also hate it, but your family was being so nice."

He lifts an eyebrow.

"I know, I know. The thing is, I was speaking up, but then I realized there were forty dresses that were all generally the same and they were all custom made for me. I couldn't say no"—I pause to take a shallow breath. Maybe this is why they made corsets, to keep women from talking. I take another sip of air before finishing—"so I said yes to the dress."

“What’s wrong with you?”

I think I’m dying. I don’t tell him that because he’d freak out and go all protector on me. I rest my hand on his thigh and place the other on my stomach. “Take. It. Off.”

“We don’t have time for sex—”

“TAKE IT OFF!”

Orcus’ fingers slip between the corset and my skin, grabbing hold of the strings and giving one hard tug. The string gives out under his strength. As soon as the corset is off, I drink in oxygen like a little kid drinking a red Slurpee with no worries about what red dye number 40 might do to their body.

“Dammit, Daisy.”

“Don’t you. Dammit. Me.” I glare up at Orcus and take another breath. “I’m dammiting myself enough for the both of us.”

“My mother is trying to be nice, but I promise you won’t offend her if you’re honest. I think she’d prefer that to you not being able to breathe.” He holds the destroyed scrap of material up for inspection. “Why would Oretta wear these things?”

“She’s a different breed of ogre.” I head to the armoire and reach for the simple blue dress, then pause and grab a dark green one. These were also custom made for me but they weren’t intended to be worn for a royal announcement. They’re soft as silk and best of all, no corset. I pull it on and walk toward Orcus so he can do the ties at the back. “I’ll apologize to your mother.”

“You’re allowed to wear whatever you want.” Orcus rests his big hands on my shoulders and I tip my head back to look at him.

“I tried,” I say with a grin. “I really did.”

His face softens. “Next time, try harder. You’re about to become queen. No dress you wear is going to change that.

Pick what makes you comfortable.” He pauses. “Pick what makes you, you.”

What makes me, me? So much of my life has been spent shaping myself into something that pleased whoever I was talking to. Mimicking them. Clinging to whoever spared me a little bit of attention and eventually being ditched because I was too much. I don’t know how to be myself and ensure he still wants me.

“You should never have to hide who you really are,” he murmurs.

Those words hit me straight in the chest. “What if you don’t like the real me?”

“That’s impossible. You’re the only reason I want to smile. I need you, but not the you who hides in the shadows so others can shine.” His eyes track over my face. “I need my sunshine.”

I sniff and wave my hands in front of my face. “You have to stop being so nice or I might start crying and then I’ll ruin my makeup—which I like by the way.”

“Come on then, Daisy. I can’t wait to tell the world you’re mine.”

“Such an alpha,” I whisper. “Will there be food? I’m starving.”

“Only the best for you. We’ll be sitting with my father.” Orcus reaches down to pick me up, but I step away and hold up my hand.

“I’m walking. I don’t know how things work in this kingdom, but a lady who has to be carried everywhere she goes isn’t fit to be queen.”

“Your leg—”

“Is fine. I stretched. I rested. I’m all better and can handle a short stroll.”

“Stubborn lady,” he grumbles but doesn’t try to pick me up again.

“Grumpy ogre,” I tease.

Orcus holds the door open, and I glide out of the room in my simple dress and walk beside him on the way to the great hall. Not for the first time, I wonder how all of these stones were piled together with such precision. The walls are smooth, perhaps chiseled to be that way, and there are no gaps between the rocks. The décor is elegant. Pretty wooden tables hold beautiful, golden lined vases of fresh cut flowers. Portraits of ogres and various other monsters are wrapped in gilded frames, denoting the importance of each person.

Are the taxes Harald and the other monsters pay used to fund all of these fancy things?

Excitement swirls inside me the closer we get. A frantic server with glossy green wings, a harpy as I've been told, zips by us, muttering something about wine. Dozens of voices spill into the hallway and the guards nod at Orcus as we approach. He pauses before we reach the doorway and glances at me.

“Ready?”

I nod. “With you by my side, I can handle it.”

“Good, because that’s where you belong.”

My heart melts, but there’s no time to respond because someone announces us and Orcus begins to walk. I take a quick breath and step with him, appreciating how mindful he is of his pace. The great hall falls silent as we take the first step inside.

As with everything in this castle, the great hall is giant. The stone walls are well over twenty-feet tall and the large navy banners hung about the room are just as long. There are rows and rows of tables and all types of monsters. Ogres, minotaurs, centaurs, harpies, other monsters with horns, the bulky gargoyles—and Basil the snake from the inn. They’re all standing to pay their respects to Orcus and his chosen mate. They’re all *staring* at me. The weight of their attention is overwhelming. My throat goes dry and my stomach flutters with nerves.

What if they hate me?

What if I’m too frail for them?

What if I'm not enough?

A blast of strength shoots through the bond, and I grin, sending some sunshine in Orcus' direction. The royal family is seated at the end of a velvet navy rug. The king watches me with a hawk-like gaze and I narrow my eyes ever so slightly before I remember my place. It's probably not a good idea to glare at a king. I school my features and focus on Orshana, checking her reaction to my last-minute outfit change.

She simply gives me a warm smile. Orlena is grinning ear to ear. Oretta is frowning. Oraya gives me a knowing once over and then nods. Orana is... not paying attention but that's totally fair. She's eleven and I know I'd be bored at that age.

We take the two empty seats between the king and queen. Once we're seated, everyone else sits and some of the tension breaks. The food comes next, plate after plate piled high with delicacies is delivered to every table before the king stands and grabs his goblet of wine.

"We've gathered you here for this royal feast to celebrate my son's mating." He raises his glass at Orcus. "He's finally decided that hiding in a cave is no way to live." Chuckles come from some in the crowd. "But in all seriousness, I've spent years shaping Orcus into the king you'll all need. He's taken his leave to dally and returned knowing where his loyalties lie. Your future king will ensure that no vampires ever dares to pick a fight with a monster."

Fury roars in my ears as applause and cheering erupts from the crowd. I clench my hands under the table to hide my rage. Orcus' face is a blank slate, but the bond is a riot of annoyance and anger, though not as much as he should feel. His father slipped in a few insults and made a fool of him in front of the court.

Orcus drops his arm on the back of my chair and leans over to whisper, "I can feel your desire for revenge, little flower," as his father starts to speak again. I imagine it's rude to carry a private conversation while the king is talking, but I'm not feeling particularly polite.

"Is that so?"

“Mmm.” The deep rumble of his hum makes my walls clench. “And it’s making it hard not to ditch the dinner and take you back to the bedroom.” He does that thing with the bond that I love and I suck in a sharp breath, heat flooding through my body. “But perhaps I can make you come here instead.”

“Don’t you dare.”

His wicked chuckle very much says, *oh, I dare* and so does the way the invisible hold he has on my pussy makes me wet. Somehow, he manipulates the bond and focuses all that energy between us on my clit.

“—and his mate, Daisy!” his father shouts.

The crowd cheers again. Orcus stands and I follow with a deep blush coloring my cheeks. My chest heaves as the pressure between my legs builds. Orcus picks up his own goblet and says a few words that are probably meant to be inspiring, all the while toying with me through the bond. His attention is divided, but the way he brings me to the brink of an orgasm in front of the crowd tells me where his focus truly lies. I bite my cheek to keep a moan from slipping past my lips while he talks and clench my fists so hard my nails dig into my skin.

Everyone sits and I’m the last one standing, but I quickly drop into my seat. Orcus renews his efforts as everyone begins to fill their plates. I clutch the arms of the chair, trying not to pant like a rabid dog, and ride out the torturous strokes rolling over my clit again and again.

Orcus fills my plate with food. “Do you like that?” he asks while dropping a few pieces of meat onto my dish. He and I both know he’s not talking about the food.

“I’ve never tried it,” I admit, lifting my cup of wine to my lips.

“I think you’ll learn to love it.” Then he sends a blast of heat straight at me, and I choke on the wine as every muscle in my body tightens and the orgasm rocks over me. The coughing

fit mostly covers the moan of pleasure, and anyone listening would mistake it for a groan of pain.

“Oh, Daisy, are you okay?” Orshana asks, rubbing her hand over my back to try and help me.

I’ll kill him for making me come right next to his mother.

“I’m okay.” I glare at Orcus then smile at her. “I’m okay.”

She pats my back then goes back to her dinner, saying something to Orlena. The eldest sister’s face darkens, and she shakes her head, clearly not happy. I round on Orcus while they’re distracted and grab his right tusk, yanking him toward my face.

“What the fuck was that?” I whisper.

“I thought you liked it,” he whispers back with an evil glint flashing in those navy irises.

“I did, but that’s not the point. There are people—”

He claims my lips with his, stealing the rest of my protest with his skilled mouth. “Forgive me, little flower. You were ready to throttle my father and it turned me on.”

It’s hard to stay mad at the ogre for giving me an orgasm. “You’re forgiven.” I release his tusk.

“Eat your food before your stomach starts growling.” He straightens and starts in on his own plate.

“Don’t tell me what to do,” I mumble.

A teasing caress ripples over my cunt in warning, so I shut up and eat.

THIRTY-FIVE

Like father, like son

ORCUS

The only thing that got me through my father's speech was watching Daisy try to keep it together as she came. I'm tempted to slip my hand beneath her dress to see just how wet she is. That might be pushing it. My mother might be oblivious now, but she'd definitely notice that. Instead, I focus all my attention on making her feel good through the bond.

Daisy sips her wine carefully, side-eyeing me like I'll do something to make her choke again. The simple green dress she changed into clings to her body. My cock aches to be inside of her. I don't know what she was thinking, agreeing to wear that hideous contraption. Her lack of self-care rankles me beyond belief. I've never met someone so willing to let themselves be deprived of oxygen only to make another person happy.

Worse than her terminal sarcasm is her terminal desire to please everyone.

We've gotten to know every part of one another as we are, but we've yet to discover the things we keep hidden from everyone else. What about her past? What made her so selfless?

"Gods above, you'd think I announced your death with the way you're brooding over there," my father interrupts my thoughts.

His wine sloshes over the side of his goblet and dribbles onto the pristine tablecloth. My gaze shoots to the centaur in charge of the nightly meals, and I catch the visible wince. Wine isn't an easy stain to remove. How much scrubbing does it take? Or are they forced to find new tablecloths night after night?

If anyone were the exact opposite of my mate, it would be my father. Daisy would fall all over herself to make things right. My father, on the other hand, doesn't even notice what he's done. Some of that comes from a lifetime of having people clean up after you, and some of it comes from his general *fuck if I care* attitude.

He leans toward me, breath bitter from the drink. "I thought you wanted to be king."

"What I want is to stop the madness you started."

"Madness?" He barks out a laugh. "I'm leaving you a legacy. Our family has never been richer. We've never been more feared by our own people. We've never been to war. You'll be the first king to win one. You should be thanking me."

"Thank you for ruining a kingdom?"

He scoffs. "Ruining? I brought our family glory. What did you do hiding in that cave besides finding a pretty little hole for your—"

My hand is around his throat, squeezing hard enough to make his eyes bulge. "Say another word and I'll rip your head off."

"Orcus!" my mother screeches.

"He insulted Daisy," I snarl.

Guards move toward us, and I glare at them, daring them to come closer. The room is silent, all eyes on us. Orlena stands up, to stop me or to help me, I'm not sure. My father's lips curl into a demented grin.

"There's the ruthless king I created," he wheezes.

His words jam into my spine like a hot iron, and I release him, dropping back into my seat, seething at having given him the reaction he wanted.

Father splutters and gathers his breath. I glance at Daisy, wondering what she thinks of her monster now. Her eyebrows are slammed together, and she's eviscerating the king with her glare. My mother's lips are pressed together. She learned long ago not to intervene. I don't expect her to defend me. While I suspect she doesn't have a ton of love for my father, she's still the queen. I don't want to see her humiliated in front of the court. I look away before she can see exactly how much his words rattled me.

Ruthless.

Exactly what he is.

Exactly what I am.

"Shall we have a royal fight then?" My father's question roars through the room, inciting scattered cheers from the otherwise silent crowd. He arches his eyebrow at me and gestures toward where people are clearing away the tables and chairs from the middle of the room.

Royal fights aren't uncommon, but the difference between this one and all the others is I've embarrassed him in front of his people. It's either submit to this or end up in prison for attacking him. I refuse to leave Daisy alone, but, of course, agreeing to spar is exactly what he wants. He wants me to fight. He wants me to show the world how vicious I can be. He wants us both covered in blood and cuts. He wants me to realize we're the same. I must take too long to answer because he scowls and leans to whisper in my ear. "Fight me or I find a way to break your *little flower*."

"Touch her and you'll wish you were dead," I hiss under my breath for only him to hear.

He laughs and claps his hand on my back. "Fifth blood wins," he shouts to everyone, and they clap in approval.

"Orcus?" My chest constricts at the way she says my name, softly and full of concern.

“It’ll be okay, li—” I cut off before I say the nickname. It’s tainted now. “I’ll be fine. Royal fights are a way of celebrating.”

She frowns. “You don’t seem like you’re celebrating.”

“I will be once this is over.” I seductively stroke the bond. “Whatever you do, don’t look away.”

The lines on her face deepen. “Okay?”

Nodding, I stand and join my father in the middle of the floor, glancing back at the royal table. My mother’s hands are clenched on top of the table and her lips are pursed in displeasure. She hates these fights. Orlena’s face is red, and she’s clutching the pommel of her knife like she’d join in if only someone would ask her. I don’t check in with my younger siblings. Seeing any more disapproval might make me second guess what I’m doing, and as future king, backing down would make people question my right to the throne.

The only choice is to fight and my father knew that.

Perhaps this was his plan all along.

I face him on the stone floor. Everyone says we’re almost identical, but when I look at him all I see is a father and a husband who failed in every respect. I never realized that I hated him until this very moment.

“There it is,” he says, smirking at me. “Fifth blood,” he shouts again and lunges toward me.

His fists are heavy and fast, a ram battering a door. Every beat splinters a part of me I didn’t know still existed. I play defense, dodging as many punches as I can, but it’s impossible to avoid them all. One catches my chin and my head whips to the side right as his other fist slams into my gut. I grind my teeth together to keep from collapsing and kick, aiming for his head, but he catches my leg and uses his hold to flip me onto my back. The air wheezes out of me and my father’s fists rain down on me.

“Orcus!”

Daisy's concern strikes me through the bond harder than any punch my father could throw.

"Listen to your little flower crying," he says right before his knuckles slam into my jaw. Blood and spit fly out of my mouth and pain rocks through my skull.

"First blood," someone calls from the crowd.

"Fight me like I know you can," father demands. He climbs off of me and waits for me to get up.

I contemplate staying on the ground for a moment, but get up anyway.

He snarls and comes at me again. The bond screams with Daisy's concern, but I block it all out, focusing only on the pain and adrenaline flooding through my body. I have no intention of giving in to what he wants, no intention of fighting back, but then he threatens Daisy again and everything turns red. I hurl myself at him, pummeling him with my fists.

The bastard laughs. His punches don't land as hard as they should, but I'm blinded by rage. How dare he threaten Daisy?

"Second blood!"

I don't stop. I don't let him get up. His ribs. His face. His groin. I take every shot that'll cause real damage.

"Third!"

"Fourth," is called with more trepidation.

No one expects the king to lose.

"Fifth," someone calls loud enough for me to hear over the blood roaring in my ears. Father groans from where he lies on the floor and silence follows that sound. My chest is heaving and my limbs shake, begging to be let loose and end the threat to our mate once and for all, but I can't kill the king, not if I want anyone to respect me when I take the throne.

I stomp toward him and fear lights up the bond. Daisy. I hate that she fears me now, but I'll do anything to protect her.

Grabbing hold of his shirt, I drag my father toward my face. “Threaten my mate again, and next time I won’t stop.”

He turns and spits out a glob of blood. It splats when it hits the stone floor, and he smiles at me. “Your mate is safe. I only gave you the push you needed to show everyone why you’re taking the throne.”

“This isn’t a game,” I snap.

“No, but it is a show.” He tips his head toward the onlookers who are waiting with bated breath, wondering if the king will punish me for beating him. I had thought he wanted to kick my ass to show them all how amazing he is, but I was wrong. Once again, I let him play me. He pushed the right buttons to unleash a beast.

I shove him away and straighten, glaring at the crowd. “Your royal fight!” I shout and hold up my hands in victory.

Like that’s all they were waiting for, the crowd begins to shout and clap. Basil dips his head in respect. Instead of helping my father up, I move back toward the table, letting him bask in the aftermath of the show he put on.



AFTER THE FIGHT, the party begins, and Daisy and I don’t stay for that. My mom grasps my hand and squeezes it, concern lining her face. She holds back whatever she wants to say. I ignore the king on our way out. Daisy is silent by my side, and I stare ahead, still blocking the bond. I don’t want to feel that fear again. I don’t think I can handle it.

We make it to our suite and Zyla suddenly appears. Her knowing gaze sweeps over my face and catalogs every visible bruise. She glances at Daisy and narrows her eyes at whatever she finds on my mate’s face or in her mind.

“I heard the fighting and thought you might need help.”

“I’m fine.”

Zyla arches an eyebrow. “You’re blue instead of green.”

“I don’t need—”

“Let her heal you,” Daisy says and I deflate, more than willing to do whatever she wants.

“Fine,” I grunt and take a seat in the common space between our room and the others’.

Zyla rolls her eyes and starts working. I stare at the ground, avoiding Daisy’s gaze as she paces in front of me. The witch hums and touches my cheek. A soft tingle spreads across my face as she infuses her healing magic into my skin until the aches are gone and the surface cuts are healed.

There are some wounds magic can’t fix. Wounds that have been gouging deeper and deeper with every passing year.

The witch leaves my side and goes to Daisy. “Are you okay?”

“A little rattled.”

“Did you watch the whole thing?” Zyla asks.

I’d forgotten that during the fight, people would be monitoring Daisy to see how she handled it. A squeamish princess won’t earn the respect that’s needed to become queen.

“Yes.” Daisy’s voice is shaky and the bond trembles with her unease.

“Good. That’s good,” Zyla breathes.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see the two women embrace. Zyla murmurs a few things before leaving us alone in the common room. Daisy’s feet pad toward me, coming into my line of sight as she steps between my legs.

“Orcus.”

I want to say something, but I’m at a loss. How do I explain any of it? How do I tell her I’m not the ogre she thinks I am? I’m not good. I’m not nice. I was raised to be a warrior, and I’ll never be anything more than that.

She sighs. “Please look at me.”

I shake my head.

“Stubborn, grumpy monster,” she growls before dropping to her knees between my legs and peering up at me with wide green eyes. My heart beats a little faster. Once she has me snared, I can’t look away no matter how much I want to hide from her scrutinizing gaze.

“Are you okay?” she asks softly.

“Zyla’s magic healed me.”

Daisy narrows her eyes. “You know what I mean.”

I clench my jaw, trying my damndest to ignore that ache in my heart.

She watches me, seeing through every shield I try to erect, and her face softens. “I don’t know what is worse: having absentee parents or having to physically fight them.” She releases a sigh and climbs into my lap. Her head rests on my chest, and I wrap my arms around her, needing to hold her. “I spent my whole life searching for parental love... and while I never found it, I did learn a few things. Most of all, a good parent, one that really cares about you, would never hurt you. They’d never force you into situations you want nothing to do with.”

“He’s the king, too. He has to do things a certain way.”

A soft growl tears from her lips. “I know you’re not trying to justify what happened out there.”

“Things are complicated.” Things are horrible.

She scoffs. “No, Orcus. They’re not. He’s your father. Yeah, he’s a king, but he’s still your father. You didn’t want to fight. Your sisters and mother didn’t want you two to fight. What did he tell you that made you do it?”

“Nothing.”

Daisy gets onto her knees on my thighs and glares up at me. “I refuse to do the miscommunication trope with you right now. You’re a big ogre. Talk to me. If you can’t... then I don’t know why I’m here.”

I lean forward, hating the way my veins flood with fear. Her leaving would hurt me more than any punch my father might land. “Are you threatening me?”

She sighs. “No, but it sounded like it and I’m sorry for that. All I’m saying is I want, no need, you to communicate with me. Don’t stonewall me. Don’t block the bond.”

“You don’t want to feel these emotions.”

“And how do you know that?” she snaps. “You don’t get to decide what I do and don’t want, Orcus. I think I’m starting to fall in love with you, but that’s going to change if you start cold-shouldering me.”

“Think?” I arch an eyebrow. “Pity, I know I am.”

She gasps then scowls, grabbing hold of my tusks and yanking my face toward hers. “Don’t try to distract me with love.”

Anyone else would be dead. Daisy is the only one who can handle me like this. I chuckle. “You don’t like love?”

“I *love*, love, but I’m being serious right now. Are. You. Okay?”

It’s impossible to deny her when she looks at me like I’m the most important thing in her life. Even after what she saw out there, after I let him make me a beast, she still isn’t scared. My heart cinches.

“No, I’m not okay.”

Her eyes bounce between mine. “Why did you fight him?”

“He insulted you, and then he told me he’d find a way to break my little flower.” Anger flares inside me once again, renewed by the innate desire to protect her. “And no one does either of those things and gets away with it.”

“He manipulated you.”

I nod. “I know.” What’s worse is I let him. I should have known what he was doing.

“Do you really think he’d hurt me?”

“Normally, I’d say no, but I’m not sure I know what he’s capable of.”

She strokes my tusks and frowns. “Well. We can’t let him manipulate you again. You were miserable, and I don’t want to be the reason you turn into a real monster.”

“I’ll always protect you.” I place my hand over my heart. “You have my word.”

Yanking me forward, she catches my lips with hers and gives me a hard kiss before resting her forehead on mine. “I know you will, big guy, but so does he, and he’s going to use that against you.”

“If you’re asking me to let him threaten you...” I can’t do that.

“No, but I have an idea. What if Zyla made a charm that prevented him from hurting me? Would that magic work against a king?”

“Magic works against all monsters, regardless of their station. He’ll be pissed when he finds out.”

Daisy shrugs. “Then let him be mad. What’s the worst he can do?”

“Kill us both?”

She sucks in a breath. “Okay. That’s bad. But I don’t think he’d do that, no matter how mad he gets.”

“And why’s that?”

“Because he needs you to get what he wants. You’re his only son and you taking the throne is the only way for him to avoid taking responsibility.”

“You’re probably right.”

“I know I am. So, should I get Zyla?”

I cup the back of her head and claim her mouth, pouring everything I have into that kiss. I was always taught to guard my vulnerabilities, but with Daisy, I want her to know them all. To know every crack and fault, for her to understand that everything I do, even blocking the bond, is for her.

When we break apart she says, “Two things? Stop blocking the bond and please don’t stop calling me little flower. I like that nickname.”

“I hate that he used it.” That was something only the two of us shared.

“Fuck him,” she says with a shrug. “I’m your little flower, and you’re my grumpy.”

“I thought I was big guy?”

“You are, but big guy is to little flower like grumpy is to sunshine.”

I smile for the first time since leaving the great hall. “You’re saying there’s a hierarchy in our nickname game?”

“Yes, and I need to be your little flower if you’re grumpy.” The determined look on her face tells me there’s no rationalizing why we should pick another nickname.

“Do you always get what you want?”

“Only with you,” she says with a wicked grin. “Now kiss me before I get really mad.”

“Anything for you, little flower.”

THIRTY-SIX

My mate is tiny, but she is mighty

ORCUS

A week passes without another run-in with my father. There hasn't been an opportunity to test Zyla's spell, but I have confidence the witch won't let any harm come to Daisy. I can't wait to see my father's face when he realizes he lost his hold over me. Callum's spell could easily send Daisy home, far away from my father, but Zyla's protective charm has me selfishly keeping her here with me.

Every second I'm not doing something for the kingdom, I'm with Daisy. I had planned to spend the morning in bed with her, but she kicked me out hours ago. She told me she had to meet with my mother to go over things for the bonding ceremony and coronation ball. I would've stayed, but I'm also happy to not spend hours picking out tablecloths and napkins.

"Sulking in the library? You really are a brooding prince." Orlena drops into the seat across from me, draping one leg over the side. Her outfit is more suited for sparring than it is for princessing, and her curly hair is secured at the back of her head.

"And you really are a stalker."

"Good one, Brother." She shakes her head. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

She rolls her eyes. "Let me guess, your mate finally realized how ugly you are."

“You know, you were once my favorite sister,” I say, fighting a grin.

“I’m still the favorite.”

“Oh?”

She scoffs. “Please. Oretta is too worried about her dresses to really bother being a good sister. Orana is still young and hasn’t had time to get to know you like I have.”

“Oraya?”

“That’s my biggest threat. She’s sneaky, that one, but even still, I know more than any of them what it’s like to disappoint our father.”

I hum and study her. Orlena, for the most part, is aloof. She refuses to play princess, and as the eldest daughter of the king... that’s a bold decision. Our mom doesn’t care what we do, so long as we’re happy. Our father on the other hand...

“You’re perfect the way you are, you know that?”

She slaps her palm to her chest. “Aw. How sweet of you to say that, wish I could say the same for you...”

“You’re such a jerk,” I say with a laugh.

“I know, but it’s why I’m the favorite.” Her smile slips off her face. “But you do know that for a big brother, you’re pretty amazing, right?”

“You think?”

“I know so. You’ll be a great king.” She holds my stare for a few moments, letting the words sink in. “Pity you won’t be a handsome king.”

I bark out a laugh and she does too. “You talk so much shit, Orlena. Our poor mother.”

“Bah, she’s fine. I think she secretly enjoys it despite all the motherly scoldings.”

We both avoid mentioning the other parent. Orlena isn’t totally wrong, of all my siblings, she and I have the most in

common. We're both nothing like what the king wanted, and we're both stuck heeling to him until I take the throne.

"If you could do anything, what would you do?"

She shrugs. "Easy. I'd join the army."

Humming, I take in the seemingly casual way she sits. Orlena plays nonchalant well, but the leathers and holsters full of weapons make it clear where her heart lies. Our father will never let her have what she wants.

"You'd be a good warrior."

"You made sure of that," she says with a nod. "Oh, by the way, Daisy wanted to see you."

"Why didn't you tell me that sooner?" I stand, preparing to leave then realize I don't know where she is.

"Because," Orlena rises from her seat, "I knew you'd hurry to leave and I wanted to talk to you."

Dammit. There it is again. Me being more like my father than I care to admit. I don't want anyone to feel like they have to corner me to get my attention.

"I haven't been a very good brother lately, have I?"

"Sometimes you have to take care of yourself. I get that. I'm not mad. Just remember to make time for the rest of us, okay?"

"I promise."

She nods and walks toward the door. "Come along, your mate is tiny but she is mighty. Wouldn't want to piss her off."



ORLENA LEADS me to the private cave I love and leaves me with a parting punch to the shoulder. I rub the spot and wait for a centaur carrying a basket of fruits to pass before stepping

into the cave, finding Daisy on a large blanket full of food. She pops a grape into her mouth and wiggles her fingers at me.

I sit beside her and grab a grape of my own. “I thought you were busy today.”

“That was a lie,” she admits. “I needed time to get the surprise ready.”

“Is this the surprise?”

She spreads her hands before her. “A picnic with your favorite human.”

“My *only* human,” I say, plucking her from the blanket and dropping her into my lap so her back rests against my stomach. “What’s a picnic?”

“It’s where you eat somewhere that isn’t at home. Usually it’s a park, but I asked your sisters where your favorite place was and they brought me here.” She pushes her red hair away from her forehead. “It’s humid, but I see why you like it. Maybe we could hide in here forever?”

“Hmm. We could do that but what happens when you need to poop?”

“Good point. There’s not exactly a special room for that like there was on our mountain or in our room.”

“Our mountain?”

She waves her hand. “Screw the cyclops.”

“I thought it was *my* mountain.”

“I can see why you’d think that, and you’d be wrong.”

“Why’s that?”

She tips her head and looks up at me. “Because I’m your queen.”

I grin. “Say it again.”

She radiates happiness. “I’m your queen.”

Running my hands up her thighs, I jerk her legs apart and stroke her through her dress. “Mmm. Yes, you are such a good queen too, hmm?”

Her cheeks pinken and she arches into my touch. “The best queen,” she agrees.

“You know what I think good queens deserve?” I glide my hands up and cup her breasts, pinching her hardened nipples.

“Cake?”

I laugh. “No, little flower. They deserve a throne.” I shove the skirt of the dress up and push her panties aside, finding her so wet already. “Needy queen.” I gather up her sweet essence and bring my fingers to her mouth. “Taste how desperate you are for me.”

Her tongue flicks over my skin. My other hand cups her cunt, and I grind my palm over her clit. She moans around my fingers as she sucks them clean.

“Would you like to take your throne?”

“No.”

My head rears back. “Why not?”

“Because.” She turns in my arms and kisses me, stroking my tongue with hers and making my painfully full cock even harder. “I want to try to put it in my mouth,” she whispers against my lips.

She’s so little. I know my saliva can help, but I’m still worried I’ll hurt her. This is what Daisy does, though. She recklessly gives her all to take care of others.

I smooth her hair away from her face and kiss her before saying, “You don’t have to do that.”

“Yeah, I know. I’m not going to give head if I don’t want to.” She arches an eyebrow and dons an imperious sneer. “Your queen wants your cock in her mouth. Are you going to deny her?” Daisy is beautiful when she smiles, but when she says things like that? She’s beyond words.

I bite my lip and shake my head. “I’d never dream of it.”

“Good. Take your pants off.”

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re bossy for a queen?”

She chuckles and slides off my lap, stripping beside me. Right then, time to stop talking. I shuck off my clothes and pull her back into my lap. Her soft thighs wrap around my waist and her pussy drips all over my length. I bring her down against it and grind against her.

“Don’t distract me,” she rasps, pushing on my chest and scooting back on the blanket.

My dick juts in her direction and I fist it, giving it a hard stroke and using her essence lingering on my fingers as lube. Pre-cum beads at the tip, and before I can spread it, Daisy pounces, lapping it up. I stroke my hand up my length to meet her lips and slam it back down, grunting.

Daisy glances up from between my legs. “Your cock is huge.”

Fuck. My chest puffs with pride. “Who does it belong to?”

Her eyes light with delight. “Me.” She wraps her lips around my tip, managing to get them around my girth. I stroke myself again, barely touching her lips before I retreat. My queen takes a deep breath and hot air rushes around my cock as she exhales and relaxes her jaw.

Those pretty green eyes are set on me as she takes me into her mouth, one inch. Two and she has to stop, but it doesn’t matter. I stare at her, mouth so full, eyes watering but set with determination, and my balls clench.

“That’s perfect right there.” I bring my hand to meet her mouth again and we begin to move together, Daisy taking around two inches of my cock while I match her pace with my fist. Her lips are clamped firmly around me, her cheeks soft and tightly stretched to accommodate me, and it doesn’t take long.

“You’re doing so good, little flower. You take it so well.” I use my free hand to move her hair from her face. “Can you swallow my cum like a good queen?”

She hums and tugs on my balls before gently massaging each one. The veins in my cock pulse and she somehow

suctions her cheeks around me, using her tongue to caress the underside of my cock.

“Fuck, Daisy.” I slam my hand down my length and she suction even harder. My balls clench tight for the last time and when she rolls her tongue, I explode. Everything hyper focuses and instead of pinching my eyes shut, I zero in on the way Daisy works to take it all down. Cum dribbles from between where her lips meet my cock. I smooth her hair and my hips jerk, making her mouth inch down my cock. She gasps and I groan as another shot of cum shoots to the back of her throat.

Gliding her mouth up my length, she begins to flick her tongue over every inch of me until I’m glistening and clean. She kisses the tip and gazes at her handy work, then she glances up at me, grinning.

“I did it. Well, sort of.” Her cheeks are flushed pink and her tongue dashes across her bottom lip, almost like she’s ready for more.

Fuck, this woman is amazing. I clamp my hand around the back of her neck and crush my mouth against hers, tasting myself on her tongue. She sighs into the kiss and I waste no time giving the queen the throne she deserves, taking care of her because a king never leaves his queen wanting.



DAISY MOANS and stretches out on the blanket beside me. “God, that was amazing.”

“What did I tell you about that name?” I roll onto my side and tickle her.

She wiggles away from my fingers and squeals. “I’m sorry! I’m sorry.” Her hair is a mess and there’s a sheen of moisture all over her body. Her legs are sticky from all the times I made her cum. She’s an absolute mess, but I’ve never seen her more beautiful than she is after I’m done with her.

“What’s my name?”

“DMX?”

“Daisy,” I growl, not really knowing what DMX means but knowing she’s being a brat all the same. “What’s. My. Name?”

“You’re so cute when you get all growly.” She bops her finger on my nose. “But if you must know, your name is Orcus.”

I roll my eyes. “Thanks for that information.”

She shoves my shoulder. “You asked!”

“I did, didn’t I?” I say with a laugh, happier than I think I’ve ever been. It’s impossible to hate the world when you have a mate like Daisy, but aside from her sunshine disposition, she actually cares about me. If that’s not a miracle, I don’t know what is, and I’m keeping my miracle all for myself like the selfish bastard I am.

“I didn’t bring you here for orgasms.” She walks her fingers up my chest.

“Why not? I think we both had a good time.” I try to smooth her hair, but honestly, it’s a lost cause at this point so I settle for running my thumb over her cheek.

She blinks and her eyelashes brush my skin. “It was amazing, but I don’t want you to think I’m only using you for pleasure. I want to... be a good mate. I want you to love me someday.”

“You’re a great mate,” I search her face. “And I do love you.”

“Don’t say that because I told you that’s what I want.”

I shrug. “I’m not. You’re more than I could have ever asked for. You’re perfect in every way, even with the sarcasm.”

“You love the sarcasm.”

“Maybe.” I smile, and her eyes drop to my mouth, her lips kicking into a smile of their own.

“I love it when I make you smile.”

“I love it when you make me smile, but I especially love it when you’re full of my cum.”

She grabs my tusk and pulls me toward her. “Don’t ruin the moment talking about cum.”

“You love the cum.” My nose wrinkles, and she rolls her eyes but doesn’t deny it. I lean in and kiss her softly.

“Is this the happily ever after?” she murmurs against my mouth.

I don’t know what she’s talking about, but if that’s what she wants, I’ll find a way to give it to her. I refuse to be like my father and take my mate for granted. He may have trained me to become a vicious warrior, but I’m not him.

With Daisy by my side, I know I can be good.

I have to be.

THIRTY-SEVEN

Kings and their threats

DAISY

The weeks leading up to the ceremony fly by. Between all the horizontal time I've been spending with Orcus—and sometimes vertical—the planning with his family, and nightly dinners with my friends in our private dining rooms, I've managed to avoid Orcus' father. The protection spell Zyla placed on me buzzes over my skin for the first time as I'm wandering through the royal library.

Orcus was called away to talk about another incident with the vampires. Instead of going to find his sisters or seeking out Zyla, I decided to take some much-needed time alone. But now, as I turn around and tip my head back to meet the king's narrowed gaze, I can't help but regret that decision.

The king—oh shit, he's a king. I give a hasty and sloppy bow. *Please don't kill me for not bowing.* My pulse races. I clench my trembling hands behind my back and stand as tall as my five-foot-five frame will allow.

“No one ever taught you how to bow?”

“No.” I quickly add, “Your majesty.”

His eyebrows notch up his forehead. “I've been hoping to spend some time with you. It seems everyone in my family has had the opportunity and they all sing your praises.” He frowns. “I'm curious how such a small thing could ever be so fascinating.”

Is he really pulling the size matters card? There are a hundred responses on the tip of my tongue, but I'm not so reckless as to say any of them to a king.

The king stares.

I swallow. Right. He wants a response. "I'm not sure I'm fascinating, but their kindness means a lot to me."

He hums. "How long have you known my son?"

"Um, maybe around a month and a half?" Or is it two? I'm not entirely sure.

"And yet you're ready to tie your life to his? He's a monster." His father leans casually against the book cases that run all the way up to the ceiling.

I had been enjoying myself in this space. It's cozy with the oversized leather chairs and grand fireplace. "He is an ogre, but I don't think he's a monster. He's also my mate."

If condescension is bad on Earth, try being looked down on by a giant monster. "I'm curious who put you up to snaring my son."

It's almost laughable how much his suspicion sounds like Orcus' when I landed in his lap, only then he thought his father was to blame. Who else would benefit? Unless... the king has enemies. The dude is sneering at me like I smell like dog crap. He definitely has enemies.

"Would you have chosen another ogre?"

"Yes."

"He told me you tried to force him to mate, but he also told me Hecate's blessing doesn't work that way."

The king ignores my goading. "A prince needs a mate. Heirs are important. How will you give him heirs?"

My stomach churns. I don't want kids, but I don't tell the king that. "I may have only known your son for a little while, but you of all people should know Orcus can't be forced into taking a mate."

“He can be forced into quite a bit given the right motivation.” His eyes bore into mine.

The protection spell rumbles over my skin. That was definitely a threat. “If you have any love for your son, you’ll think twice about threatening me.”

His lips curl into a cruel smile. “Oh, you’re cute. You think your witch and little trull scare me?”

“No, but I think any decent father would want to save his relationship with his son.” I’m going too far, but he reminds me of my parents, and I wish I could tell them how horrible they are, but the king makes a fine substitute.

The laugh that pours through the library is heartless and cold. “And that’s where my son and I will always agree. I’m not a *decent father* as you put it. I’m a king and I do what needs to be done to protect my kingdom.”

“Like killing some goats and then refusing to take responsibility?” The question slips out before I can clamp my lips shut.

“So he’s told you about that. Did he also tell you about the plan to eviscerate the vampires once and for all?” Malice paints across his features, so vicious I know without a doubt eliminating the vampires is on the table. But Orcus would never.

I shake my head. “He wouldn’t agree to that.”

The king’s loud, condescending chuckle fills the library. “It was his idea, but your naivety is adorable.” He pushes away from the wall and books tumble off the shelves.

Scurrying to avoid them, I scowl at his back.

He glances over his shoulder. “Oh, and Delilah? He better be at the front of that battle line or I’ll find a way to make him... and you and I both know how I’ll do that.”

By using me as leverage.

Bastard.

“My name is Daisy.”

“Does it matter? Oh, tell your little witch friend I said I’ll see her soon.” The ground shakes with the king’s retreat. Even though he was the first to leave, I think I lost that verbal match. Everything he said races through my mind. I’m certain he wanted to start some type of fight between me and Orcus.

I’m a little concerned about why Orcus didn’t tell me, but I trust that he had his reasons. I’m also determined to figure out what the plan is. He can’t agree to mass slaughter. Maybe he’ll change his mind if we talk about it.

I pick up the books that fell and pile them on a table. Only a monster would walk away from the books without checking for damage.

“Daisy?” Zyla calls from the front of the library.

“Back here.” I set a thick tome at the top of the stack. Fifteen books fell. Three had damaged spines. The rest are dented.

“What happened?” she asks as she rounds a bookshelf.

Prometheus flies over and crashes into me. I tumble to the rug covered floor with an oomph and it follows me down, licking the side of my face with a hot sandpaper tongue. The baby dragon is a little bigger than a Great Dane now. So much about the dragon has changed, but its pretty blue scales and golden eyes are as beautiful as ever.

“You’re going to hurt Daisy,” Zyla scolds.

Hurt?

“No, I’m okay, but I think it’s time to stop tackling me.”

Sorry.

“It’s okay, little one.” I scratch under the dragon’s chin and then gesture for Prometheus to get off.

The dragon shifts to the side. I push up from the floor and Prometheus uses its head to help me up. Shooting the dragon a grateful smile, I smooth my top—a simple violet tunic made of the finest fabric.

“The spell alerted me that you might be in danger.” Zyla searches my face. Her blonde hair falls around her face in soft waves.

“The king found me.”

She squints at me. “And?”

“He pretty much told me I’m expected to give Orcus’ babies and that he’s not above using me to make Orcus do things. He also said he’d see you soon.”

Her features darken and magic flares at her fingertips. “Did he try to hurt you?”

“No, no.” I eye the sparks of golden magic. “Everything is fine, you can put that away.”

Flicking her wrist, she extinguishes the flames. “Tell me what he said, word for word.” She grabs my arm and drags me to one of the oversized chairs.

It takes a minute for both of us to climb onto it. Prometheus easily zips up to the cushion and settles between us. The seat is big enough for all three of us to fit comfortably.

Sighing, I drop my head to rest on the cushion and tell her everything Orcus’ father had told me. Usually it’s the mother-in-law who you have to worry about, but those monster-in-laws have nothing on the Monster King. Orshana is so lovely. I have no idea why fate saw fit to make the two of them mates. She totally got screwed.

“I’ve tried to read his mind, but I only get bits and pieces,” Zyla murmurs with a frown. “The rest is fuzzy. That’s weird.”

“Should we be worried about that?”

She shakes her head. “No. But now we know he’s planning to scare me.”

“Apparently, they’re all planning something. Orcus didn’t tell me about the attack.”

“Does that bother you?”

I hesitate. There are a dozen reasons Orcus wouldn’t tell me about things like that. For starters, I’m not the queen yet. I

also know nothing about ruling a kingdom. But I don't see how the plan will help bring peace. That sounds like a good way to start a war.

"You should tell him."

"It won't stop anything."

"He listens to you, Daisy. I imagine he didn't tell you because he's trying to protect you." She pauses. "There's something you should know."

"What? You're leaving me?"

She shakes her head. "Not until I see you happy and safely onto the throne."

Growing up, I always dreamed about having a sister. It's not like I never had friends. I did, but I was always disposable. The one who got invited because I was there when all the invitations had been delivered and the person hosting the party had forgotten about me until they saw my stricken face.

Zyla, the Grand High Witch, wanting to stay and make sure I'm safe is more than any other friend has ever done for me.

"When he asked, I didn't feel like I needed to tell you because we had only just met, but now that we're friends... I don't feel right keeping it a secret."

"This sounds like I'm about to cry."

She grimaces. "Hecate, I hope not. I'm horrible with tears."

I chuckle and breathe. "Just tell me. Nothing can be worse than my mate's father threatening me."

"Orcus asked me to make a spell to send you home."

"Oh, is that all?" I shake my head. "He told me he asked you, and I'm way ahead of him there. Callum already made me one."

Zyla is quiet for a moment. "It doesn't bother you that he still wants the spell made?"

I shrug. “I mean, a little, but Orcus has made it clear he’s going to protect me regardless of what that looks like. I don’t want to leave. I think I love the big ogre. If it comes to him using that spell on me without my consent, that’ll tell me all I need to know.”

She pulls out a vial of luminescent pink liquid. “I can pour it out. Say the word and it’s gone.” Her brown eyes skate over my face, and instead of scouring my mind, she waits for my answer.

The spell she crafted is different from the one I received from Callum, but I have no doubt it’ll work.

“No. Give him the spell. I want him to decide what to do with it like I did with my charm.” I told Orcus to give me time to prove myself. I hope to Hecate—or whatever god—that he finally sees I belong here.

“I’m so annoyed Callum finished before I did,” she mumbles and slips the vial back into the pocket on the inside of her shirt. “He’s going to be insufferable.”

“Yeah, about that. When are you two hooking up because that tension is *hot*.”

She scoffs. “Never again.”

“Again?” I nudge her with my elbow.

She scowls and looks away. “It was one time.”

“Oh.” I twist my hands in my lap. “Is that why you hate him?”

“I don’t hate him.” She says those words with such sadness my own chest aches. “Part of me wonders if it would be easier if I did,” she confesses. It’s so easy to hear the heartbreak in her words. That’s something I’m all too familiar with.

Sucking in a breath, I place my hand on her arm and squeeze. “What did he do?”

“He picked someone else.”

“Mother fucker. I’ll castrate him.”

“You sound like your trull friend now.” She shakes her head. “We weren’t dating. I might’ve said something to him that pissed him off. The next time I saw him, he was with another person.”

“And now?”

“I don’t know. I don’t care enough to pay attention.”

She’s lying, but I let her have it.

“Well, he’s an idiot.”

She chews on her cheek and falls silent. Her face crumples, and I instantly regret bringing up Callum.

“Zyla, I’m so sorry.” I reach across Prometheus and hug my friend. “I shouldn’t be prying.”

Her breath shudders in her chest. “It’s okay. I don’t have anyone to talk to about this stuff. Ever since I became Grand High Witch, the others treat me differently.” She sniffs. “I didn’t realize how much I needed a friend.”

“Well, you’re in luck because I’m on the market.”

“You’re good with tears.”

I laugh and rub her back. “I only did what I would want someone to do for me.”

Hugging me, she snuffles. “Thank you.”

Once we break apart, I cast my gaze across the library. The tall library tables with dark stain and leather cushioned chairs at this end of the library are mostly empty and the large shelves surrounding us give us our own little bubble of seclusion “How about we find Harald and head out for a walk?”

“He’s probably busy with his mom. She arrived this morning.” Zyla swipes at her cheeks.

“Is she terrifying?”

“Absolutely. Best to steer clear for now.”

We both laugh and Prometheus rolls over on its back, begging for pets. Zyla and I spend the rest of the afternoon

together holed up in the library. There's plenty of conversation to distract me, but one thought ping-pongs through my mind.

Will Orcus send me home?



THE KING CALLS for a formal dinner later that night. Orcus is somber as we head to the great hall. There was an incident with the kingdom's soldiers and a small group of vampires. No one died, but limbs and even a few eyes were lost. The message about the attack was wrapped around the bloody horn of a minotaur.

The ground shakes as Orcus walks, but I've gotten used to walking beside him and avoiding being stomped to death.

"Are you okay?" I ask for the second time since he told me about what happened.

"No."

"Are you going to go forward with the attack after our ceremony?"

He stops and glances around before picking me up and stepping into the shadows. "How do you know about that? Did Oraya tell you?"

I find my footing on his arm and brace my hands on his shoulders. "No. Your father found me in the library."

His eyebrows snap together, drawing a furious line down the middle of his forehead. "Why didn't you tell me that sooner?"

"I was going to, but you were so upset over the latest incident with the vampires when I found you it didn't feel like the right time."

"What did he say?" Orcus demands.

"That you were going to eviscerate them and that I should probably figure out how to birth baby ogres."

He doesn't say anything.

"Do you want baby ogres?"

"No." His face is unreadable.

"Oh thank g—Orcus," I say with a small grin. "And the vampires?"

"I don't have a choice."

"In a week you'll be king. You'll have plenty of choices then."

"It'll be too late. They'll know we're up to something once they see our forces marching toward their border. Even if I stop the attack, we'll end up in a war."

"Or, you could send everyone home and let the vampires know there's a new king in town."

He shakes his head. "It isn't that simple."

"What if it was?"

"That's wishful thinking, little flower."

I lift a shoulder. "Maybe, but I do know that you'll never be able to live with yourself if you go through with this plan."

His navy eyes flash. "My father—"

"Will run away while you pay the price. You're better than him, Orcus. You may not think so, but I know so."

He studies me. "You believe that?"

"Without a doubt. Your dad is an asshole."

"You call me grumpy all the time," he points out.

"That's totally different. You can be grumpy and still have a heart. Your father on the other hand? I don't know if he has one."

"I think at one point he did." Orcus looks away as someone passes. In the moment of silence, I mentally mark every line of obligation or concern or frustration on his face, swearing that somehow, I'll find a way to make his father pay.

"You are better than him," I say as he turns back to me.

Instead of responding, he simply brushes his lips over mine. “We’re going to be late now.”

“Then we better get going, grumpy.”

The soft smile he sends my direction melts my heart. Orcus nods and carries me the rest of the way to the great hall. I don’t ask to be let down this time. Any trace of happiness is gone, now replaced with a battle-ready scowl. My heart clenches with unease. Shaking off the fear of uncertainty, I prepare myself to face the ogre I want to junk punch with an unaffected smile.

He tried to rattle me.

I won’t let him win.

THIRTY-EIGHT

Never fight with your sister-in-law, especially if she's an ogre

DAISY

It's been at least thirty minutes and the king hasn't so much as acknowledged our presence. The monsters sitting around the tables on the main part of the floor are more subdued than usual, shooting occasional glances toward the raised platform where we dine. Orshana and Orlena are whispering to one another. Oretta is pouting, but even so, she's beautiful in the crimson gown and matching tusk cuffs she's wearing. The younger sisters are both focusing on their plates, though I catch Oraya's eye as she shoots cautiously curious looks at the king. She gulps and swings her head away.

The king shifts and I suck in a breath. My heart flutters and my flight or fight response kicks in as the spell Zyla cast buzzes over my skin. I don't know the mechanics of the spell, but it's meant to warn me of the king trying to hurt me. I glance at him, but he's sipping on his wine and studying the room. He hasn't even acknowledged my presence, so why is the spell buzzing?

"What is it?" Orcus asks.

My forehead crinkles. "Something is going to happen."

"You sound like Zyla. What do you mean?"

"I don't know," I confess. "But I know something will."

He frowns and glances around, assessing the room with the gaze of a trained warrior before moving his attention to his

father. The king continues to pretend like we don't exist. Orcus' eyes swing back to meet mine. *I don't see anything.*

Even still, the buzz on my skin hasn't let up.

The doors to the great room bang open and a minotaur dressed in the signature blue uniform of a soldier rushes toward the king. His hooves clack on the stone floor and everyone in the room watches his progress. The monster drops into a bow in front of our table.

"Such dramatics. What is it?"

"Your Majesty," the minotaur begins.

"The vampires?" the king guesses.

Does he even care about the furies? Or are the furies pitting the vampires against the monsters? Maybe this has been part of their game all along.

The minotaur glances at me for a millisecond then snaps his attention back to the king. "No, Your Majesty. The news I have is better delivered in privacy."

The protective spell buzzes more violently over my skin. *Run, run, run.* I swing my head side to side, wrapping my fingers around the dinner knife just in case. Orcus' hand falls onto my thigh. Concern zips through the bond. I count as I inhale, trying to calm my racing heart and the protective spell. The king won't attack me in front of all these monsters. Orcus won't let him get close enough to touch me. I'm safe.

"Very well." The king stands and addresses the room. "Stay and enjoy your dinner and drinks."

"Should I come with you?" Orcus asks his father while squeezing my thigh. He shouldn't have to choose, but I'm terrified of what might happen if he leaves my side.

"No, no." The king drains the rest of his wine. "Enjoy dinner with your future queen. Perhaps she'll indulge the court in a fight."

That sets off a riot of conversation as the king retreats. The protective spell buzzes even harder as monsters begin to beg for a fight. I swallow and glance at Orcus. His face is shrouded

in anger, and his jaw muscles tick as he glares at his father's back. The spell protects me from a direct attack from his father, but proposing a fight isn't a direct attack.

"She can't," Orshana whispers to Orcus.

"I know, but per our own court rules, when the king suggests a fight, it must proceed." Orcus scrubs his hand over his face.

"I'll fight the queen!" A pretty ogre with vibrant auburn hair stands up, eyeing Orcus with far too much appreciation.

The monster beside her has the head of a llama and the curvy body of a pinup model. "Lara would make a good match."

"Sit down and shut up." Orlena shoves away from the royal table. "I'll take the pleasure of being the first to kick Daisy's ass."

Everyone in the room but our table bursts into laughter. Orshana shakes her head and whispers at Orcus to stop this. Oraya and Orana's eyes are wide with fear as they look at me, as if suddenly realizing how fragile I am.

Then it hits me. The king wants the kingdom to know I'm not fit to be queen. What sort of monster queen can't defend herself?

Monsters are chanting for a fight now, some even braying, and Orlena turns and holds Orcus' gaze. An entire conversation happens with that simple glance. Orlena is the only monster in this room that wants to fight and who Orcus trusts. She makes more sense than any of the other sisters as she's been trained to fight, and despite the fact that she might hold back, she won't throw the fight for fear of hurting me.

This fight is going to hurt.

"No," Orcus whispers for only our table to hear. "She can't fight."

"It's our way, Brother. Your intervention would make her weak, and we'd have more to worry about than people demanding a fight. They'd never accept her as your queen."

“I won’t let you hurt her.”

“I’ll be careful,” Orlena hisses.

“No,” Orcus says again.

“They’re watching everything you do right now,” Orshana whispers. “The kingdom expects you to be like your father.”

“Only because they’ve never known anything different,” Orlena mutters. “It’s up to you, Brother. I’ll spar with her and make sure there’s no permanent damage.”

Even the thought of being flicked by an ogre sends a pang of agony through my system. The fight, if you could even call it that, wouldn’t last long. Orlena will wipe the floor with me in a matter of seconds.

“I’ll even go to third blood.”

Shit. Okay. Third blood sounds like it’ll take more than a matter of seconds.

“*Fight, fight, fight, fight,*” the crowd has joined together now, demanding what the king promised.

“It’s not happening,” Orcus whispers to his sister.

“She’ll be seen as weak.” Orshana isn’t trying to convince him. She’s only warning him of the consequences. “They’ll use her against you.”

“They can fucking well try,” Orcus growls.

My heart jumps into my throat as he shoves away from the table so hard the chair tips over. The room falls quiet, leaving only the screeching of his chair across the stone floor.

He pauses, scowling at each and every one of them with murderous intent. The bond is equally as pissed. A few brave monsters heckle him.

Is she scared?

Afraid she’ll die?

Our queen needs to know how to fight!

As much as I hate it, they’re right. They’re monsters. They deserve a queen who isn’t afraid to step into a fight. They

deserve a queen who will honor their traditions, no matter how deadly and stupid it is for me to agree to them. If I can't show these monsters why I deserve the crown, it won't matter that I'm wearing it.

A deep growl emits from Orcus. "My future queen will—"

"I'll do it," I whisper.

Orcus glances at me and shakes his head. "Daisy—"

"It'll be okay." I set my napkin aside.

"You don't have to do this."

"I know, grumpy. I want to." I push away from the table and stare at the crowd. They're all watching me with open judgment. The ogre who offered to fight me scoffs and mutters something about my size. A few monsters laugh at that. "I'll fight."

"To third blood!" Orlena shouts.

Applause and shouting roars in my ears. Monsters hop up and shove tables and chairs out of the way, preparing the fighting ring. Orcus is trembling with anger as I step away from the table.

"Daisy."

"It's okay," I tell him, nodding with more confidence than I feel. This is going to suck.

"Daisy," he says a little louder.

I stop and walk back toward him. He bends down so we're face to face, and I grab his tusks, pulling him in for a bruising kiss. "If you embarrass me in front of my friends, I'll never forgive you."

"Those monsters aren't your friends," he growls.

"Semantics." I shrug. "You know I have to do this."

"No," he denies the truth. "No one cares about the fights."

"Liar," I whisper. "Orlena will make sure I don't die. I can handle a few hits."

"I don't like it."

I shrug. “I didn’t like it when you and your father fought.”

“He did this.”

“Yup, but we’re not going to let him win.”

“He wins either way.”

Blowing out a harsh breath, I release his tusks. “Maybe so, but I’m doing this and you’re going to let it happen.”

He scowls, but doesn’t demand I do what I’m told. Smart monster. He may hate it, but the fact is, I’ve made it my choice. Sure, I was backed against a wall, but I could have let Orcus stop it. I could have avoided the fight. The monsters would never respect me. More than their gowns and flock of ladies in waiting, a queen needs respect. Otherwise, the title is no use.

“Come along, sister,” Orlena says, walking past us. “It’ll be over in a few minutes.”

With my heart in my throat, I join her in the makeshift fighting ring. All I can hear is the blood rushing through my ears. Orlena drops into a fighting stance, and I mimic her. Orlena’s gaze skates over me from head to toe and her frown deepens. I should have taken the three cardio kickboxing classes I took a little more seriously. My heart batters against my rib cage.

Orlena begins to move. She’s quicker than I thought and I don’t see the first hit until it’s too late. Her palm cracks across my cheek and her nails scrape over my skin.

“First blood!”

Pain radiates through my skull but I stay on my feet. I throw a few lame punches and Orlena dodges every one, disapproval deepening the lines on her face.

“You never learned to fight?”

“Didn’t really need to,” I say, jumping away from a slow punch she sends in my direction.

She and I both know she’s not giving it her all. Crouching and swinging her foot around, she sweeps my legs out from

under me, and I go down. I tuck my chin to keep the back of my head from smacking into the stone floor. Orlena pounces on me, pinning me to the floor. Even though it's pointless, I don't give up. I try to buck her off. She lands a few light punches to my stomach. Grunting, I punch her in the stomach. She barely blinks, grabbing both of my arms and gouging me with her nails in two rough swipes, one right after the other.

The pain tears a cry from my lips and moisture fills my eyes.

“Second and third blood,” she screams.

The crowd revels at my swift defeat, laughing and clapping and shouting. Orlena holds her hands above her head and pretends to bask in the glory of victory. I cover my face with my bloodied arms to hide the tears. By the time she helps me up, the tears are gone but my limbs shake. I'm not built for fighting. I *hate* confrontation. Blood trickles down my arms and face. I tip my chin and muster as much dignity as I can as I head to the table, ignoring the pain as best I can. Before I can take my seat, Orcus carries me from the room.

I don't argue.

THIRTY-NINE

Lagertha the Trull

DAISY

Orcus stops outside of the great hall and tears off a piece of his shirt and rips it into strips to wrap around the wounds on my arms. I press the rest of the material to my face. Once I'm set, he storms toward our wing. Silent and pissed, not at me but at everything that's happened since we've come back. Prometheus zips around Orcus' head as soon as we arrive. The dragon's chitters are disgruntled.

I reach my hand out to stroke its cheek. "I'm okay, Prometheus."

Hurt?

"A little, but I'm okay." I'm actually surprised at how much Orlena pulled her hits. Not a single punch was thrown, but she probably realized I'd have a hard enough time surviving her slaps.

"What happened to ya?" Harald asks. Another tiny trull with graying green hair stands beside him.

Orcus doesn't say anything but continues walking into the common room.

I tip my head and look around Orcus' bicep. "A little brawl is all, Harald."

The trull narrows his eyes on Orcus' back. "Ya let this happen?"

“I tried to stop it,” Orcus snaps, his tone at odds with how gingerly he sets me onto the cushion of the oversized chair. He glances at the trull as he takes his own seat across from me. “But then Daisy said she wanted to do it and I had no choice. Where’s Zyla?”

“Dunno.” Harald scurries over to my seat. “Who did ya fight with?” He’s wearing a white t-shirt and cute green overalls, looking very much like a leprechaun, but I would never tell him that.

“Orlena. She kicked my ass.”

“Bah. If she wanted to kick yer ass, you’d be unconscious.” His gaze slips over my face and down to my bloodied arms. “Ya need Zyla.”

“I know.”

“Where is the witch?” Orcus grumbles, shoving away from his seat and marching toward her door.

“Be nice to her!”

He glares at me. I shrug. He’s in a foul mood, and I don’t want him to take it out on people we care about. I turn back to Harald.

“Is this your mother?” I smile at the trull who is scrutinizing me like she’s trying to figure out if it’s dirt or crap on the bottom of her shoe.

“The name’s Lagertha.” Her hair is short and green and closely shorn. Her belly is as round as Harald’s. There are no Viking braids in sight, but the name still fits, especially with the hard stare she’s shooting at me.

Just as prickly as Harald.

“It’s lovely to meet you.”

She scowls. “My son might be a fool, but I’m not. What do ya want from him?”

“I don’t want anything from Harald. We’re friends.”

She barks out a laugh. “No one befriends a trull.”

“Well I do.” I arch my eyebrows and hold her stare. “From the way it sounds, most monsters are assholes to trulls, but I’m not a monster and I happen to like Harald, trophies and all.”

“Ya showed her the skins?”

“Yup. She might’ve turned a little green, but she handled them well. I told ya, she’s a good one.”

Lagertha shakes her head. “She hasn’t fulfilled her promise yet.”

“She’s not queen yet.”

“She’s stringing ya along.”

“No. She’s not.”

“She is right here,” I jump in before they can continue. “I’ve already talked to Orcus about it, and he agreed with me. We can’t implement any changes until we’re king and queen, but I promise I’m not lying.”

“The witch isn’t in her room.” Orcus stomps back over to the seat. “Where is she?”

“I’m not sure. We were together in the library earlier. The spell alerted her that I might be in danger and she came to find me.” Which is weird because the protective charm is still buzzing over my skin, more gently than before, and she hasn’t shown up. “Maybe there was trouble back in the magic realm?”

“I should summon Callum.”

“Orcus. We have a medical wing here. Why don’t we go there?”

“Because Avery will only patch you up and I want it fixed.”

Releasing a sigh, I shake my head. “Please go get Avery.” I pull the bloodied piece of his shirt away from my face. It’s soaked through, but the cut really isn’t that bad. “If you don’t go get them, I’ll need all of your shirts and I’m not too keen on other people seeing those abs. They’re *mine*.”

His lips twitch but the scowl is stronger than the smile. “Fine, little flower. I’ll go get them but if you so much as move, I’ll find a way to punish you.”

Considering his form of punishment is pleasure, I’m not so sure he should be threatening me, but I nod and do as he asks. Now isn’t the time to play with him.

Orcus glances at Harald. “Guard her with your life.”

“Don’t tell me what to do,” Harald snaps. “But ya already know I will.”

“I won’t forget your allegiance.” Orcus rushes out of the room. I frown after him, hating how frazzled he is.

Maybe I should’ve let him stop the fight, but then we’d have more problems to deal with and we don’t need that. Besides, it wasn’t horrible.

Harald plops down onto the cushion beside me. “Tell me about the fight.”

“You’re so bloodthirsty,” I tell him with a laugh before launching into the story. Lagertha climbs onto the coffee table and Prometheus settles into my lap. I pet the dragon and weave an epic tale of my absolute failure. Catching the way Harald’s eyes glimmer with excitement, I go into an obnoxious amount of detail about each hit.

“This Orlena, she’s a princess?” Lagertha asks once I finish.

“Yes. The oldest sister, but she’d rather be a warrior than a princess.”

“Then she should do it. In trull society, she’d already be one.”

“I think it’s more complicated than that with the current king,” I tell Lagertha. “But once Orcus is king, that will change.”

“Ya have a mouth full of promises.”

“Thank you.” I beam at Lagertha and pretend like she didn’t insult me.

Her features slam together in confusion, but Avery and Orcus arrive and stop the conversation. The nurse sets to work. Avery clucks at me a few times, mumbling about how I should know better than to pick a fight with an ogre, but the wounds are cleaned and bandaged in a matter of minutes.

“How’s your head?” They cup my face and study me. “Eyes are clear. Any headaches?”

“No.”

“Slurred words?”

“No, she really didn’t hit me that hard.”

Avery harrumphs. “Well, you can take a hit, I’ll give you that. The wounds should close up tonight, but you’ll have a few nasty scabs during the ceremony. If you’re lucky, they’ll be gone by then.”

“I’ll have the witch fix them when she returns.”

Avery’s face falls and they drop their gaze, packing up the supplies. “The witch is a very skilled healer.”

“You are very skilled too,” I tell Avery. “Not all of us are lucky enough to have magic, but I have no doubt you’re the royal medic for a reason.”

They titter. “Thank you for those kind words.” They grab their bag and stand, side-stepping around Prometheus who is snoring beside the chair. “Your dragon has gotten big.”

“I know! I feel like every time I blink it gets a little bigger.”

“Soon enough, it may not fit in the castle. Don’t forget to put some of the ointment I left with you on the cuts, it’ll prevent scarring.” Avery curtsies and turns to leave.

“Thank you, Avery.” I glare at Orcus and send a scold through the bond.

“Yes, thank you, Avery. Your work is impeccable.”

The centaur pauses and fiddles with the lapel of their white jacket. “Thank you,” they murmur. “Those words mean a lot to me.”

Once they're gone, I shake my head at Orcus. "You have no idea that you insulted them, do you?"

"What? How?"

"You said Zyla would fix Avery's work."

"No, I said Zyla would fix the wounds."

"But Avery did that already. To them, they fixed the injuries. I know what you meant about healing them with magic, but Avery doesn't have that and they did a great job."

"I didn't mean to insult them." He frowns after the centaur.

"I know you didn't." A yawn cracks my jaw and the cut on my face pulls. I hide a wince so as not to rile Orcus more than he already is. "I'm so tired."

"That's our cue to leave," Harald tells his mother. They slide down the leg of the coffee table. "See ya soon, Princess."

"Good night." I yawn again. "I'm so happy you came, Lagertha. Harald missed you."

Shock washes over the trull's face again, but she simply nods in acknowledgement before heading off after her son. Orcus scoops me up and eyes the dragon.

"Think it'll be okay by itself?"

"I don't think you could wake Prometheus even if you tried." I grin and rest my head against his chest. "I'm sorry for agreeing to the fight."

He kicks our door closed and carries me to the bed. "That might've been the worst thing I've ever had to endure."

"Really?" I stretch out on the bed and he removes his torn shirt and climbs in beside me, pulling me tight against his body. "What about the fight with the vampires?"

"Doesn't even compare. I thought I was going to murder everyone in that room for cheering Orlena on."

"Such drama," I whisper, rubbing my nose against his.

"I'm calling off the attack."

I study him. "What changed your mind?"

“You. You were right, I don’t have to be like my father. What he did tonight, intentionally putting you up to fight, was too far. You’re not a toy he can play with, and I’m not a monster he can control. I make my own choices, and I don’t choose war.”

“Wow.” I rub his arm and squeeze the obnoxiously large muscles. “I’m proud of you.”

He kisses my cheek. “We need to teach you how to throw a punch.”

“I kind of sucked, huh?”

“Absolutely terrible,” he murmurs. “You know what I realized tonight?”

“What?”

“In three days, you’ll be my queen.”

“And you’ll be my king,” I say around a yawn.

“Go to bed, Daisy.”

“Don’t tell me what to do,” I mimic Harald and he laughs. A smile tugs at my lips as I fall asleep.

Even with the ass kicking, I’m happy.

FORTY

Ceremony mishap

DAISY

My wounds are mostly healed by the day of the ceremony. The scabs aren't the prettiest, but I'm not going to worry too much about that. Honestly, I can't really. Not with the flurry of panicked workers, dress fittings, frazzled cooks, and one very grumpy ogre prince. Orcus is pacing the bedroom floor when his mother and sisters arrive.

"What are you still doing here?" Orshana asks. "You'll make her nervous and I can't have that. Go find something to do. Take the dragon out so it can fly around."

"I'm staying," Orcus says.

"I swear I will call Erebus myself and offer you to him," his mother growls.

"If you send me to the Nether Realm, then there is no ceremony." He smirks at his mother.

Orlena rolls her eyes. "Get out of here, you oaf."

"You think I'd leave my mate with the ogre who hurt her?" Orcus is teasing, but Orlena rears back like she was slapped. I have no issue with what Orlena did. It was smart and I'm thankful she offered. Orcus knows that, he's only being a butthead.

"I was trying to help. Would you rather she fight Lara? Daisy wouldn't be here if it weren't for me stepping in."

“Here we go.” Oretta sighs and flops onto the bed, the puffy layers of her dress skirt crinkling. “Daisy, your scabs look much better,” she says loudly, but the two siblings don’t take the distraction. The scabs are still dark brown, but pieces have started to flake off.

“I was joking, Orlena. I know why you stepped in, and I’m forever in your debt.”

“Is that so?” The eldest sister drops her hands to her hips. “Then I’m calling in the debt. Get out.”

“That’s not how it—”

“Orcus?”

He glances at me, sees the look on my face, and deflates. “Fine. I’ll go. But if she’s hurt while I’m gone...” He trails off when Orshana clears her throat. “Right. It was an accident. My point is be careful with Daisy.”

“I’m not that fragile,” I mutter.

“Yes, you are,” everyone in the room says.

I pout my bottom lip then promptly hide it.

“All right, I’ll go.” Orcus squats down and I use his tusks as leverage to pull his face to mine. Our lips move in sync, a choreography we’ve perfected in our many nights alone. My heart skips a beat.

“That’s disgusting,” Orana says.

“I think I need to vomit,” Oraya adds.

“Oh, hush up. They love each other,” Orshana says with a swoon-worthy sigh. “Don’t you just love, love?”

I chuckle against Orcus’ mouth and pull back, patting his cheek. “See you soon, grumpy.”

“I already miss you.”

“Father never kisses you like that,” Orana says.

Orcus stiffens, but I shake my head, warning him not to say anything. She’s only a child. Orshana is already handling it with more grace than I ever could. *Go*, I mouth to Orcus and

give his tusks a shove. He takes his leave with slumped shoulders and shuts the door behind him.

Oretta releases a breath. “I thought he’d never leave.”

“He’s anxious,” Orshana defends her son. “Now. Daisy. I know we agreed on the dress, but I found another option you might like.”

I try not to let my panic show. The last time she had dresses made for me didn’t go so well. I’m flattered and honored that she’s been so kind, but she has questionable taste in gowns. Especially the neon yellow monstrosity she takes out of a garment bag. There are bright pink butterflies all over the poofy skirt and there are even poofy arm caps. It’s like the 1980s vomited all over the dress but not in a cute way.

“Well? Do you like it?”

“Um.” I stare at the dress. Orcus said I need to speak up for myself and this is the perfect time, but I’m terrified of offending his mother. She’s been so nice.

“You haven’t even seen the best part yet!” Orshana turns the dress around and squeezes the giant pink ball of fabric at the top of the skirt.

That’s it. There’s no way I’m wearing that. It has a freaking bunny tail.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t like it.” The ogres all stare at me and my heart slams against my ribcage. “It’s very... big... and yellow... and not my style. I hope you’re not offended.”

Orlena tips her head. “You’re saying it’s ugly.”

Nibbling on my bottom lip, I shoot my gaze around the room. “No, I’m saying that it’s better suited for someone else.”

“This dress was custom made for you,” Oretta says.

Crap. Crap. Crap. This is what I was worried about. I should have kept my mouth shut but it’s too late now. Orcus would want me to stand my ground. With a grimace, I say, “I appreciate you having the dress made, but I can’t wear that. I’m sorry.”

Orshana sighs and drops the dress onto the floor. “Well it’s about damn time you said something.”

I grimace, then frown. “Wait, what?”

“We were waiting for you to say what you really think, not dance around my feelings. This dress?” She kicks the yellow gown. “Is ugly. So is the other one you agreed to wear—”

“Hey, I liked that dress,” Oretta cuts in.

Orlena laughs. “Which is why you’ll never be in charge of my ceremony.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Last time I checked you were single.”

“Oretta. Orlena,” their mother says. “Please. This is Daisy’s day.”

“Right. Sorry.” Orlena mimes zipping her lips. Today she’s not wearing her sword, but I’d bet money she has a dagger or two hidden.

“Sorry, Daisy. Continue bad mouthing fashion, Mother.” Oretta rolls her hand in a *carry on* gesture.

Orshana pinches the bridge of her nose. “You all make me crazy.”

“We didn’t do anything,” Orana whines.

“I know, sweet. You two are my favorite,” Orshana smiles at her and Oraya.

“Mom!” Oretta and Orlena shout at the same time, sounding like a bunch of teenagers. I cover a laugh with a cough and bite my cheek.

“Oh, please. You know your brother is my favorite.”

All four of the girls start to protest, and Orshana and I share an amused look. She rolls her eyes and picks up another garment bag. In comparison with that yellow dress, the dress I picked out might be considered cute. Even so, I hold my breath as Orshana pulls it out of the bag, preparing to pretend like everything is fine. Too late to go back now.

“I thought you might like something a little more subtle,” Orshana says as she extracts the most gorgeous gown I’ve ever seen.

Not a poof in sight. The dark green silk of the V-neck sheath gown shimmers in the light. It’s sleek and simple. Somehow exactly what I’ve always dreamed of. She turns it around and the dress cuts low to show off my shoulders which are my best feature aside from my boobs. I place my hand on my chest and walk toward the dress.

“Orshana,” I whisper, unable to find the words.

“It’s lovely, isn’t it?”

“It’s perfect.” I touch the black beads on the shoulder straps.

“That’s the reaction I was looking for,” she says with a beaming smile.

I lift my gaze to meet hers, blinking back tears. “Thank you so much.”

She reaches down to pat the cheek without the scab. “You’re welcome, love. Why don’t you try it on?”

“Wait, wait, wait!” Oretta shouts. “Makeup first.”

I glance at her over my shoulder. “No pink eyeshadow, right?”

“I promise. We’ll work with soft greens and grays. You’ll be a simmering, smoky eyed queen.” She pats the mattress. “Let’s get to work.”



EVEN THOUGH IT’S only hair, makeup, and getting dressed, Orcus’ family makes it an all-day affair. By the time I put on the dress, it’s almost time for the moonlit ceremony. As bonds are gifted by Hecate, the ceremonies are held under the full moon. I wonder what the goddess thinks of a human

participating in one. The bond instantly snapped together between Orcus and me. That has to mean something.

My stomach growls as I slide the dress up my legs. I can't eat though. I refuse to throw up at my own ceremony. The soft vibration of the protection spell hasn't gone away. I wonder if Zyla needs to reset it, but I haven't seen her since the day in the library. I'm worried about her, but she's the Grand High Witch. She has responsibilities and I won't begrudge her for leaving if her people needed her.

"What do you think?" Oretta asks, refocusing me.

The beaded straps are flexible and soft against my shoulders. The silk itself is so smooth it glides over my skin. I stay behind the dressing wall and turn to check myself out in the mirror. Holy. Crap. I'm hot. Like, if there were a clone of me, I'd totally bang her. My red hair has soft curls held back by two thick strands which are pinned together in the back. The makeup is absolutely the star of the show. Oretta wasn't lying when she said I'd be a smokey eyed queen. There's a smolder that wasn't there before, and I can't wait to stare Orcus down looking like this.

"Daisy?" Orshana calls.

I've kept them all waiting. Stepping out, I spread my hands and do a little spin. "Well?"

"She's a princess!" Orana claps.

"No," Orlena says. "She's a queen."

"You look amazing. Your makeup definitely elevates the look, but even without it, you're gorgeous." Oretta skates her eyes over the dress. "And as much as I loved the other gown, this one is it."

"Thank you."

"You look so pretty, Daisy," Oraya says softly, a smile pulling at her lips.

Orshana sniffs, and I focus on her. "I am so happy you're his mate." She swipes at her damp cheeks. "I thought for sure

he'd be alone forever, but he deserved love, and I'm so happy you gave that to him."

"I'm so grateful to all of you. Seriously. I've been living a dream and Orcus is perfect."

A knock comes at the base of the door. Orshana clears her throat and steps back to open it, letting in Prometheus, Harald, and Lagertha. The blue scaled dragon barrels through the room, now the size of a young horse. We really need to think about where else to keep the dragon. The only reason Prometheus can fit in the castle is because it was made for Ogres. I don't know how big dragons get in this world, but based on Prometheus' growth, I'm guessing they're huge. I scratch under the dragon's chin and it purrs.

Mama.

I release a sigh. "Soon, little one. Soon." With everything that's been going on, there's been no time to go to the dragon's nest. I'm beginning to feel like I've failed Prometheus.

"No Zyla?" I ask the trulls.

Harald grimaces. "Afraid not."

"Oh." I bite my cheek. She's been gone for four days. She had said she'd be here to help see me to the throne. I wish she had left me a note, but I'm sure she had a good reason to leave. I'm just really sad she's not here. I push the feeling aside. I can tell her all about it later.

"I'm sure she'll make it in time, love. She knows how important it is to you," Orshana says.

I shrug. "It's okay. I know she's busy."

"It's also okay to be upset," she says.

"I know. I'm not though. Zyla is the Grand High Witch. She needs to do what she needs to do, but I do wish she was here."

"I'll take her eye, if it helps." Lagertha studies her nails. From what I've learned about trulls, offering to mutilate someone on my behalf means that Lagertha has started to like me.

That's enough to rip some of the sadness away. "That's nice of you to offer, but I think she can keep her eyes."

"I wish there were a way for your parents to see how beautiful you look." Orshana shakes her head. "Too bad we can't magic them here."

I press my lips together and nod, blinking back tears. She's here with her kids and she loves them so much. So openly. Even when she's teasing or scolding, there's no doubting how much they mean to her. My throat burns as I swallow.

"Mom, you made her cry," Orlena snaps.

Orshana places her hand on her neck. "I'm so sorry, Daisy. I didn't mean to make you sad."

"Um. It's okay, but I think I need a minute."

"Okay, we'll go." She gestures to the girls.

"Actually, you guys should stay. I'm going for a short walk and then I'll be back and we can head out together."

"Okay, but don't go too far." She eyes me like she's scared I might run.

"I won't. I only need some air." I slip through the room and out of the door, shutting it softly behind me just in time.

You were a mistake.

We had so many plans, but then we had you.

A fat tear slips down my cheek and my throat aches, begging me to release the sob that's lodged in my chest. I blink back the tears and fan my face. I've always hated grieving the parents I never had. Part of me feels like they don't deserve my sadness, but it isn't for them. It's for little Daisy. The girl who wished more than anything that they'd give her hugs and kiss her cheek. The little girl who wished to hear *I love you* before bed every night. For the Daisy who ended up craving love so much she scared off potential boyfriends and even friends.

I hate how they made me desperate.

I hate how they never bothered to ask where I'd been.

I hate how they'd never save me a plate of dinner if I came home late.

But most of all, I hate how much I don't hate them. Some fucked up part of me still loves them.

I won't let them ruin this night. Not after everything else they've ruined. Setting off in a random direction, I count my breaths to get a hold of myself. I turn down a corridor I've never been down. I'm sure there are pretty decorations on the wall but I can't see them through watery eyes. *No crying.* Usually I can control my emotions. I turn down another corridor. Today is a special day though, and those are typically harder. My chest is heavy, and it's hard to swallow, but I force myself to count my breaths. I'm so focused on that, I don't notice the vibration of the spell getting stronger and stronger until it's almost painful.

I suck in a breath right as a hand clamps over my mouth and a big green hand bands around my waist. I scream and thrash, trying to break out of the hold, but the ogre is stronger than me.

"I can see why my son likes you," the king says around a laugh. "But, unfortunately, I can't have you getting inside of his head." He rips a piece off my dress and I snarl, bucking against him. The fabric flutters to the floor, and I brace for the worst, but he doesn't touch me the way I expect. No. He brings a vial of sparkling liquid toward my face.

Zyla's transportation spell. How did he get that? That's a silly question. I know how. She didn't leave without telling me goodbye. The king must've done something to her. There's no way she'd give him this spell.

And her protective charm can't stop him from using it on me because the tincture was crafted by her hand. The spell won't stop her own magic and if the king has Zyla, no one will know I'm in danger.

"Heard this'll send you back home. Let's see if the witch is as good as she says she is." His hand slips down to clutch my chin with a vice grip. He shoves his thumb into my mouth, and I gag around it. He forces my head back. His eyes are the exact

shade of navy as Orcus' but there's not an ounce of decency in them.

Thrashing, I bite down on his thumb, but he simply grunts and narrows his eyes. "I guess this is goodbye."

He tips the vial and the liquid splashes to the back of my throat. I try to spit it out, but he shoves my mouth shut and pinches my nose so hard I start to cry. Three seconds pass and I don't swallow.

Four.

Five.

Six.

I try to fight it. I try not to let him win, but eventually I have to swallow or risk fainting, and if I faint, he'll be able to do whatever he wants. My throat bobs and the king chuckles under his breath. His laughter is the last thing I hear as the world before me warps and bends.

FORTY-ONE

War

ORCUS

Unlike Daisy, I don't have a support system to spend the day with. I'm glad she'll be busy getting pampered. I could spend the day with my father, but I'd rather not be pissed on the second most important day of my life. He had nothing to do with the first and Daisy had everything to do with it. I was, admittedly, annoyed when she fell into my tub, but even still, I consider the moment the bond snapped into place as my favorite day. It was the day my life changed, and it was the day I got lucky. Daisy could've ended up with another monster, but Hecate knew we were meant to be.

For all her faults, including what she did to Echidna, the goddess isn't half bad. My creator Echidna kept toying with Hecate's creatures, luring hungry vampires into her traps to shove wooden stakes in their hearts and slowly bleed them dry, chaining the weres in silver which made their skin burn, using her dark art on magical beings until their magic turned shadowed and maleficent. She tainted the world.

The only thing that taints my relationship with Daisy is the king. My father wasn't happy when I called off the attack, but in a room full of advisors, he couldn't admit that he was trying to cover up his own mistake to that many monsters. No one wants a war. Everyone loses in war.

As the night wanes on and the moon is closer to rising, I pull on the fancy suit my mother had made for me. A sleek pair of black pants and a silky green top. Knowing Oretta was

more than likely involved in the styling, I'll be matching the gown Daisy will be wearing. I smooth my hair back and shine my tusks. They'll be in pristine shape for my queen. A smile tugs at my lips. She loves my tusks. I remove the cuffs and polish them as well, making sure they sparkle before sliding them back on.

The door opens, and I scowl as my father steps in. My immediate reaction is to kick his ass. Daisy would be worried if I came to the ceremony littered in bruises. Making sure this is the best day of her life is the only reason I stay rooted to the spot. He studies me in the mirror, but I refuse to turn and face him.

“I thought you might want company.”

A line forms above my nose. “You were wrong.”

His face is the picture of sadness, but I don't buy it. “This day is important. A father should spend time with his son before his—”

“Cut the shit. What do you want?” There's no reason why he'd come here to be with me. He's not that type of ogre.

“I want you to reconsider.”

“We're not attacking the vampires.” I clench my jaw to keep from saying more.

His mask slips. “You're soft and stupid. You think they'll stop attacking us when you become king? Who knows what the furies have offered them.”

“No, but I'll call for peace talks. I'll make offerings to the furies.” Or try any number of things that he hasn't.

Scoffing, he picks up the stone tumbler on the drink table and fills it with wine. “Peace. There's a far-fetched idea. Did *she* put that in your head too?”

The way he says she has me tightening my fingers into fists. I swear if he says one bad thing about her, I'll punch him. Daisy would probably be frustrated by that. I take a breath. “You should go.”

“I think I’ll stay. I am still king, if only for a bit longer.”
There’s a nasty glint in his gaze.

I don’t like it.

Scowling, I finally face him. Chest shuddering with barely contained rage. He’s ruining things like I knew he would. “I’m not asking. Go.”

Orlena bursts into the room, out of breath and frenzied. Her braid is a mess, like she’s been running. *Something’s wrong*. “It’s Daisy! She’s gone.”

My heart jumps. “Gone?”

She nods, pieces of her dark hair falling into her face. “I’ve looked everywhere.”

“What do you mean she’s gone?” I shout.

She flinches. “She went for a walk and never came back and—”

“She’s not gone,” I snap.

“I’ve looked everywhere—”

“Dammit, Orlena! This is why I shouldn’t have left. I asked you all to do one thing: keep Daisy safe.” Harsh words that aren’t entirely fair but there’s no reasoning with my mind or the bond. I asked them to keep her safe. I never should have left.

Her hand braces over her heart. “Brother, please. You can be mad at me later, but right now, we need to try and find her.”

Scowling, I push past her and into the hallway. I run toward our wing, and Orlena and my father follow me. The walls of the castle shake, but I don’t give a damn. I’ll bring this whole place down if it means finding her.

Mom is sitting on the bed, trembling fingers pressed to her mouth. Oretta is hugging her and Oraya and Orana are sitting on the bed, wide-eyed and scared. I check behind the dressing wall, in the bathing pit, in every crack and crevice. I seek her emotions through the bond, but her presence is faint, almost like she’s underwater and I can’t quite reach her.

Terror seizes the air in my lungs, and I slam my palm against the door to the bathroom, splintering it. “Where is she?” I rake my hands through my hair, destroying the careful way I styled the strands.

“Orcus,” my mother croaks, but I don’t spare her a look.

“I told you I looked—” Orlena begins.

Growling, I glare at her. “You didn’t look hard enough. She’s not gone.” She can’t be.

“Maybe she realized marrying a monster wasn’t what she truly wanted,” my father drawls from near the door.

My head swings in his direction. He shrugs and his stupid smug look has my fists clenching once more. He didn’t like that I stopped his plan. He said Daisy was putting thoughts in my head. Maybe he did something.

Taking three quick steps, I put myself in front of him, chest heaving and eyes jumping over every inch of his face. “What did you do?”

The king leans toward me. “I didn’t *do* anything.”

“Liar.” I grab his shoulders and slam him against the wall. “What did you do?”

“Orcus!” someone calls but I’m too blinded by anger to heed their cries.

My father sucks in a pained breath. “I didn’t touch your little flower!”

Fuck him for using that name. I punch him in the ribs and someone gasps behind me. “You didn’t like the idea of pulling back, you wanted to continue with the fight,” I punch him again and again but he simply takes it with a hard grunt. He doesn’t even try to defend himself. Why won’t he fight back?

“What did you do with her?” I snarl, landing another hit.

“I told you, I didn’t do anything.” He groans.

“Well I don’t believe you.” I pull my fist back for another punch.

“Vampires!” Andrew, a minotaur guard, bursts into the room, clutching a bloodied scrap of Daisy’s dress. “It was the vampires.”

“Where did you find that?” I demand.

Andrew’s gaze slips to the death grip I have on my father and my fist aimed at the king’s face. His posture shifts. To the untrained eye, it would look innocent. To me, it’s a soldier preparing for battle. He’s loyal to the king. “Your Majesty?”

“Everything is fine. Answer my son’s question.”

I release my father and scowl in his direction.

“In the south wing,” Andrew says. “Her dress—”

“Show me,” I snap, pulling my attention from my father.

“Right away.” The guard races from the room and we follow after him. Me, my father, Mom, Orlena, Oretta, Oraya, and Orana. Stone walls blur and the only thing I can seem to focus on is the blood dripping from the cloth the minotaur is holding. Vampires. Why would they do this?

I stopped what my father was planning. There’s no reason for them to do something like this... but then again, there was no reason for my father to escalate things the way he had planned. Maybe the vampires are just as ambitious. Maybe the furies offered them something to motivate them. Maybe they realized what we planned to do and decided to strike first.

Or maybe Hecate ordered them to deal with us the same way she dealt with Echidna. Hecate only did what any good parent would do. She killed the thing that threatened her children’s lives. And now the monsters are threatening her children. If she consulted with the furies, or the furies asked for her permission to use her vampires, I doubt she’d try to save us.

The goddess protects her own creatures.

We round a corner and enter the main hall that runs through the south wing. This is the most decorative hall in the entire castle, but it’s not the ornate objects that catch my

attention. It's another bloodied scrap of green silk, identical to the fabric of my shirt. I drop to my knees and pick it up.

Her dress was torn.

It's slick with blood. She must have fought. I dig my fingers into the fabric, hating how vulnerable she is. How vulnerable I let her be. The first thing I should've done was teach her how to fight. Even I know those skills wouldn't get her far when facing off with a vampire. She needed a weapon. Even still. She would have been taken.

I sniff the fabric. It's not Daisy's blood. A harsh breath leaves my chest. I feel for her through the bond, but all I get is faint indications of distress. Relief floods through me. She's still alive. For now. They wouldn't take the future queen only to kill her. They want to use her.

"Orcus," Mom murmurs, placing her hand on my shoulder.

They ransacked that village but we got there in time to keep them from totally destroying it. I fought with them. I severely injured a few, and they did the same to us. But why take my mate? She's innocent. The furies want their vengeance, and I thought they were above these things, but with Hecate's blessing, the vampires might do anything within their power to make moves.

If they take out the monsters, they stand to inherit our territory and whatever other blessings Hecate and the furies promised.

Dammit. This is my fault.

"She's gone?" Orana asks.

"No." I shake my head.

"Yes," Oraya whispers.

"No." I grind my teeth together. They took her because of me. They took her, and I don't know if I'll ever get her back. The thought of losing her, it's too much. A world without her smile, a world without her kiss, a world without her fingers curling around my tusks. I can't do it. Nothing matters if she's not here. The throne, the castle, the whole world doesn't make

sense without her. *But she's gone*, a nasty voice whispers inside my head. A fissure cracks open my rib cage, exposing vital organs. Agony like I've never felt stabs straight through my heart, choking me and the breath I'd been taking.

Agony twists in my gut. "NO!" I slam my palms onto the stone floor and suck in a sharp breath. My shoulders heave. The fabric is so soft in my hands. I stare at it.

She's gone.

And I'm going to do whatever it takes to get her back. My father steps back when I rise and turn on him, probably expecting another punch. I hold my hand out for the other scrap of fabric and the minotaur drops it into my hand. I clutch the pieces of her dress and glare at my father.

His brow furrows. "I'm so sorry, Son. I never thought it would come to this."

"Call the soldiers together."

He tips his head. "This will start a war. You didn't want that."

"That was before. Things have changed."

"Orcus, please," my mother says, but when I glance at her, she can't find anything else to say.

"I know you don't want this, and neither did I, but what they did can't stand. I have to get her back." And make those blood suckers pay for what they've done. I've avoided the furies' wrath, but all it did was put Daisy in danger, and now I'll take the full fury of Hecate and any consequences that might come if it means getting Daisy back.

Nothing will keep me from her.

My mother drops her gaze and nods. "I know," she whispers.

I glance at Orlena. "You're coming with me."

She straightens and takes a warrior's stance. "Anything to get Daisy back."

Finally, I look back at my father. “I guess you got your war,” I mutter before shoving the bloodied fabric against his chest and storming away.

FORTY-TWO

Bathing pits are a great place to land

DAISY

Traveling through whatever spell Zyla crafted is possibly the most horrific thing I've ever experienced. My body is thrashed around from side to side until I'm suddenly dropped. My stomach jumps to my throat as I plummet through the iridescent aether of the magic. I brace for impact, expecting to land somewhere in Edgar's home, but I'm dropped right into hot water.

My dress floats up around me, and I accidentally inhale. I choke and kick my way toward the surface. Breaking through the water, I hack and gag, grasping for an edge or something to hold on to. My fingers find purchase on smooth stone, and I pull myself toward the edge, blinking as the water drips into my eyes and burns as it mixes with the kohl eyeliner. It takes a minute to get enough bearing to realize I wasn't sent to Earth.

This is Orcus' cave.

I pull myself out of the water, staggering to my feet as my dress clings to my body. I'm lucky I was wearing a silk dress. Had it been the other one, I don't know if I would have made it to the surface. A cool sweep of air rushes through the cave and gooseflesh ripples down my arm. I shiver and strip out of the dress, draping it over the table to dry before cleaning the ruined makeup from my face. Wrapping the oversized towel around me, I pace the floor, trying to get my panic flutter in my gut under control.

The good news is I'm still in this world.

The bad news is I'm so far from the castle and without Harald, I don't know that I remember the way to get there.

The king did this. *That bastard.* What a selfish asshole. I turn and pace in the other direction, huffing and shaking my head. I'll kill him myself. Well, probably not, but I'll yell at him, and Orcus will definitely consider killing him so it's essentially the same thing.

Things could be worse. I found a way to get to the castle and I'll do it again. I can do this. I'm not helpless, at least, not entirely. If only I had the charm Callum had made. It's safely tucked away in the jewelry box back in our suite at the castle.

Crap. Zyla. The king got that spell from her, but she definitely wouldn't hand it over willingly. She couldn't scour his mind. He probably paid some other magical person to give him protection against scouring. With the royal coffers at his hand, the king could pay for a lot of magic. I swear if he hurt her... no. I can't think about that. I need to stop wasting time and get moving. I've already wasted who knows how much time. How long does a transport spell take anyway?

I scrub the towel over my hair and toss on one of Orcus' shirts, using a strap of leather to cinch it around my waist. I dry off the sandals and slip them back on. Digging through Orcus' chest at the end of the bed, I search for a weapon he might've left behind. He had taken so many with him when he left me here.

"Aha." I snatch the tiny dagger from the bottom of the chest. It's probably the most I can handle without accidentally hurting myself. I grab the leather sheath for the weapon and attach that to my makeshift belt. "All right. I can do this. All I have to do is get down the mountain without running into a cyclops."

I glance toward the hall that leads to the cave's entrance. My heart skips. I've barely escaped twice now and I doubt I'll be able to do the same for a third time, but I'll damn well try. I don't know what story Orcus' father painted. My mate has to know I wouldn't leave on my own.

Determination floods through me and the bond tugs at me. The bond! With how jarring the magic had been, I'd forgotten all about it. I reach for Orcus. Anger. Sadness. Fear. My breath shakes as I exhale.

Fuck.

I try to push some reassurance toward him. There's a flare of interest, but it's quickly replaced with rage. Whatever he thinks, it's bad. I have to get back to him. Shoving away from the chest, I march down the hall and toward the entrance.

The cyclops can go screw itself.



THE CYCLOPS, in fact, did *not* go screw itself. I duck, barely missing the giant wooden bat. I'm getting really fucking tired of being a baseball. By the light of the full moon, I'm sprinting down the rocky mountain side, and the cyclops is barreling after me. You'd think I'd have learned by now. In my defense, it's not like I planned to end up back in the cave and based on its busted face, it's the same Cyclops Prometheus and I encountered.

"MINE. MINE. MINE."

"You have a serious problem!" I scream back.

The bat whizzes over the top of my head, far too close to making contact. I squeal and try to run faster, but the sandals aren't exactly marathon ready. My toes curl in to try to keep them on. One misstep has me tripping and stumbling into the side of the mountain. The rocks tear at my skin but I don't even care.

I whip around, holding my hands up. "Nice cyclops," I whisper as it stomps toward me.

"My mountain," it growls, pulling the bat back and preparing for a home run.

Side-stepping, I move as fast as I can along the mountain. Jagged edges scrape and dig, but that minute pain is worth dodging that bat. It crashes into the rock hard enough to launch stone shrapnel into the air.

I turn my head away and keep moving. My heart slams against my ribcage and my entire body trembles. I'm not making it out this time. This is how I die. My stomach clenches as I chance a glance and see the cyclops already swinging. I'm not far enough away and he's too close.

I'm dead.

Bludgeoned to death by a monster with a mountain kink.

Before the bat can connect with my face, a stream of fire blasts into him. The creature shrieks as the flames engulf him. I flinch away from the heat, shielding my face from the sudden flash of light, but as quickly as it came, the fire dies out, as though there's nothing left to burn.

Safe.

I suck in a heavy breath, muscles instantly relaxing. "Prometheus?" I drop my hand, eyeing the pile of monster soot. "Wow. Remind me never to get on your bad side."

Mama.

"I promise, and I know I keep saying that, but I promise we will find her soon. But first... can you take me to Orcus?"

"Why is she ignoring ya? I thought ya were friends?" Lagertha's annoyed voice carries over Prometheus' wings.

The dragon drops onto the path, smashing the pile of soot beneath its taloned feet. I would feel bad for the monster, but the truth is... I don't. Does that make me a horrible person? It tried to kill me. It nearly did.

Harald stands at the base of Prometheus' neck, clutching a leather strap that he's using as a makeshift harness. "What are ya waiting for? Hop on!"

"Give her a moment, Harald, she's pretty, not smart."

“That’s messed up, Lagertha.” I shake my head and stroke Prometheus’ throat. “Hey there. How’d you find me?”

“Once we figured out ya were missing, Prometheus started setting stuff on fire. Orcus had no choice but to let the dragon out of the castle.”

“And being a mother, I recognized a child wanting to find its own. I grabbed Harald and we followed Prometheus outside,” Lagertha adds.

“But why would you want to go to a dragon’s nest? Surely that’s dangerous.”

Lagertha’s face scrunches. “Ya really aren’t making your case for being smart.”

I’m starting to feel insulted. “How about instead of being rude, you tell me what you mean?”

A breeze whips around the mountain side, almost as cold as her stare. “The dragon thinks yer its ma.”

Zyla said the same thing.

Me? The mother of dragons? Daenerys would lose her shit. “If I’m Prometheus’ mom, then Harald is my grandpa.”

“Daisy. She’s right.”

No. It can’t be true. I don’t know the first thing about parenting a human, let alone a dragon. “You can’t seriously think that Prometheus thinks I’m its—”

Mama.

Prometheus nudges my cheek with its snout and makes a sound that can only be described as a purr lit on fire. Deep, rumbling, with the potential to be deadly. *Mama. Safe.* My brain short circuits. How is this possible? I helped Prometheus back in the magic village, but it was only a baby then and we’ve been planning on finding the dragon’s nest ever since. I’ve taken care of the dragon like I’d want someone to take care of my baby, making sure it has food and water and a cozy place to sleep and plenty of snuggles and love... and holy shit. Holy. Shit.

“I’m the mother of dragons,” I whisper.

Lagertha frowns. “There’s only one dragon. Do you think she hit her head? Should we take her to a healer?”

“No, no. I’m fine. But... Prometheus?” I stare into the golden eyes of the dragon and see the affection for what it truly is. A child’s love for its parent. My chest clenches and I’m relieved all over again that I didn’t end up back on Earth. There’s no telling what it would have done to Prometheus. “I’m honored to be called your mother.”

Prometheus chitters.

“Lovely as this all is, we have to go. Orcus is preparing to march toward the vampires as we speak.”

“Wait. What?”

“He thinks they took ya. Apparently, he’s wrong.” Lagertha scrutinizes my face. “The father. He did this, didn’t he?”

I nod. “I think he did something with Zyla. She made a potion to send me home, but apparently home to me is the cave.” My brow furrows. “That part doesn’t really make sense to me. Did you happen to see Zyla?”

“No.” Harald grimaces. “But searching for her will have to wait. Your mate is about to start a war because he thinks the vampires took ya because the furies offered them the monster kingdom. We need to stop him.”

Even if I make it to him in time, the vampires will still know an army of monsters is marching toward their border. There’s no stopping what Orcus started... unless... there’s a way for the furies to know what happened. Maybe in exchange for peace, we give them what the furies have wanted all along.

Justice.

This all started because of the king. It’ll end with him. I could be making the dumbest and biggest mistake of my life, but my gut is telling me I’m right. This is the answer. And if I’m wrong, hopefully Prometheus can try to scorch the vampires so we can escape.

“You’re right. We should go see the vampires.”

“That’s not what I said.”

“I know, but I have a plan.”

“Better be a good one,” Lagertha says as I climb on to Prometheus’ back, settling between the dragon’s shoulders and behind the trulls. “Cause if I die, I’ll kill ya.”

FORTY-THREE

The first speech

ORCUS

The crowd of gathered monsters is restless. Harpies and their webbed wings. Minotaurs with deadly sharp horns. Centaurs and their bow and arrows. Gargoyles with fists as hard as rocks. Snakes and the poison that runs through their veins. Misilents with their taloned feet and deadly beaks. Each and every one is battened down with weapons and their eyes gleam with the promise of violence.

It only took a few hours for them to heed command and gather in the courtyard. Those that are on assignments at other borders will remain there, but the majority of our army is in front of me. Rows upon rows of sworn warriors, hundreds of monsters waiting for orders.

Like me, they take Daisy's capture as a personal affront. The vampires have stolen their future queen, and while she may be smaller and fragile than any monster, she's still irrevocably mine. An attack against me is an attack against us all.

"They need to hear from you," Orlena says softly.

"She's right." Maddox glances at my sister with interest, but I can't be bothered to care if it's romantic or merely a warrior respecting a fellow warrior.

We're standing at the gates, the only thing keeping them at bay. My father is whispering with Basil and the snake's eyes flash toward me. I don't trust either of them. That's why

Orlena and Maddox are by my side. I'm sure the snake hates it, but showing the blood bags they can't come onto our lands and take from us without repercussions takes precedence.

"Orcus," Orlena prompts again, this time she sounds a little too much like our mother.

She's right though.

Stepping away from them, I hold my hands up and the chatter dies down and every monster stares at me, waiting for their marching orders. I've commanded monsters before, but this isn't the same. This battle will be the difference between life and death, because if we don't get Daisy back, I'll be dead inside.

"Some might say you're all here because you swore your allegiance to the crown." I move my gaze around, making eye contact with as many as I can. "Some might say you joined because you enjoy fighting. Both of those things might be true, but I know another truth. I know the vampires, the ones with their blood-soaked teeth, breached our walls and took my mate. They laid an invitation at our feet." I take a breath, but it doesn't keep the rage from seeping into my voice, hardening it until it's as sharp as the blade at my hip.

"Today, I ask you to march with me. To remind them that we're not just monsters, we're a wall of fire they cannot douse. We're the flames that will incinerate their land to get back what belongs to our realm. To take my mate, your future queen, is an act of war. So I ask you. Will you accept the invitation with me?"

The roar from the crowd is an undeniable answer. The monsters are so busy rallying they don't notice my father slipping away.

"Father!"

His head whips in my direction, eyes narrowing.

"Will you honor me by leading our warriors?" I shout so every monster can hear my question.

Monsters glance at him. There's no way he can deny me, and I won't let him sit this one out. This is what he wanted.

He'll be there when it all goes down. Some might consider the shift in his expression as determination, but I know his anger better than anyone else. He's pissed.

Too damn bad.



ORLENA SIDLES UP TO ME. She's wearing leathers riddled with sheaths for all sorts of knives and blades. Her hair is half braided back and the rest is pulled into a tight ponytail. Kohl is smeared across her cheeks, probably Oretta's idea.

With a heavy sigh, I say, "I'm sorry for what I said."

"No apology needed. You were right. We should have been more careful."

I grimace. "No. You couldn't have known the vampires would attack."

"Even so. I wish I would have gone with her." Orlena adjusts the strap around her waist.

"You look like a warrior."

"Thank you." She glances at Father who is twenty paces ahead *because he's still the king* and then looks at me. "Is provoking him the smartest idea?"

I shrug. "I'm tired of worrying what'll set him off. I need all the help I can get with the vampires. You remember what I taught you about them?"

"I remember you sparring with me until I nearly died."

"Orlena," I growl.

"Relax, big brother. I remember. Never drop your guard. Fight like death is coming for you. Keep an eye out for the shimmer of movement at the edge of your vision or you'll miss when they come in for the kill."

I shouldn't have asked her to come. Our mom will be pissed if she gets hurt and I'll never forgive myself. I was always bothered that no one let Orlena join up with our protective forces, but maybe my parents were right with that regard. At least back at the castle she'd be safe. At least there her life wouldn't be in my hands.

"Not you too," she mutters. "I'm perfectly capable of protecting myself and our lands. You've trained me yourself. You know how good I am."

"Yes, but you've never been in a real fight and I'm wondering if this is too dangerous for your first taste of battle." Clouds are gathering on the horizon, but we march on. Rain won't stop us. It'll take two days for the entirety of our forces to get to the borderlands. We'll push through until the stars come out and then we'll sleep. A tired army is a dead army.

"I'm not scared."

"And that," I give her my full attention, "is precisely what you should be."

She sucks in a breath and glances away, color filling her cheeks. My sister is right, she is good, but she's also too cocky. Years of sparring with me and Maddox gave her a big head. I'm not going to send her back. She only needs to understand that this isn't going to be easy.

"Keep your head. Don't be overconfident. There won't be breaks and tap outs. Monsters and vampires will die all around you. You don't stop fighting, you don't focus on anything but surviving until you hear me shouting your name. Understood?"

Pressing her lips together, she narrows her eyes and nods.

"Good. I'm honored to fight by your side."

"And I with you." She falls back a few paces, lost in her own thoughts, and Maddox takes her place.

"A little harsh," he says under his breath.

"She needs to be ready." And I'm worried she's still not.

He glances over his shoulder and I don't have to look to know who he's checking on. Maddox is my oldest friend, which is the only reason I haven't ripped his head from his body. He's broken more monster hearts than I can count. There's no way he's setting his sights on my sister.

"Don't even think about it," I growl for only him to hear.

He whips around. "What are you talking about?"

"You know what I mean. She's not a toy for you to play with."

"I would never play with her."

I side-eye him. "I'm not kidding. You so much as think about flirting with her, I'll kill you myself."

He places his hand on his chest like I've physically wounded him. "I thought we were friends."

"We are and that's why it's not allowed. I know what you do." I scowl at my father's back. The snake is beside him now and I don't like that they're whispering.

"Your sister is nothing like those monsters," Maddox mutters.

"Leave her alone."

He falls silent for a moment. "Do you really think so poorly of me?"

I don't regret protecting my sister, but I hate hurting his feelings. "No, but I think highly of Orlena," I say with a laugh. "She deserves a prince."

Maddox scoffs. "She'd eat a prince alive."

"That's disturbing."

"It's true. What are they talking about?" He juts his chin in my father's direction.

"I don't know, but I don't like it."

"The snake will never be truly loyal to you." Maddox scrubs his hand over his jaw.

“He’d never willingly step down.” Basil is a high ranking official, but I don’t want him anywhere near my court.

“Not without a little help,” Maddox says.

“Are you offering?”

“If you need the help, I will do what needs to be done.”

I grunt and we fall silent. There’s a darker side to what Maddox does for the kingdom. He deals with things most wouldn’t be able to stomach, and he’s the best. The snake can’t be trusted, but I don’t know that I want to authorize his assassination. Once the crown is officially mine, I’ll give him a choice. On the off chance he makes the wrong decision, then I’ll consider Maddox’s offer.

But first, we need to get Daisy back.

FORTY-FOUR

Furies are not furry

DAISY

Riding on a dragon is terrifying. Or maybe it's Prometheus being so young. It doesn't seem tired carrying the three of us, but it's still a little unsteady with gusts of wind. When we reach vampire territory, the sky is still dark but there's a faint lightening of the blue on the horizon. Prometheus dives toward the ground, and I scream, grasping at the leather straps. Harald and Lagertha cling on for dear life, their pint-sized bodies lifting into the air with the force of the current.

"Prometheus!"

The dragon releases a shriek and adjusts so it's not such a steep descent, but my stomach still lodges in my throat. We land in a soft field of bluegrass and wildflowers, and the impact rocks through Prometheus' body and bucks me and the trulls off its back. I land with a thud and roll onto my back, panting and staring up at the starry sky.

Is it swirling? I blink a few times and my vision clears and the world rights itself. Note to self: Work with Prometheus on landing, or better yet, never ride a dragon again.

"Fuckin' tart whales, that was rough." Harald groans.

"Tart whales?" I ask with a laugh and sit up.

Lagertha is already on her feet and scrutinizing our surroundings. "They're coming."

“How do you know?” Prometheus pokes its head in my line of visions and chitters. I stroke the dragon’s neck and give it some praise. It’s not really its fault.

“The vampires know everything that happens on their lands.” Lagertha eyes me. “I hope yer plan works.”

“Me too,” I say around a swallow.

Harald walks over and stares up at me. “I meant what I said when I offered to kill your enemies. Vampires are a nasty bunch, but I’ll fight with my life if it comes to it.”

I shake my head. “If it comes to it, we run. Do you think you can get us out safely, Prometheus?”

The dragon chuffs and smoke pours from its nostrils.

“See? We’ll barbecue a few and make our escape.”

“Is that so?” a smooth, melodic voice asks from behind me.

My heart skips and I whirl around. Prometheus growls and steps in front of me. The trulls are at my side in an instant, wielding tiny, razor-sharp daggers. The woman before me isn’t quite what I was expecting. Her skin isn’t pale and sickly like Edward from *Twilight*, instead it’s a rich shade of brown and practically glows with health. She has long braids and a few pieces in the front have pretty golden cuffs. She’s wearing a sheer dress that looks as though it was made of spider silk. She’s gorgeous. But then she smiles, and while there’s not a fang in sight, it’s terrifying. Like the cat finally caught the canary. Her lavender gaze sweeps over our group with cutting precision.

Straightening my shoulders, I pat Prometheus’ neck and step out from behind the dragon and walk straight up to her. I hold out my hand. “I’m Daisy. What’s your name?”

“We do not deign to give you our name,” the woman says, voice like a siren. Before I can even ask who *we* is, two women step out from behind her. One with skin as white as snow and the other with skin as dark as the night. Three gorgeous beings. A trio of power.

Crap on a cracker. I'm not dealing with vampires. I'm dealing with the furies themselves.

"I apologize. I meant no offense." I dip my head in an odd bow-like gesture. For all my regency era books, you'd think I'd have that down. Glancing up through my eyelashes, I give the goddess in the center a sheepish smile and pray she doesn't kill me for not knowing how to pay my respects. "About what I said—"

"About barbecuing the vampires?" Her gaze flicks behind me. "Strange company you keep, folk."

"I'm not a folk and these are my friends." I glance over my shoulder and see Harald halfway to where I am, knife in hand. "Harald," I warn.

The trull grunts and retreats a few steps. I slide my gaze to Lagertha. She hasn't moved but the hold on her knife has. It's perfectly positioned to throw. I give a small shake of my head before turning back to the furies.

"You gave us your back."

"Technically, I gave you my side..." I trail off when the goddesses squint at me. "Right. Is that another faux pas?"

"Never give an enemy your back, folk." The goddess in the center steps toward me, and I crane my neck to maintain eye contact. She's so tall and her lavender irises swirl with wisps of silver.

"I'm not a folk." I shake my head. "And I truly hope to not be your enemy. I came here to negotiate."

Her head tips and curiosity flashes in her eyes. "We don't negotiate."

"Yes, well," I lick my lips, suddenly very aware of how close she is and how little I am in comparison. "I have something that might be of interest to you."

"And what could a folk like you have for us?" she says, lips twitching. She's trying not to laugh at me.

I may be chronically optimistic, but one thing I hate is when people laugh at me. I tamp down my immediate reaction

to lash out. What do the furies want most? Justice. What do they hate most? Unwarranted death.

“Right now, an army of monsters is marching here to fight the vampires. Innocent lives will be lost unless you hear what I have to say and what I’m offering.”

The goddess looks down her nose. “The monsters would never make a folk their queen.”

Taking a deep breath and praying for patience, I smile sweetly at the fury even though I’m feeling more lemon than sugar. “I already told you, I’m not a folk. I’m a human. I’m not from this world.”

“That must be why your aura is strange,” she murmurs to herself then glances at Prometheus. “That’s a baby dragon. Did you steal it?” There’s a violent edge to her question.

“No. Prometheus is... my friend and it thinks I’m its mother. I don’t mean to rush you, but this can’t wait. The monsters are on their way here as we speak, but that’s only because the king made my mate think the vampires had taken me at your request.” I scowl.

“A not-folk with a baby dragon and trulls wander into our yard and demand to be heard?”

“I didn’t know it was your property,” I say quickly. “We meant to land in vampire territory.”

“Technically, every bit of land could be our property.”

“Let’s hear what the folk has to say,” the one on the left says, toying with the end of her hair. “I’m bored and I do love a good story.”

The one in the middle arches a perfectly sculpted eyebrow. “What is it you think we might want to hear?”

The one on the right, the deathly pale one, begins to circle us. Lagertha and Harald keep their eyes on her, and I turn a little to keep her in my sights. They’re definitely the cats and we’re 100% the canaries. The only question is will they keep us alive long enough to get the justice they crave.

A hand suddenly grasps my chin, and the goddess in front of me leans toward me, whispering in a language I don't understand. My mouth parts on its own accord and something deep within my being is propelled through my system and up my throat. Heart pounding, I try to stop whatever she's doing, but my body doesn't respond to my command. I'm at the furies' mercy.

Everything about it is wrong, like my soul is being called from my body. She sucks and a shimmery essence funnels past my lips and into hers. Only taking a small draw, she closes her mouth and stares at me while she tastes... whatever it is. A few seconds pass, and she hums and spits the essence back into my mouth. It collides with the remnants in my mouth and shoots back to where it came from. And as quickly as everything was wrong, everything is right again.

She drops my chin. I take several steps away, clutching my neck and staring at her with wide-eyes.

"Did that one move?" Lagertha asks. "It looks like it moved."

"It stepped back," Harald says.

"No, before that."

"I didn't see anything."

I blink and furrow my brow. "What was that?"

"I was tired of waiting for you to tell me the king is the one who killed our goats." She shares a look with the other goddesses. "And you're here to offer him to us and beg for peace."

"Wow. That's amazing," I whisper. "You got all of that from the—" I vaguely gesture to my face. I don't know what to call the shimmery magic.

"From your soul? Yes. I saw every truth you wanted to tell, and some you're afraid to admit." Her gaze roves over my face. "Coming here was stupid. We already know the king is responsible."

I swallow and take a tentative step back. “I had to try,” I say. “There’s no reason for people to die. Not when you can have the justice you’ve wanted. Take the king, but please, spare the monsters and vampires from this war.”

The two goddesses on either side move to stand behind her, disappearing from sight. Is it my imagination or did her eyes begin to glow a little brighter? Did she absorb the other two? It’s probably rude to ask that.

“You love the ogre.”

“I do. And he deserves more than a lifetime of war.”

She considers me and then glances at the horizon, as if she can see the monsters already. “Love, real love, is the purest form of selflessness. You came here knowing it would be dangerous.” She steps toward me, and I try not to shrink away from the power radiating off of her.

“Yes.”

“I accept your proposal.”

My breath catches. “Really?”

“Yes.”

“Oh my gosh! Thank you so much!” I throw my arms around her, and she stiffens. Crap. I can almost hear her words: *Never hug a goddess*. Wincing, I take a few quick steps back and hold up my hands. “Sorry. I’m excited, but sorry.”

She hums and glances at the trulls. “There will be no blood spilled today, do you understand?”

“So long as ya don’t hurt my queen, we have a deal,” Lagertha snaps.

“Curious they’re loyal to you.” The goddess cuts her gaze to mine. “The vampires are waiting to take you to meet your mate.” She snaps and she and the clear pasture disappear and is suddenly replaced by a field full of what can only be vampires. The goddess is gone and in her place stands an imposing vampire. He’s gorgeous in a way that’s hypnotizing and dangerous and his eyes are full of cunning and violence. His lips pull back, but it’s not a smile so much as a warning.

Now *that* is a vampire.

I lift my hand and wave. “Hello.” This is so awkward. Should I bow?

The vampire studies me, more curious than *I want to suck your blood*. “How did a folk strike a deal with the furies?”

“Not a folk,” I say with a hard shake of my head. “I’m Daisy.” I hold out my hand. The vampire eyes it like it’s poisonous and I let it fall back to my side. “What should I call you?”

“My name is Drake.”

“Lovely to meet you, Drake.” And slightly terrifying but he doesn’t need to know that. “I was told you’d take me to meet my mate.”

He nods and runs his tongue under the tip of his fang. “Follow me.” He sets off and the army of vampires stares at me. They don’t even have weapons. If the myths are anywhere close to true, they won’t need them. The monsters might be strong, but I don’t know who would win in a fight to the death. Good thing I won’t be finding out today.

“Come on,” I say, scooping up the trulls and setting them on Prometheus’ back. “We have a war to stop.”

FORTY-FIVE

The final decision

ORCUS

We crest the hill that swoops into a low valley where the border between our land and the vampire territory lies. The air holds an unnatural shimmer where our realms split. They're already here. Glamor is a tricky thing, but once you know what to look for, it's easier to spot. My father marches down the hill but I halt, holding a hand to command everyone behind me to stop.

“Father.”

He turns back and scowls. “What?”

“They're here.”

Laughing, he turns and gestures to the clear horizon. “There's nothing but open air.”

At his words, the glamor is ripped away. Rows upon rows of vampires wait for us, lined up and ready to defend their land. My father takes a quick step back before he can stop himself, but my eyes zero in on Daisy. There are bloodied scratches on her arms and she's wearing a shirt, but she smiles and waves at me. I narrow my eyes, searching for the glamor.

I don't trust the vampires, but there's no shimmer around her form. Her auburn hair is swept up in the breeze, and I swear I can smell her scent even over the unmistakable copper tang of blood filling the air. The bond squeezes with relief and a flood of happiness surges through my system. I send my own relief back and narrow my eyes.

She's not a prisoner. My eyes fall to the dragon and the trulls beside her. Prometheus?

"I see you came prepared to die!" my father shouts.

Daisy steps forward and not a single vampire moves to stop her. She's not a prisoner. "Your father did this, Orcus! Not the vampires. He used Zyla's spell to send me away."

"They are using your mate to cast lies," my father calls over his shoulder. "They're controlling her mind."

It's possible. Like glamor, the vampires can compel someone.

Daisy shakes his head. "He's lying!" The truth of her words speaks to me through the bond.

"She's been compromised. Command your men now before it's too late," my father demands.

"Tell them the truth, Orcus! I met the furies and I told them what happened. They only want your father."

My father huffs and steps toward her. "Is your mate threatening me?"

A vampire pulls out of line and stands beside Daisy, eyes set on my father. "Any harm to her is an insult to all of us."

I frown and glance at Maddox. "Did I hear that right? The vampires are defending my mate?"

He nods. "I guess her charm knows no bounds."

Grunting, I turn back to my ranting father who is starting to rally some of the troops. Orlena steps up beside me and studies the blood suckers with interest.

"I thought they'd be taller," she murmurs.

Maddox coughs to cover his laugh.

I side-eye both of them. "If you want to start a war, insulting them is the way to do it."

My father appears at my side and whispers, "Orcus, I've trained you for this very moment. Deep down, you know this

is what we have to do. So do I. That's why we're here; you and I are warriors."

"Is what she said true?" I study his face and it hardens, telling me all I need to know. "Unbelievable. You didn't get your way so you found a lie to help get what you want?"

"I did what had to be done. Now you need to finish it," he hisses.

Someday a choice will come and you'll know what to do.

Zyla's prophecy. War or peace. Giving up my father to save my mate. Righting a wrong. It's an easy decision.

"No."

"No?" My father's face turns red. "No? I should've known you weren't strong enough, not like me. If you won't start this war, I will."

"You're right," I say before he can say anything to the monsters behind us.

"I told you I was," he snaps.

I shake my head. "Not about that. What we're doing here is wrong, but you were right that I'm not like you. I won't let your lies ruin the kingdom I'm about to inherit." I turn to face the armada, ignoring his angry spluttering. Daisy told me to tell the truth about what happened. I don't know what sort of deal she struck, but I trust my mate. "My father wants you to fight," I shout loud enough to overpower anything my father might say. "But what he won't tell you is that all of this, every horrible curse that's come upon our land is his fault."

"Lies! Don't listen to him, his mate has gotten in his head."

"No. My mate has only encouraged me to do what I should have done that day you killed the furies' beloved pets. My father," I glance at the vampires, "is responsible. He was building a second home and was clearing the area."

"Don't let him fool you! My son was there too! He's not so innocent."

I glare at the monster I call father. “Yes, and when I realized what you’d done, I told you that we should go to the furies and offer whatever we could to make things right.”

“Like they’d accept an apology and let it go,” my father hisses. “Conflict was inevitable.”

“Maybe so, but I’m certain the nature of the conflict wouldn’t have lost so many lives.” I face the monsters again. “Do you remember what he told you when the first flood destroyed the village in the east? He said he didn’t know why the gods would curse us. And then with the illness that killed dozens of monsters in the west, he lied again. Refusing to take accountability for what he’d done. He sat there and told each and every one of you he didn’t know why these things were happening. He lied to you then and he’s lying to you now, all to save himself.”

“I did what a king has to do! You think you’re fit to rule? You don’t have what it takes to make the hard decisions and do what’s best for our kingdom.”

“Sending out our own monsters to meet certain death is what’s best for them? Lying to your people and your family is what’s best for the kingdom?”

He storms toward me and gets in my face, staring me down. I scowl right back at him.

“Everything you say is the life of a king and I’ve prepared you for this from the day you were born.”

And that he has. He spent so much time grooming me to rule and not enough being a father. I remember the snap of a staff on my back if I cried or said I was tired. I remember the way he’d push me until I’d collapse on the ground, defeated by exhaustion. I remember the way he’d mutter in disgust at how my ten-year-old body couldn’t keep up with his.

“Your future queen has made a bargain.” The vampire standing next to Daisy cuts through the tension, reminding me of the choice I have to make.

Stepping away from my father, I find Daisy’s gaze. I don’t know how she did it. She nods in encouragement and shoves

some of her sunshine toward me, her way of providing reassurance.

“The furies want the king, and in exchange, the vampires agree to make peace.”

“That’s never going to happen,” my father says with a laugh.

My eyebrows hit my hairline. “That’s *all* you want?” I ask the creature at her side.

“Orcus.” A growled warning from the king, but I ignore him.

The vampire defers to Daisy. She smiles and nods. He dips his head and looks at my father. “Hand over your king and we will make peace.”

“My people will never hand me over!”

“Orlena?” I can’t make the decision without her input.

“Do you remember Doren?”

I nod. Doren was a minotaur and one of our favorite soldiers as children. He used to bring us toys and he’d play with us when he wasn’t on duty. He had no family of his own, but to us, he was like an uncle. He was one of the first monsters to die as a result of the floods.

“A life for a life,” Orlena says clearly.

“You traitors.” My father whirls to face the monsters, missing the looks of betrayal. “Seize them!”

No one moves to grab my sister. No one even glances in my direction. They’re all glaring at the king.

“For Daphne,” someone calls.

The crowd nods and monsters begin calling out the names of people they’ve lost. Each and every one died to protect my father’s lie.

“Guess you have your answer,” I say, stepping toward him.

Growling, he drops into a defensive stance. “You’ll have to beat me.”

“Very well.” I start toward him but stop as a tiny dagger imbeds in his throat. He grunts and slaps his hand over the wound, glancing around for the culprit. My gaze goes straight to Harald. His hand is still posed in the after throw, as if he wanted everyone to know exactly who did it, and he winks at me.

“You dare to attack your king?” My father takes a step, but it’s sluggish. Stumbling to the side, he swings his arm out and the first line of monsters steps out of the way. They don’t reach to help him.

They’re done.

And so am I.

“Three,” Harald shouts. “Two. One.”

His legs give out first. The great monster king collapses onto his knees. He glares at the trull. “Poison,” he rasps.

“Sedative,” Harald corrects. “Much as I’d like to add your skin to my cart, the furies aren’t done with ya.”

“Trait—” His words cut off, and he falls face forward into the lush grass.

Silence follows. I wait, giving a chance for anyone to object to what I’m about to do. No one speaks up. No one races to the king’s side. The thing about using everyone for your own gain is that you end up with no one. With a heavy sigh, I lift my gaze from the man who never loved me and find the gaze of the woman who loves me more than words can say.

“Give me my queen.”

FORTY-SIX

Homecoming

DAISY

We leave the vampires with the promise of peace and goodwill. The soldiers are silent as we head home. There's no rejoicing. No happy banter. Betraying a king is no easy decision, but it was the right thing to do. Orcus holds me tight at the head of the army. Prometheus and the trulls fly ahead of us, leading the way. My throat and chest tighten with every step we take. What will Orshana think? Will she hate me for what I've done? As much of a bastard as the king was, he was her mate.

"You're worrying too much," Orcus murmurs.

He's one to talk. It's not solely my anxiety filling the bond and there's a permanent line of worry etched across his forehead. Orlena hasn't said a word either.

"I can't help it."

"She will understand."

Will she? I wouldn't, but my mate isn't a horrible excuse of a monster. He's decent and good and wonderful.

"We need to find Zyla," I tell him.

"My father would be a fool to kill the witch. She's probably locked in the dungeon."

I frown. "Wouldn't she be able to get out?"

“She would, if not for my father commissioning Callum years ago to craft a spell to prevent any witch or wizard from breaking out.”

“Callum,” I mutter with a scowl. “Did you plan on taking many magical prisoners?”

“No, but there’s no telling what he thought.”

“I’m still confused about something. If your father liked using his power to get his way, why would he create that law to give it away once you found your mate?”

“Loyalty isn’t certain during war. My father wanted sworn allegiance, but he was smart enough to know that once the fighting began and more than a few monsters died, frustration would build and frustration with the crown almost always leads to rebellions.”

I scowl at the horizon. “But why start the war at all?”

“To make sure whatever he did was far overshadowed by how ruthless the vampires can be.” He shrugs. “His twisted way of making himself feel better.”

Turning in his arms, I place my palm on his chest and look up at him. “I’m sorry.”

He knits his eyebrows together. “For what?”

“That you had to choose between me and him. That I made a deal without consulting you... that I accidentally forced you to become the thing you never wanted to be.”

“One: There was never a choice, it was always you. Two: Your reasoning was sound. You thought of the monsters and what was best for them. Three: Never feel bad for finding your way to me because I’ll never regret that day.” He smirks. “And I’ll never forget the way your eyes rolled back when you landed on my c—”

I slap my hand over his mouth before Orlena or Maddox can hear him. “Okay, okay. I’m not sorry.” He teases his tongue over my palm, and I make a face. “You have no idea where my hand has been. I’m moving it, but I swear if you mention your... meat stick... I’ll withhold sex.”

“You’d never be able to withhold sex from me,” he murmurs as soon as my hand is gone, sensually stroking me through the bond. “I know every little button to push until you’d be begging me for my... meat stick.”

“Ugh,” Orlena groans. “Meat stick is worse than cock.”

I bite my lip to keep from giggling.

“I’ve never heard you say cock before,” Maddox says. The interest in his voice is so potent I slide my gaze over to them. He’s far too close to be considered friendly, but he’s still far enough away to have plausible deniability with Orcus. The look on his face screams *smitten as a kitten*.

“Maddox,” Orcus snaps.

His friend stiffens and falls back. Orlena doesn’t falter, but I don’t miss the way her face falls.

“That wasn’t necessary,” I tell Orcus.

“She’s my sister. He’s my best friend. It can’t happen.”

I arch an eyebrow but keep my mouth shut. It could totally happen, but he’s not ready to hear that yet.

We pass the path that leads either to the castle or Orcus’ cave. He hesitates and glares up at the peak.

“Fucking cyclops.”

“I told you, Prometheus toasted it to death, and I’m fine.”

He sweeps his gaze over the visible scrapes.

“Mostly fine,” I correct. “You can’t be upset at me for that. I was trying to get back to you.”

“I can be mad at you if I want to be,” he mutters and starts toward the castle. “But I’ll let this one slide.”

“You’re so generous, *Your Majesty*.”

His jaw clenches. “Don’t.”

“Why, *Your Majesty*? Does it bother you? Would you prefer *Your Highness*?”

“I’d prefer your cunt wrapped around my cock,” he whispers. “But if you keep it up, I’ll settle for my hand turning your ass red.”

“You’re a cruel king to tease me like that,” I whisper back.

“You have no idea what I plan to do to you, little flower.”

My core clenches and fiery lust shoots through the bond. I bite back a goofy grin. “I think I have an idea.”



ZYLA AND CALLUM are waiting for us when we arrive at the castle. She races toward us, and I squirm in Orcus’ hold until he grudgingly lets me down. Bursting into tears as I run, I release the last of my anxiety and crash into her. Together we stumble and she laughs, hugging me tight as I clutch her like sand slipping through my fingers.

“I was so worried.” I pull back and look her over. “You’re not hurt, are you? I’m so sorry, Zyla.”

“I’m fine. I’m glad you are too. I was worried I’d never see you again.” She swipes at her cheeks. “But here you are.”

I hug her again, and my gaze connects with Callum’s. Zyla told me how much he hurt her. I scowl at him. If he so much as causes her to break a nail, I’ll find a way to ruin his life. His lips press together and he nods at me, shifting his focus to Orcus who is approaching him.

“I’m exhausted,” I confess. “Can we go inside and make some tea?”

“I thought you’d never ask,” Zyla says with a laugh. “I have so much to tell you.”

We turn and head into the courtyard. Callum and Orcus trail after us, followed by a flood of monsters. Orshana breaks away from the younger sisters and races to Orcus, searching the crowd. She spots Orlena and releases an audible gasp, but

then she keeps looking. Her gaze jumps over face after face before flying back to her son's. He grimaces.

This isn't just his truth to tell. "I'll be right back," I tell Zyla and join my mate.

Orshana spares me a glance and a nod before focusing on Orcus. "What happened?"

Orcus opens his mouth to respond but all that comes out is a strangled sound. My chest clenches. She may hate me for what I've done, but I can't let Orcus take on the burden of telling his mother that his father is probably dead.

"I made a deal with the furies."

She turns to me. "What deal?" she asks softly.

I want to look away. I don't want to see how upset she'll be. I may be a coward in a lot of ways, but I can't be with this. She deserves to look me in the eye when I tell her what I've done. "I offered a trade. We gave the furies justice in exchange for peace."

She rubs her chest. "Justice?"

"Mom," Orcus manages, but his voice cracks and her face scrunches in confusion. "He's done something, hasn't he?" Her gaze bounces between us. "What did he do?"

Orcus takes a deep breath and tells her everything about that day. Her hand moves to cover her mouth and her eyes mist. He tells her what the king had done to Zyla and what he did to me. Her face shatters with each painful truth, but she doesn't try to argue. Orshana knows who her mate was.

"I'm sorry," Orcus says with a sniff. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

"Hurt me?" she asks, cupping his face. "My sweet son, you did nothing wrong." She gives me a pointed look. "And neither have you." Sniffing, she shakes her head and drops her gaze. "I knew what he was capable of, but I never thought he'd do something like this. I never thought he'd hurt our family and our people. I'm the one who should be sorry. The

moment I knew how horrible he could be, I should have taken you kids and left.”

“No, Mom, you’re—”

“Orcus,” she cuts him off. “I should have left the first time you came back from training barely able to walk and covered in bruises.” She pinches her eyes shut. “I told myself that this is what we do. This is what his father did. This is how warriors are made, but I... I was wrong. I cannot tell you how much I’ve regretted everything I let him do to train you.”

My chest aches for her. To live with that guilt... it would suck.

“I don’t blame you for anything,” Orcus tells her. “Warriors do train hard. Did he take it too far? Yes. Was that your fault? No, and at that point, you trying to leave with us would have been more dangerous than staying. If you tried to leave with his heir, he would’ve killed you for treason.”

She nods. “I know.” Her voice is thick with emotion.

“You deserve a mate who loves you.” He hugs her and she releases a quiet sob. I slip away to give them space, knowing right now Orshana needs her son more than I do. Orlena is with the princesses and based on the stricken looks on their faces, she’s telling them what happened.

They’re all going to resent me some day. Today, it made sense, but eventually, I’ll be the woman who gave up the king to save her own ass.

Zyla threads her arm through mine. “How about that tea?”

Prometheus bumps into my leg and chirps.

“Watch it, ya crazy beast!” Harald grasps at the makeshift harness.

Lagertha releases an exasperated sigh. “If yer going to keep complaining, let me drive.”

Zyla and I share an amused glance and head inside to find some tea. Prometheus prances alongside us, totally unfazed by the death threats being tossed around on its back.



“SO THAT’S why you didn’t know what he had planned.” I shake my head. “Did Callum know what he was giving the king?”

Zyla lifts her shoulders. “I don’t think he knew how the king would use it. I assume he thought it was for the vampires or another enemy.”

Callum’s spell prevented her from scouring the king’s mind. The only magic that’s strong enough to counter hers.

I frown into my tea. “It’s still horrible that his magic is the thing that prevented you from seeing what the king had planned and protecting yourself.”

“Yeah.” She takes a long sip. “But that’s how things go between us. Things go well... and then they fall apart.”

“Did he at least apologize after he rescued you?” I hedge, petting Prometheus’ head which is propped in my lap. We’re in the back part of the library and the chair is just big enough for the two of us to fit into, and once the dragon wedged itself beside me, Prometheus promptly fell asleep. I can’t help but think cats and dragons might actually be related in some way.

Her cheeks turn bright pink. “He did.”

I squint. “Did he... oh my god. You guys totally fucked.”

Her blush deepens and she grins. “Maybe.”

“Yes, Zyla. Get that wizard wand.”

She snorts and covers her face with her hands. “Oh, moons! Why did I sleep with him?”

“Probably because he’s totally hot and he came to save you once he realized something was wrong.” I think for a moment. “Are you mates?”

“Not in the same way you and Orcus are, but our souls are tied together as you know. I can also feel things from him...”

Her smile fades and is shrouded by anger. “Some things I’d rather not know.”

“He wouldn’t.”

“He did,” she growls. “It only happened once, but that was enough for me to remember why I can’t let him in. Or it was. I wasn’t thinking straight when he broke me out of that cell. If he weren’t such a powerful warlock, I could have saved myself, but he forged those cells for the king and made them resistant to magic.” She frowns. “I should have been able to break his spell, but I couldn’t.”

Maybe the two of them being so powerful is part of why they struggle to get along.

I drink the rest of my tea. “Well, good thing he showed up to save the day. I was so worried.”

She groans. “He’s going to gloat. I know it.”

I recall the way he watched us embrace. There was no gloating, only pure concern and maybe a little self-loathing. “Maybe.” I set the empty cup on the table beside the chair and glance around the library. “I should probably go face my mate and his family, huh?”

“You should, but I don’t think they’ll be as mad as you think.”

“It’s weird when you scour my mind and I can’t tell.”

She grins. “Go see your family.”

A throat clears and we both turn, scowling at the wizard standing before us. Callum has the good sense to look chastised and I give Zyla a look. *I’ll kick his ass.*

“I’ll be fine,” she reassures me.

I ease out of the chair, careful not to wake the slumbering dragon, and walk to the wizard. Callum holds my gaze, and I don’t need to say anything to make it clear exactly what I want him to know. *Don’t hurt my friend.* His jaw clicks and he nods, stepping aside. I brush past him and give them space.

FORTY-SEVEN

Family is who you choose

DAISY

Zyla was right. No one is mad at me. We have a quiet dinner. There isn't much talking, and while they all agreed we did the right thing, they're still allowed to be sad and grieve. Orcus doesn't touch his food and I push mine around my plate. His hand hasn't left my leg, and when Orshana finally ends the dinner, he snatches me up and carries me to our room without even telling them goodbye.

“Orcus, where are your manners?”

“Fuck manners.” He kicks into our bedroom and slams the door shut, tossing me toward the bed.

I squeal as I sail through the air and land on the soft mattress with a quiet thud. He comes down on me before I catch my breath and pins me in place, face hovering over mine.

“I thought I lost you.”

“I'm right here.” I grab his tusks and tug. Our lips crash in a messy and hurried kiss, each of us desperate to confess how terrified we both were. My legs clamp around his waist and I bite his lip softly, grinding against him.

“Daisy.” My name falls from his lips on a whisper but it's like he called to my soul. The bond vibrates with love. He pulls back to look at me. “You have no idea how much you mean to me.”

I kiss his cheek and drop my head back onto the mattress. “I know that I love you... and that you love me.”

“It’s more than that,” he presses. “You’re my whole world, and the thought of you not being here... it almost destroyed me. The only thing that kept me standing was hope that I’d get there in time to pry you from their grasp.”

“That’s more than I ever wanted,” I say as a tear slips down my cheek. “You’re more than I ever wished for.”

“What, you didn’t think to wish for a handsome, grumpy ogre?”

I giggle. “Now who’s sarcastic?”

He arches an eyebrow. “You’ve infected me.”

“I’m so sorry,” I murmur and brush my lips over his. “How can I make it up to you?”

His lips curve against mine. “I can think of a few things,” he says before stealing my breath with a kiss that imprints itself on my soul. It’s more than lust and desire, it’s the truth of everything we confessed. It’s love and it’s devotion and it’s perfect. Just like him. “I need to be inside of you,” he says, slipping his hand between my legs and prepping me with his fingers. “I need you to clamp around me. I need you to scream my name. I need you.”

“Yes,” I rasp as he scissors two thick fingers inside of me.

“But first, I’m starving.”

“You should have eaten.”

“I was saving myself.” He kisses me and then slides down my body and buries his face between my legs.

My hands immediately grasp his hair and I meet his tongue thrust for thrust, taking what I want and what I need, exactly like he’s taught me. My entire body pulses with desire. His tongue slides over my clit, warm and sweet, demanding and rough, *commanding*. Orcus doesn’t make me come; Orcus tears the orgasm from my body with three swipes of his tongue and before I can even come down from bliss, he’s naked and sliding inside of me.

Bit by bit he stretches me, and I've never loved the feeling more than I do now. He's the prince I've always dreamed of, but when he pulls back and slams into me, shocking the breath from my lungs, he's the villain I've always secretly lusted for. His arms cage my head and his tusks brush either side of my head, almost like they're forcing me to look him in the eyes as the second orgasm crashes over me.

His irises expand and his gaze slips down to my lips seconds before he claims my mouth. I meet his tongue lash for lash, cling to his body, and fall for him more and more. He slows his thrusts, finding a smooth rhythm which allows his cock to brush over my g-spot again and again, gently coaxing my body toward another release.

"I'll still make you my queen," he murmurs against my lips. "And I'll worship you every day." His cock pulses. "I'll give you everything you've ever wanted. All I ask in return is to have your love, your smile and," he thrusts, "your tight pussy."

I smile and brush my nose over his. "Shut up and kiss me, grumpy."

Our mouths collide again, but it's different this time. It's not frenzied with the haze of lust. It's not only sex. This is Orcus baring his soul to me. I'll give him more than he's asked for, but if I admit to that he might get growly, so I simply send a burst of happiness straight through the bond. That thick vein that runs up the side of his length throbs and my walls clamp around him in response.

"Fuck, I'm going to come."

"You better," I say and flex around his length. "You can do it, grumpy. Give me everything."

"Daisy," he grunts and bucks into me, losing control.

His thrusts are wild and hard, but they don't hurt. If anything, I love it more than the careful control. To have him losing control inside of me is the world's greatest feeling. I tip my hips ever so slightly so he hits that spot deep inside of me perfectly until I start to moan along with him. Every muscle

bunches tight around him and with his final thrust, he takes us both over the edge and we cry out.

Together.

Like it was always meant to be.



ORCUS TRACES circles over my back and I squirm when he hits my side. “Mmm. I like that,” he whispers.

“It tickles.” I reach over and run my nails over his neck. Orcus squeals. Straight up squeals, and I burst out laughing.

“That’s it,” he growls, and pounces on me.

“No, no, no! Please,” I whimper. “Tickling is the worst.” He doesn’t stop and my bladder screams at me. “I’m going to pee if you don’t stop!”

“Liar,” he says and continues to torture me.

“I mean it. Our bed will be soaked through with piss and it’ll be your fault.” I scream when he tickles the spot that makes me the most vulnerable. “Orcus!”

“Fine.” He relents but straddles me. His cock is so big and heavy it rests against my stomach.

I bite my lip.

He arches an eyebrow. “Really, little flower?”

“Don’t judge me, you’re the one that put it on me.”

“We’ve already gone three rounds.”

“And?”

He releases an exasperated breath. “I know you think I’m infallible, but even my well runs dry.”

I pout my lip. “You don’t even have a little bit?” I pinch my fingers together.

“You’re such a demanding queen.” He leans down and kisses me. “I love you and the answer is no.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.” I roll my eyes then grin up at him. “I love you too.”

He kisses me again then drops onto the mattress beside me. The mattress puffs up on my side and I launch into the air but his hand flies out to catch me and push me back down. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay.” I roll on my side and stroke his tusk. “Hey, Orcus?”

“Hey, Daisy?”

“I need to pee, but I’m afraid to stand up.”

A true, 100% *I have a monster cock* smug smile cuts across his face. “You’ll be covered in my cum.”

“Yeah, and so will your floor.”

He shrugs. “I don’t care about that, all I care about is you being coated in my scent.” His eyes find mine with a devious glint of amusement. “Maybe I can go another round.”

“Oh no. That’s not how it works.”

“Says who?”

“Me.” I wrinkle my nose. “Why would you even ask that question?”

He releases a sigh. “You’re right, we both know you’re the boss.”

Biting back a smile, I lean up and kiss the tip of his tusk before sliding off the bed. A rush of cum drips down my thighs and I try not to flinch at the audible splat on the stone floor. I take a step. Splat. Flinch. Another. Splat. Cringe.

Splat. Splat. Splat.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

Orcus’ deep, rumbling laugh brushes over my skin. I scowl at him over my shoulder, but it’s hard to be annoyed when

happiness is so clearly scrawled over his face from the way he smiles to the way his eyes squint in the corner.

With a huff, I turn and go to the bathroom, pretending not to notice the soundtrack that follows me. I do my business and clean up a little. This time when I walk, there is no splat. I glance in the mirror as I wash my hands and widen my eyes. My hair is a disaster and there are dark circles under my eyes from not sleeping, but that's not what surprises me. It's the way my skin almost glows that catches my attention. It's almost like... I'm truly, deeply happy. There's no forced optimism. That deep aching desire to be loved doesn't hurt quite as bad, not with the way Orcus and my newfound friends and family bring me joy.

“Now that's a view,” Orcus says, appearing behind me and smoothing his hand over my ass. I start to turn, but he stops me and drops to his knees, meeting my gaze in the mirror. “I want you to watch yourself as I take the last part of you that belongs to me.”

My eyebrows slam together in confusion but when his hand pushes on my spine, I drop my elbows to the counter and tilt my hips for him. He murmurs in approval and parts my ass with his hands, slipping two fingers inside of my wet heat. I glance back at him and our gazes collide. He shakes his head and gestures toward the mirror.

“Look at yourself, tell me that woman in the mirror doesn't deserve everything I'm giving her.”

“So demanding,” I grumble but do as he asks.

He teases a finger over my clit and I hum in approval, watching my mouth slightly part at the sensations he gives. Then his mouth brushes over my ass cheek, moving slowly toward a part of myself I've never given to anyone. Orcus buries his face in my ass, teasing and probing like it's a damn feast and I... don't hate it. The fingers inside of me pump faster and faster, and the closer I get to an orgasm, the more my skin flushes. I used to hate how easily my skin would turn red, but as I watch myself being pleased, I have a new appreciation for it. My fingers curl and grasp at the stone

counter and suddenly Orcus mouth is gone and a finger, the smallest one, slips into my ass at the same time he rubs my clit.

“Oh shiiiiit,” I say, rocking back into it. It hurts a little, but it’s the perfect thing to edge the euphoria.

“That’s it, little flower.” He gently bites my ass and moves his fingers in time. The one in my ass forces me to feel every part of his fingers in my cunt, and the thumb at my clit reminds me that this is all about him making me aware he knows exactly what he needs to do to own my body.

The woman in the mirror is seductive and beautiful. This is what he sees whenever we’re together. He loves my splotchy red skin. He loves the way my eyes hood. He loves the way my teeth dig into my bottom lip, and he loves the way my mouth drops open as the first seconds of the orgasm hit.

I don’t know what I did to deserve this, but I’m so happy I fell through that portal.

FORTY-EIGHT

Jealous bitches get stitches

DAISY

Even though the ceremony hasn't officially happened, Orshana named Orcus and me king and queen. No one openly objected to that decision, but as I walk to the great hall for dinner, I catch a snippet of a hushed conversation.

"She betrayed our king," an insistent voice carries around the wall of a hallway I'm approaching.

"No, she saved our soldiers," a second voice objects.

"If you truly believe that, I feel sorry for you. She's had her sights set on the crown ever since she stepped foot in the castle. I don't even think she likes Orcus."

"They're mates."

"And how do you think that happened? You know he never wanted a mate. And if he did, it would have been me."

Ah. Now I don't even have to wonder who is spreading rumors. It's Lara, the ogre who clearly wanted Orcus all for herself and wanted to fight me.

"Whatcha doing, Daisy?" Orana asks.

I startle and clutch my chest. "Jesus." I'd been so focused on the conversation I didn't notice Orcus' little sister approaching. "Orana, you scared me."

She giggles. "Sorry."

Lara and a pretty centaur join us in the main hallway. The centaur's eyes bug, and she glances at the ogre, but Lara is too intent on glaring at me.

I tip my chin up. "Ladies."

Lara scoffs and rolls her eyes. The centaur dips into a bow and excuses herself, but Lara simply turns her back on me and sashays toward the great hall. The blue dress she's wearing hits mid-thigh, showcasing a smooth expanse of green skin. She'd be pretty if not for her shitty attitude.

"She should have bowed," Orana says, squinting at the older ogre's back.

I lift a shoulder. "It's okay."

She frowns at me. "No it's not, Daisy. You're the queen. Mom says people should respect their queen."

"Well, I doubt Lara will ever respect me. She likes your brother." But there's no way Orcus would be attracted to an ogre like Lara. She's everything he didn't want—ambitious.

Orana makes a face. "Gross."

I try not to laugh. "You realize *I* like your brother."

Her face scrunches in even more disgust. "Don't remind me."

The littlest of the sisters is taller than me and yet there's no denying that those are the words of a child.

"It's okay," I tell her again. "She won't ruin my night."

"No," Orana says, glancing at me. "She won't. I heard we were having cake tonight." And with that, she hurries toward the great hall.

I stare after her and shake my head. It's nice that she was offended for me. I do want respect, but after sacrificing the king, I knew some monsters would begin to question my motivations.

Wait a second. Why aren't I running toward the cake?

You're being a chicken shit.

The voice in my head isn't wrong. Steeling myself, I roll my shoulders back and tip my chin ever so slightly and glide toward the sounds of a hundred monsters. How many more will look at me the way Lara did? How many people has she turned against me already?

Anxiety swims in my gut and the Daisy who is used to pleasing everyone is trying to find an excuse to find Lara and charm her into being friends, but the more recent version of myself says fuck that ogre. She's a cunt. I narrow my eyes and clench my fists at my side as I turn into the great hall. Every head swings in my direction.

I don't falter. I don't cower. My gaze searches for Orcus', finding him smack in the center of the royal table. I hold those navy eyes and let my hips sway a little more than necessary as I head up the navy velvet rug. Monsters bow as I walk by. A smirk works over Orcus face and he leans forward, slowly lowering his gaze down my body and dragging it back up. The heat flashing across his face is born from a desire I know all too well thanks to the bond.

A whisper reaches my ears, a snake full of jealous hate. I simply walk straight to my seat. A minotaur servant pulls it out, but Orcus grabs me and yanks me into his lap. My hand finds his left tusk on instinct and our lips crash together. The room could be full of deadly vipers and I wouldn't care, not with the way he professes his devotion in one single, mind-altering kiss.

When we break apart, I grin up at him. "Hey, grumpy."

"Sunshine," he rumbles, brushing his nose against mine.

"As much as I love your lap, I don't think I can eat like this."

He arches his eyebrow, like he's tempted to make me try, but eventually the hold on my hips loosens and I slide into my seat. For the first time since handing over the king, I face the court. Most are still bowed, but a brave few are standing, perhaps never having bowed at all.

Standing at the center of a small group, Lara glares at me. The centaur from earlier casts her eyes down, but the two harpies with webbed wings don the same scowl as Lara.

“Keep looking at my mate like that, Lara, and I’ll ask the trulls to bring me your eyes,” Orcus says before taking an unbothered sip from his goblet.

The ogre startles. “Forgive me, your majesty, but you can’t expect me, or any of us, to bow to the one who gave up our king. Your father.” She squints at me. “She’s a traitor.”

I clench my fists in my lap. Lara wasn’t there that day with the furies, but everyone knows by now. That’s the way gossip works and there’s no way that something as monumental as that would stay a secret.

Orcus starts to rise, but his mother beats him to it. Lara and her minions drop into a bow for Orshana.

“The ceremony may not have happened yet, but make no mistake, my son and his mate are your new king and queen.” She pauses and lets those words sink in. “Come here, Lara. Bring your friends.”

The ogre shares a concerned look with her posse, but she can’t deny Orshana. They find their way in front of the royal table, standing before the queen as she was asked. In this light, it’s easy to see the series of veins that run through the harpies’ wings, streaks of lightning cutting across a dark night. The tension is so thick and their hate is so tangible, my throat constricts. I hate confrontation.

“Daisy. Please stand up.”

I look at Orshana and shake my head. They don’t trust me. These monsters think I betrayed the kingdom. She arches an eyebrow and nods in encouragement. Slowly, I push away from the table and stand, noticing how much shorter I am compared to her. I try not to think about everyone else who might be thinking the same thing, who might be realizing how much I don’t fit.

“Daisy fought to keep you safe, did you know that?”

“But my queen, she gave up your—” Lara begins, but Orshana cuts her off.

“Did you know she went directly to the furies herself, knowing how dangerous it might be?”

Lara scowls. “I heard.”

“Then you also heard what my husband, your *king*, was willing to sacrifice to save himself.” Orshana’s hand lands on my shoulder. “Daisy fought for this kingdom while you pranced around court happy as a songbird. Daisy protected our monsters. Daisy is the reason we still have a place to call home.” Her voice goes violently soft. “And you *will* bow to her.”

“The king—” one of the harpies starts, but Orshana is faster.

“*The king* didn’t give a shit about this kingdom. He would have traded you to save himself.”

The harpies glance at each other.

“It’s true,” Orlena says. “My father didn’t care about anyone but himself.”

“And if not for Daisy,” Oretta chimes in, “your pretty wings would’ve been ripped from your bodies before the vampires bled you dry.” She flashes a vicious smile and takes a sip of her wine.

Orshana places her palms on the table and leans forward. “Now bow before I do worse than what my son threatened.”

Damn, Orshana. I bite back a smile and fight to keep my face as neutral as possible. Lara catches a twitch of a smile and shakes her head in refusal even as her friends dip down into low bows.

“She’s not fit to be queen.”

“Right, well, I’ve had ’bout enough of that,” Harald says seconds before a knife embeds in her thigh.

The screech that emits from Lara matches the pitch of my own scream. She falls to her knees, and I slap my hands to my

mouth as blood pours out of the wound. Her friends scramble away, the harpies flapping their wings to carry them half-way across the room and the centaur clopping to the side. The trull hops onto the royal table and marches down it, kicking over goblets on his way. Lagertha is hot on his heels. Together, they're the world's tiniest army, and I'm more terrified of the two of them than I was of the furies.

"Sorry, Orshana," Harald says. "She was yappin' and insultin' my queen."

Orshana gives him a warm smile. "No apologies needed."

Harald stops before me on the table, and he and his mother bow to me. "Should I flay her?" he asks.

I choke on my own spit as I imagine the demented grin on his face while he rips her skin from her body. Shuddering, I shake my head. "No."

His eyebrows snap together. "No?"

Clearing my throat, I say it again, this time louder. "No."

"My knives are freshly sharpened and if those don't work, I've got a spare toenail in my back pocket. Let me at least take an eye."

"Two. I want one as well," Lagertha drawls, grinning at a now wide-eyed Lara. "Might make a necklace out of it."

Trulls.

"NO." I narrow my eyes on them. "Lara can keep her eyes." I lift my gaze to meet hers. Her face is scrunched in pain but that hate is still there. "And she can keep her life."

"My queen is merciful," Harald mutters, sounding down right put out about that. He vaults off the table and races toward Lara. She yelps as he rips his knife from her leg and sucks in a ragged breath.

"If I had my way, I'd turn ya into a dress for my queen." He flips the knife into the air and runs up her leg in a flash, pushing off her thigh and landing on her chest in the next instant, dagger in one hand and a fist full of her dress in the

other. The tip of the blade stops centimeters from her right eye which she barely manages to pinch shut. “Insult her again.”

“Harald,” I warn.

“I’m only making sure she’s listening.” He taps her face with the knife. “Go on, you know you want to.”

The ogre’s mouth presses into a tight line and she trembles, either from the wound or the trull currently threatening to gouge her eye out.

“Then we have an understanding. Next time you bow, or I’ll make you do it and next time my queen might not stop me in time.” He releases her dress and pushes off her chest, kicking into a backflip and landing on his tiny feet in front of her before striding back to the table and scaling the table cloth.

“Right. Well, *Lara*. I think it’s time you pack your things and head back to your village, seeing as you’ve overstayed your welcome.” Orcus stares at the wounded ogre.

Lara flinches like she’s been physically slapped and tears slip down her cheeks. She glances at me. “Please,” she whispers.

Well, if it isn’t *Harry Potter and the Audacity of this Bitch*. I’m not feeling particularly charitable. Orcus’ hand finds my waist, and he tugs me into his lap. I tip my head back and our gazes clash. There’s so much there he doesn’t have to say. Promises to keep me safe. Promises to love, protect, and cherish.

“You have twenty minutes,” he says, waving his hand in her general direction but not bothering to spare her a glance.

Maybe what’s being done is harsh, but the reality is if Lara stayed, she’d find a way to poison the court against us. Maybe not everyone, but a few and that’s all that would be needed to cause discontent.

By the time I return to my seat, the floor in front of the table is cleared. Harald and Lagertha have returned to their seats and Lara is gone. Her followers have made their way back to their seats. I guess they’re not as loyal as she thought. It’s a little sad.

“I know you’re not feeling bad for her,” Orcus grumbles.

“For like two seconds,” I whisper.

“She doesn’t deserve it. Now eat so I can take you back to our rooms and show you how much you deserve to be queen.”

My thighs press together and a giant grin bursts across my face.

FORTY-NINE

Friends

DAISY

A moon cycle is 30 days, but time has never gone by faster. Between getting up to speed on everything there is to know about the kingdom, dress fittings, dinners with family and friends, and taking Prometheus on nightly flights, there's almost no time to rest. In fact, the first time I have to take a full breath is in the minutes before I'm meant to walk out onto the stone dais and complete the bonding ceremony.

Zyla slips into the room after everyone else has left. Her brown eyes flash over me and the lavender silk dress that clings to my skin like pure spun moonlight. "Hecate, you're gorgeous."

I run my hand over the gown and turn to face her. The train of the dress wraps around my ankles. "It's not too flashy?"

"No. Not at all. Hecate will be pleased." Zyla rushes to untangle me, handling the fabric with delicate touches.

Speaking of. "Why is it that the bonding ceremonies are blessed by Hecate and not Echidna?"

"Well, for one thing Echidna was slain long ago, and while she was the mother of monsters, the bonds come from Hecate. They're eternal, like her magic and her moon. Echidna, if ever given the chance, would have destroyed the bonds. Selene would have been pissed on Hecate's behalf and then Echidna would be facing two angry moon goddesses."

Sometimes I wonder if Greek mythology was made up by someone in the thick of an acid trip. Trying to map out how all the gods and goddesses and other mythological beings fit together is more than difficult. Good thing I have Zyla.

“Is Callum still here?”

She scowls.

Oh great. “What did he do now?”

“Nothing. Yet.”

I frown. “He sucks.”

She gives me a wry grin. “Most days I agree with that.” Shaking her head, she releases a soft breath and gives me another once over. “You’re beautiful, Daisy.”

“Thank you.” I give her a quick hug. “It’s probably time to stop stalling, huh?”

“I wasn’t going to call you on it, but all that talk of the goddesses wasn’t just simply curiosity.”

“I needed a distraction.”

She smirks. “I know.”

Of course she does.

Grabbing the flower crown from the dressing table, she carefully places it on my head and smooths my hair. “There’s the queen.” She holds out her arm. “Come. I can’t wait to see the look on Orcus when he sees you.”

I slip my arm through hers. “I hope I don’t cry.”

“I will,” she says softly. “Love, in its purest form, is beautiful.”

There’s more than a hint of longing in her words, but I don’t mention Callum again. They’ll have to work out their issues in their own time.



ZYLA SLIPS AWAY ONCE she positions me at the top of the long stretch of stairs and fixes the train of my dress. Chains of daisies line the steps, forming two straight lines that lead to where Orcus is standing. I can sense the monsters in the stands, their gazes set on me, but all I see is the ogre waiting for me. His eyes rove over me and I do the same to him.

Those tusks are gleaming in the light of the full moon. It's so bright there's no need for torches. Orcus' green skin is bathed in creamy moonlight and his navy lips pull back into a full grin. His eyes crinkle around the corner and he drops one hand to his chest. The bond pulses with need and I take the first step.

Orcus is wearing a silky top that matches the color of my dress and black slacks. His black hair is artfully pushed away from his square face. No one has ever been more attractive to me than this ogre. He wasn't the prince from my books, but he's the prince I've always needed. I take a few more steps and the bond throbs again, this time with happiness.

Not mine.

His.

My heart swells and my eyes pool with moisture. He watches me as though I'm a divine goddess, and as I walk toward him, I can't help but feel like one. The moon brushes over my skin in a soft caress, as if Hecate is jealous of the attention I'm giving Orcus. I tip my face back and study the moon for a moment. That magical touch turns warm and I smile and whisper my thanks. Maybe it's a trick of the eye, but I swear the moon shines even brighter than before and it releases me from its hold.

When my gaze catches Orcus' again, nothing can keep me from getting to him now. I all but run down the stairs, the train of the lavender dress sweeping behind me. The daisies on the

ground ruffle in the breeze. I laugh softly and vault off the last step and Orcus lunges to catch me. He cradles me in his arms for a moment and stares at me so intently, memorizing every detail.

Someone clears their throat and I glance at the Moon Priestess draped in sheer white fabric. “Shall we begin?”

I blink and tip my head back. “What do you say, grumpy?”

“I’ve been waiting for this from the moment you fell onto my”—I slap his chest and he chuckles—“lap.” He sets me on the stone and I adjust the train of the dress as best I can before giving up entirely. There are no bridesmaids or groomsmen. It’s me, Orcus, the priestess, and the moon of course.

“Take each other’s hands.”

Orcus’ hand dwarfs mine. The priestess steps forward and places a silky iridescent ribbon around both of our wrists and whispers things about love and devotion and the moon, but all I can hear is the blood rushing through my ears. All I know is that this moment may make things official between the court and the moon, but our love began before this moment.

The priestess finishes wrapping the ribbon and rests her forehead on our hands. “Hecate bless this bond.”

Nothing happens, and I start to frown. I truly thought there would be some big show but this is a little...

“Underwhelming?” a voice coos in my ear. It’s rich and smoky and seductive and magical.

I look at Orcus but he’s no longer in front of me. Instead, I’m in a field sitting next to a goddess with flowing brunette hair, freckles dotting her nose, and mischievous emerald eyes. A golden and silver aura shimmers around her. Magic. *Hecate*. God damn, she’s beautiful. Her lips, even those are divine, quirk as she notices my admiration.

“Hello, little human.” Her voice is like a melody.

“Uh.” I release a nervous chuckle. She’s talking to me. “Hi. I hope we didn’t disturb you.”

She waves away the apology. “This is the most fun I’ve had in years.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, this world is dreadfully boring sometimes.”

“I do miss Netflix,” I mumble under my breath.

She hums. “That and humans. They’re so... chaotic, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Yes. Like the folk, right?”

Hecate shakes her head. “The folk might have their own dramas, but the humans of Earth are a different breed of chaos. I’m sure that was an intentional interference.”

“By who?”

“A primordial who doesn’t like to be left out of the fun.”

That’s not an answer, but one doesn’t just ask a goddess to clarify. Especially not when she gives the full weight of her attention to me. My breath catches and I try not to move. She’s so... much and I’m so... not. Pulse racing, I search her face.

“You didn’t bring me here just to chat, did you?”

She laughs and shakes her head. “You may be the first of your kind in this world, but you won’t be the last.”

I could argue that without magic the humans can’t find their way here, but if anyone has the power to bestow magic, it’s her.

“Humans have a tendency to ruin a good thing,” I warn her.

She grins, but it’s full of teeth and dark threats. “They can try.”

“I’d hate to see this world ruined,” I try again. It’s not my place to advise her, but giving humans unfettered access to this world is... ill advised. It may not be technologically advanced but that’s part of the charm. If the wrong people found their way here, they’d find a way to monetize it and bleed it dry.

“Mmm. I am aware of that,” she says, reading my thoughts. “Which is why a chosen few will be blessed to travel between the worlds, though some may find themselves lost in this one.”

A line forms above my nose. “Why are you telling me this?”

“They’ll come to you for help.”

“And you want me to help them?” It would have been nice if someone had been here to help me.

She nods.

“I’ll do what I can,” I say, careful not to over promise.

“Good. Then it will be done.” She places her hand on my chest. “Now, as for that blessing.”

A beam of pure white light bursts from her palm and one moment I’m blinded, and in the next, I’m back on the dais with Orcus and the priestess’ head still pressed to our hands, like no time has passed at all. Orcus’ pupils are blown wide and as the moonlight fades, a smile breaks across his face.

The priestess releases a shaky exhale. “The goddess is very pleased,” she murmurs before glancing at me. “You have received the moon’s many blessings.”

“To the king and queen,” Orlena shouts from the stands and a roar of applause and cheering follow her words.

FIFTY

It's trull, not troll

DAISY

Standing before a goddess is far less terrifying than standing before a swarm of trulls. They may be tiny but we all know they're stabby. Harald and Lagertha are set apart from the rest, standing at my feet and looking up at me expectantly. When they said they'd invite some trulls, I didn't anticipate so many.

I married the king of monsters, but this queen is still petrified. I'm about to lose an eye if I don't make them happy. I told them I'd fix their tax situation, and after pouring over the accounts with the crown's accountant, I determined just how much they overpaid. The slight ogre, smaller than any I've ever seen, had an actual title I'm sure, but as soon as I saw what was being done to the trulls and the rest of the monsters, I was too distracted to ask.

The king had increased taxes across the board for seemingly no reason. No one benefitted from the increase but the king, and the royal coffers were overflowing with unused coins. The trulls had taken the worst of it, and I hate Orcus' dad even more than I did before. I don't know what became of him, but I doubt he's enjoying himself. The furies didn't exactly strike me as goddesses that would be merciful.

"Daisy," Harald prompts.

Right.

I swallow the sudden spike of fear. Orcus is otherwise occupied, but he already agreed to the plan. All I have to do is deliver the message. It's not like I'm doing anything bad, but I swear I see a few murderous glares in the crowd of trulls. To say they hate the crown is an understatement. That's all about to change.

At least, I hope.

Prometheus nudges my hand. I glance up at the dragon. Soon enough, it may not fit in the castle. Golden eyes gaze down at me, saying so much without a single word. Regardless of what the trulls decide, Prometheus will protect me.

I smooth my hand down the back of its neck and clear my throat again. "Thank you all for coming." An uneasy shift ripples through the crowd, but I charge on. "I've gone through the books and found some issues as it relates to the trulls and their tax payments."

"We're not paying more!" someone shouts.

Lagertha flings a knife into the crowd and trulls dive away from it. I avert my gaze, not wanting to see if the dagger made its mark.

"Let the queen talk or I'll flay ya myself," Lagertha growls.

I swallow again. "As I said, there was a discrepancy." Turning, I gesture for the minotaurs. They bring two chests forward and set them at my feet. A few coins slip out of one and roll across the floor. Harald squints at it, the chests, then looks at me.

"What are ya saying?"

"I'm saying," I begin with a soft smile, "That you've been unfairly taxed and this is our way of apologizing." I bend and open one chest and a few trulls gasp. "I can't make up for all the wrongs, but I hope this assures you that Orcus and I plan to rule fairly."

"My Queen," Lagertha says, voice choked. She falls to one knee and dips her head. Harald follows suit. Line after line, the trulls bow.

Mama. Prometheus chuffs, exhaling a roll of smoke that mists through the air. I smile at the dragon and think *sweet baby* before focusing on the task at hand.

“Please, rise. If you need help getting the chests home—” I cut off with a startled gasp at the sudden rush of trulls. I scramble away as dozens of trulls lift the heavy chests from the floor, hoisting them like ants carrying home a prize.

“We won’t forget this,” Lagertha says before whistling and directing the trulls out of the castle. Almost as quickly as they’d flooded it, the trulls leave. Only Harald lingers.

“Daisy.” He sniffs and swipes at his cheeks. “I can’t thank ya enough.”

“Don’t thank me. It was the right thing to do.”

He nods and wrings his hands, glancing longingly after the trulls.

“You know, I’m not really in danger anymore. You should go.”

“But what if you need me?”

“Then I know where to find you,” I say with a wink. “I’m honored to call you a friend, Harald.”

He blinks back a fresh wave of tears, face growing red. “I’ll be back to visit, don’t ya think I won’t.”

“I look forward to it.” I jerk my thumb toward where the trulls disappeared. “Now hurry up before they spend it all without you.”

Chuckling, he bows again and rushes after his friends. My chest is heavy as he leaves. I’ll miss him. I’ll even miss Lagertha. Prometheus makes a soft, pitiful sound, and I pat its head.

“I know.” And the worst part is, I have one more promise to fulfill and this one might destroy me.



PROMETHEUS' flying has vastly improved. The dragon can even carry me and Orcus without faltering now. It also helps that it never seems to stop growing. Wind rushes around us and Orcus' hands are casually wrapped around my waist. Moisture slips down my cheeks, and I pretend like the harsh rush of air is making my eyes water, when really it's the possibility of never seeing the dragon again.

Zyla and Harald had said Prometheus considers me its mother, but I know once the dragon sees its own kind, it'll want to stay.

The dragons live in the far reaches of the lands. It takes two days and three free roaming goats to travel into their territory. I expected some type of giant bird's nest, but what we find is more like a grouping of rocks and giant caves, much larger than the one I found Orcus in. The mountains out here are treacherously steep.

One moment we're flying solo, the next we're surrounded by a cluster of seven dragons twice the size of Prometheus. Their scales are all different colors; some bright and brilliant, others muted and subtle, but regardless of how beautiful their scales are, it's their eyes that really catch me off guard. The largest and closest has brilliant emerald green irises filled with knowledge and suspicion. Its scales are mostly muted green but there are hints of luminescent gold shimmering at the edges of each one.

Holy. Dragons.

Its gaze slips to Prometheus who has started to growl in warning. The larger dragon responds with a sharp noise and Prometheus suddenly changes course and we plummet toward the ground. The dragons follow us. Orcus holds me tighter. The dragon lands and we jolt to the left, but Orcus rights us. Tremors roll across the land as the other dragons land around us in a circle. We're surrounded.

Smoke is rolling out of Prometheus' nostrils and the little dragon is baring its teeth at the green-eyed dragon who tips his head to the sky and releases a stream of fire, hot enough to make sweat bead to the surface of my skin, into the air. The accompanying sound, somewhere between a growl and a high-pitched shriek, is nothing short of terrifying. Prometheus whimpers and drops its head low.

"This was a bad idea," Orcus grumbles.

"It'll be fine," I whisper.

The dragon—who I assume is the leader—lowers its head and glares at Prometheus. The baby trembles and the leader releases a stream of smoke, opening its mouth to reveal sharp teeth and making the baby dragon squeak.

Mama!

Prometheus is scared. Oh, hell no. Before Orcus can grab me, I step in between the dragons and glare at the bigger one. Concern flares in the bond.

"Don't you dare threaten Prometheus." I scowl at the leader who tips its head so it can look at me. "It's a baby. Whatever it did, it didn't know better." A burst of smoke rolls over me, and I choke a little but don't stop glaring.

You defend the child, a deep rumbling voice sweeps through my mind. It's ancient. I don't know how I know that but I do. This dragon before me has been around for a very, very long time.

"I do," I say even though this is 100% a *dumb way to die* moment.

A strong presence appears at my back, but I don't lean into the safety of my ogre's arms. I stand strong, if not a little shaky, and look the dragon in the eye. Something scrapes across my brain, like talons slicing through flesh, and I release a soft gasp, surprised but not in pain. Images—memories of me with Prometheus—flash through my mind, called forward by whatever magic the leader possesses. Orcus places a protective hand on my shoulder and steps beside me, ready to push me behind him at any given second.

“Daisy.” Say the word and I’ll find a way to get us out of here.

Mama. Prometheus butts its head against my hip and the leader’s attention slips to the smaller dragon.

It is unconventional, but Prometheus believes you are its mother. We will grant your request on one condition.

I arch an eyebrow. “What’s the condition?”

You take Septima with you.

Maybe that’s Prometheus’ real mom, I think.

No. The dragon’s parents died during a terrible storm. Zeus struck them down after they let their child toddle off for two days before looking for the babe.

That seems harsh.

To you, maybe, but Prometheus was only a few weeks old, barely able to walk let alone find food. We do not begrudge the sky god for his decision.

Glancing at Orcus, I relay the conditions. His gaze slips over the dragons and mine follow. Which one might be Septima? “We don’t have room for a full-size dragon in the castle,” Orcus says quietly.

Septima will find a place of their own. They will teach Prometheus our ways and the youngling will remain with who it believes is its mother.

That’s a fair deal. And even though I’m the queen of monsters, I dip into a low curtsy to show my thanks. It doesn’t take a genius to realize the dragons are outside of the umbrella of what Orcus and I govern. It would be foolish to assume they’d listen to us when they could smite us.

Some type of conversation flows through the ring of dragons in a series of chirps and growls and puffs of smoke. Five launch into the air, leaving the leader and a dragon with metallic red scales and vibrant golden eyes.

Septima.

I dip my head in respect as it studies me. In my periphery, I see Orcus do the same. Prometheus stumbles into me and I grunt, tripping over my own feet but catching myself before I go to my knees. The leader's head weaves toward Prometheus, and it growls at the little dragon again, this time less threatening and more like a teacher scolding a student. Prometheus drops its head.

Sorry, Mama.

"It's okay, sweet thing." I run my palm over the top of Prometheus' head. The two larger beasts watch our interaction with open curiosity. Clearly a dragon has never been raised by anyone other than a dragon. I glance at Septima. "I think we'll do a good job," I tell her. The red dragon releases a puff of steam. I can't tell if that's a yes or no, but I know Prometheus will be a good student.

The little dragon yawns and exhales smoke.

The babe tires. Septima will fly you home.

Without further goodbye, the leader launches into the air with a harsh gust of wind that whips my hair around my face. Septima dips a shoulder and stares at us until Orcus and I get the hint and clamber on. Prometheus stamps its feet in protest, but Septima releases a stream of fire to the side of the smaller dragon's head. Prometheus scurries up to join us on Septima's back, and I chuckle as the smaller dragon grumbles at me.

"You should listen to Septima."

I want to fly, Prometheus whines.

"You're tired," I say with a sigh. "It was a long flight here. Rest now and when we get back, you can hunt for dinner."

Fine. Prometheus tries to hide the spike of excitement, but I don't miss the way its eyes spark with delight.

"That was dangerous," Orcus grumbles.

"Oh it was definitely a *too stupid to live* moment for sure," I say with a laugh. "But did you hear how scared Prometheus was? I couldn't stand by and just watch." What kind of mother would I be if I allowed that?

“You never cease to amaze me,” Orcus murmurs into my hair, kissing the top of my head. “Have I told you how happy I am that you fell into my bathing pit?”

“Mmm. More than a few times, but I do love to hear how much you love me.” I grin at him, and he pretends to scowl at me, but seconds later the furrow of his brow breaks and he rolls his eyes and smiles.

“I love you too, grumpy.”

And there’s only one thing left to do.

FIFTY-ONE

And finally, a real throne

ORCUS

I find Daisy sitting on the throne wearing nothing but a skimpy black gown, the pendant Callum had given her dangling from her hands. That spell could rip her away from me. She watches me stare at the gem. She's brave in surprising ways, stubborn in exasperating ways, but the one thing that's certain: she's meant to be my mate. There was no accident. Daisy was always meant to be here. She can't leave. My chest tightens and I shift my gaze to meet hers.

I take a step toward her. "If you think I'm letting you go now—"

"I thought we might destroy it together."

"Destroy it?" Another step. Her head tips back, exposing that gorgeous throat. She's so delicate. Soft in ways I could never be. She's perfect. How did I get so lucky?

Daisy nods. "Yup. I think this sort of magic is dangerous to leave sitting around, don't you?"

Another step and I'm before her. I drop into a squat and study her face. "This is your last link to your world." It's so much to give up and I'd never ask her to do such a thing, but I'd be more than relieved if that thing was gone.

She shakes her head. "You know what Hecate told me."

Daisy told me everything after the ceremony, and I'd be lying if it didn't slightly terrify me that my mate snared the

attention of the goddess.

“I do, but the goddess moves in her own time. It could be lifetimes before she crafts a portal for her chosen and we don’t even know if you’ll be able to go through it.”

“I don’t think you understand.” Daisy sits forward, the fabric of the black dress dips dangerously low, exposing more of her cleavage and turning my thoughts in an entirely different direction.

My gaze tracks over that smooth skin. “Why don’t you explain it to me, My Queen.”

She grins. “This is my home. I don’t need Earth. Not when I have my friends, but most of all, I don’t need that world when I have you here with me.”

“Have I mentioned how sexy you are on that throne?”

Uncrossing her legs, she bares her naked cunt for a second before recrossing her legs. A wicked smirk breaks across her face at the low rumble of approval in my chest.

“Tease.”

“Help me break the spell.” She grabs my tusk and brings my lips to hers, but she doesn’t kiss me. Instead, she whispers, “and then I’m going to fuck you on your throne.”

My cock is painfully hard and it takes all my self-control to focus on the first part of what she said. Break the spell. Right. Easy enough. I take the gem from her hand and smash it into the floor, shattering the stone. Power bursts through the room, buzzing over my skin and making Daisy’s pupils dilate. She sucks in a breath as the stone walls around us tremble, but after a few seconds, whatever remnants of magic fade.

“Get off my throne, little flower.”

She complies, and I rip off my clothes before taking the seat, gazing at her in that scrap of fabric. Her thick red hair spills over her shoulders as she walks toward me, hips seductively swaying and pulling my attention to her hand playing over them, smoothing the fabric as she glides her palms in to cup herself.

“You know,” she says, voice a little breathy as she presses into her hand. “I’ve been dreaming about mounting you on that throne for weeks.” I pat my thigh. She licks her lips and closes the distance. “This is always my favorite part of the dream,” she whispers before climbing onto the chair and planting her feet on the arms.

I shove her dress up as her fingers dive into my hair. I lean forward and hook my tusks under her legs, bringing her right where I want her. She smells sweet and needy. Like temptation and nirvana. Teasing her with the tip of my tongue, I swipe through her heat, tasting her with a rumble of approval. She pushes herself toward my mouth, asking for what she wants like I taught her and who am I to deny my queen?

Gripping her hips, I smash her cunt against my mouth and taste every sinful inch of her. The flat of my tongue sweeps through her slit before I seal my lips around her clit and suck hard. She moans and bucks, coating me with her essence. My cock throbs but I take my time, thoroughly drawing out her first orgasm until she’s trembling so hard she’d fall off my tusks if I weren’t holding her up. Before she stops shuddering, I start to tease her again but she pulls my hair and tips my head back.

From this angle, I can barely see her eyes around the curve of her tits. It’s enough to make my dick leak with need. She’s fucking perfection as she is, but with her eyes hooded, cheeks flushed with pleasure I gave her, she’s a goddess, and I’ll worship her for the rest of my gods damned life.

I slide two fingers inside of her, and she bites her bottom lip. My thumb finds that sensitive nub and her hips roll into the touch as I knew they would. Her walls are velvety and slick around my digits and I scissor them inside of her stretching and prepping her to take me while I tease the prospect of another orgasm. She’s taken my cock quite a few times now, but I won’t be so careless as to not prepare her. Thanks to my saliva, her body shifts to accommodate me. By the time she whimpers my name, begging for mercy, I add a third finger and curl all three, stroking over that spot deep

inside of her. I watch as her eyelids flutter closed and her back arches, pushing her tits out as she grips my hair tight.

“Look at how pretty my queen is,” I murmur and slowly extract my fingers. “But you’d look even prettier sitting on my cock.”

She releases my hair and grasps my tusks as she climbs off the arms of the throne to straddle my hips. I pull the dress up and she lifts her hands. The fabric glides over her skin. Her nipples pebble in the cold air, and I lift her up so I can suck on my favorite one—the one on the right. Her desire drips onto my dick.

“Orcus,” she whines.

“Yes, My Queen.” I lower her hips and her hands find my hardened length, positioning me at her center. We watch as she slowly sinks onto my cock. Her nails dig into my shoulder when she takes me all the way. Her stomach bulges ever so slightly, but I know it isn’t painful when she begins to circle her hips.

“Fuck, it’s deep,” she rasps, but I don’t think she’s complaining. “I can feel you everywhere,” she continues, lifting her gaze to meet mine. “It shouldn’t be possible.”

I bring my face to hers and smirk. “It’s possible because you’re my mate.” I capture her lips and steal whatever other words she has to say. Daisy’s thighs clamp around me and she starts to move. I let her use me, let her take me however she can. I let her come first, moaning my name until she collapses onto my chest. Then I take over. I languidly work my hips in and out of her, loving how even after she’s spent, her walls clamp around me, like they’re desperate to keep me right where I am.

With a dark chuckle, I thrust up and she moans, grasping my arms. I wait, giving her a chance to tell me to stop. She doesn’t. I slap both my hands on her ass and grind her against me and thrust in again. Her lips close around my nipple and I grunt in surprise.

“Don’t stop,” she whispers before biting me. It’s firm, but not enough to hurt. “I need you to come inside of me, Orcus. *Please.*”

My chest swells with pride. She’s come so far. She’s not holding back now, and neither do I. She may not realize it, but every time I thrust inside of her, I make a promise. A promise to make her smile. A promise to protect her. A promise to love her until my last breath. A promise to give her everything she’s ever wanted. Her hands find my tusks, like they have a hundred times before, and it feels like home.

“Look at me,” she whispers.

Yes. A hundred times yes. My vision tunnels, and all I can see are those gorgeous green eyes watching me, waiting. She tightens around my length and I release a sound no ogre would be proud of, but Daisy simply grins and does it again. I realize as much as I thought I was in control, I never was. It’s always been her. I relent and give her everything she’s asking for, and she tugs me forward in time for her lips to capture the whisper of her name on mine.

My mate. My little flower. Daisy. *My Queen.*

Epilogue

DAISY

“They’ve found me, Daisy! They’ve found me!” Edgar shouts. “And I was zipping back and forth in that wheelchair like you’ve never seen, ready to take on whoever your mothers sent,” he tells his kids who are sitting around the large table in the private royal garden. They’re almost his age, but they look at him with child-like affection. They’re even smiling despite his reference to what he’d done. Edgar’s made up for all the time he’s missed and they’re as close as can be now.

His bushy eyebrows jump up his forehead and his gaze meets mine across the table, eyes dancing with mischief.

I’ve been queen for exactly a year, and he still thinks this is the funniest story he’s ever told. Shaking my head, I glance at Orcus who is wearing the goofiest grin I’ve ever seen. Orshana and her daughters are waiting for Edgar to finish the story. I don’t know why they’re all acting like they haven’t heard it before.

“But then Daisy opens the door, brave as can be, and scares the assassin away, but not before taking his weapon.”

“This is the best part,” Orana, age twelve now and far too young to be hearing parts of this story, whispers to Oraya. Oraya rolls her lips in and tries not to giggle.

“He was the mailman, Edgar. How many times do I have to tell you that? And it wasn’t a weapon, it was a—”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. It was your dildo.” More than one person laughs at my expense. “Biggest thing I ever saw. Probably should be considered a weapon if you ask me.”

Orcus’ hand finds my thigh under the table. “How big was it again?”

“If you ever want to get laid again—”

“This big,” Edgar interrupts, forming a big circle with his hands. “When I woke up, I thought for sure I’d finally run her off, but then I thought *Daisy would never leave without saying goodbye*. So then I started looking... and when I found the dildo in the bathtub, I was a little horrified.” He wrinkles his nose. “Getting herself off in my bathroom? What kind of caretaker was she? But then I saw the amulet. I realized what had happened and knew I had to find Daisy. She had no idea what she was in for. I got into the bathtub and made a wish and boom!” He slams his hand on the table. “I’m falling into a bathing pit and this big ogre is yanking me out by the collar of my shirt.”

“Wait, wait, wait.” Oretta holds up her hand. “You never said what you did with the dildo.”

“Maybe he used it,” Orlena teases.

Maddox, Orcus’ best friend and an Orlena super fan, bursts out laughing.

Edgar’s cheeks flush. “I’d never use a used dildo!”

“But you would use one?” Orlena asks. A warm breeze whips through the garden and tosses pieces of her black hair into the air. Maddox sucks in a sharp breath.

My dude has it bad.

“No, that’s not what I said.” Edgar huffs. “You’re missing the point of the story.”

“Oh, no, Edgar. I think we all want to know exactly what became of my beloved dildo.” I bat my eyelashes at him and the old man scowls at me. The look is so him that my smile only widens.

“I did what anyone would do. I took it out and threw it away.”

“Did you use gloves?” Maddox asks.

Orcus’ fingers flex on my leg and a wave of possessiveness rushes through the bond.

Edgar hesitates, flicking his gaze to Orcus. “I didn’t have time to think about gloves. I knew I needed to find her.”

“So, technically, you’ve touched Daisy’s va—”

“Don’t finish that sentence,” Orcus snaps at his best friend who gives me a smug smirk, more than pleased at having riled my mate.

“Right. And we all know the rest of the story from the thousand other times Edgar’s told it. Can we please stop talking about my dildo?” My cheeks flame as I say it out loud again.

Orshana chuckles under her breath. She’s an angel. She never makes me feel ashamed but that doesn’t mean I’m not embarrassed every time the story is told.

“Fine, fine.” Edgar sits back and glances at his kids. “Anyway, you all know how much I wish I could’ve come back sooner and made things right.”

Edgar’s guilt weighs him down, but Roland pats his shoulder and the old man glances at his son with watery eyes.

“It’s okay, Dad,” Roland says. “We’re happy you’re here now.”

“And I’m happy that story is over,” Cici says with a shudder. “Hearing my dad talk about dildos is wrong.” The others share sympathetic looks with her.

The air pressure changes and a swirling, shimmering portal appears a few feet away from the table. I open my jaw to pop my ears as we wait for Zyla to appear. We’ve all gotten so used to her showing up that we aren’t even fazed by the impressive display of magic.

“What did I miss?” she asks as she steps through, blonde hair whipping behind her. The simple black slacks and pretty cream top cling to her, and I don’t miss the way Orlena slides her gaze to Maddox to see if he notices. To his credit, the ogre doesn’t even spare the witch any attention.

Zyla flicks her wrist to close the portal, but before it can collapse in on itself, Callum jumps out, wearing his signature trouble-making smirk. The witch glares at him and finishes closing the portal. He winks at her and takes the seat next to Maddox. Zyla stares at the one beside him for a moment, as if willing it to explode. We share a look, and she rolls her eyes. *Don’t ask.*

The tension between those two is obnoxious. Callum is the biggest butthead, but Zyla is also one of the most stubborn people I’ve ever met. I can’t help but wonder when they’ll finally give in and start dating.

“Edgar was telling us the story about how he got back, again.” I arch an eyebrow. “You didn’t miss anything.”

“Did he already get to the dildo?” Callum asks, and Orcus nods. “Fuck. That’s my favorite part.”

I groan. “Can we please change the subject?”

“It’s officially been 8 hours since the time the trulls last flayed someone,” Orcus offers.

Maddox grimaces. “Actually, I was going to wait until after dinner to tell you, but a certain snake insulted Harald and Lagertha. Let’s just say the trulls will all have new boots before the week is over.”

While I know Basil was a nuisance, I still cringe at the image the news paints. My murderous little friends wield the sharpest—or maybe dullest—toe nails to get the job done. I can’t say I feel too bad though. Basil has been undermining Orcus’ command ever since he became king. At least this way, Orcus won’t be to blame.

“How’s the training going?” Zyla pours herself a goblet of wine and Callum snatches it out of her hand. She snarls at him

as he takes a sip. He hands it back to her but she doesn't take it. Instead, she grabs his cup and pours another drink.

"I don't think I'm built for fighting," I confess. Hours and hours have gone into teaching me to defend myself. While I can throw a punch effectively, I still hate doing it.

"You could be built for it if you'd just punch like you mean it." Orlena and Maddox share an exasperated glance. They've been doing the bulk of my training because Orcus can never seem to focus on fighting when we're on the mat together. That and I think the other soldiers complained about walking in on us more than a few times.

Zyla grins. "Daisy has a gentle soul."

"See?" I say to Orcus. "Besides, why do I need to know how to fight if you abolished the royal fights?"

"Because," he places his arm on the back of my chair and leans into my space, "someday someone may get brave and try to take what's mine."

I boop his nose. "Aw, grumpy, I love you too."

His eyes flash and in the next instant his lips are on mine. The collective groans from our guests breaks through my lust, and I push him away with a warning look. A strong, sensual stroke brushes over the bond. I shove a bucket full of sunshine in his direction and that big smile of his, the one that makes my heart skip a beat, bursts across his face.

I love his happiness too.

Twin, ear shattering screeches fill the air. All of us slap our hands over our ears and look up, watching Prometheus and Septima approach. Prometheus' pretty blue scales are so vibrant now that it's full grown. Under Septima's tutoring, the dragon has grown mentally as well. They land a hundred feet away and the ground tremors beneath their taloned claws which grasp at the earth.

While the others continue the conversation, I push away from the table and head to greet them. This is, after all, a family affair and Prometheus is like my giant deadly baby. Septima isn't too bad either. The large dragon studies me with

eyes that are wise beyond its years, and I dip my head as a sign of respect. The dragon blinks and then slowly returns the gesture. Prometheus' golden eyes sparkle and the dragon lowers its head for me to place my palm over.

“Hey there, little one.”

I'm bigger than you are.

“Well, you'll always be that tiny baby to me.” I rest my forehead on Prometheus and together we inhale, drawing air in for six seconds, and together we exhale. The warmth from Prometheus' breath wraps around me, an embrace I've come to love.

Mama.

“Are you hungry?” I pull back and scratch the spot under the dragon's jaw.

Always.

I glance at Septima. “And you?”

Goat?

“I had them bring twelve, six for each of you.”

Septima releases a pleased rumble. *You are a good queen.*

A grin tugs at my lips. “Thank you, Septima.” The kitchen staff is placing the meal on the table and three hands from the stable are ushering the goats over. I take a moment to take it all in. Edgar is telling another story to his kids, this time the tale just for them. He's so happy my chest clenches. Zyla and Orlena are whispering to each other and Callum and Maddox are watching the exchange with open curiosity. Orcus is distracted by some animated story Oretta is telling him, otherwise I'm sure Maddox would be looking anywhere else. Orana and Oraya are greedily grabbing their food and Orshana is watching it all with a watery smile.

Our eyes connect and she lifts an eyebrow. *Are you joining us?*

Nodding, I say goodbye to the dragons for now and take my place at the table. Orcus' hand immediately finds my thigh

and Zyla and Orlena check in with me, making sure I'm okay before continuing their conversations.

“And look, Daisy is back, I'm sure she agrees with me.” Oretta side-eyes me. Her dress is frilly beyond belief, but she's the only ogre I know that can pull it off. “Don't you think he'd look superbly kingly in a jabot?”

“I don't know, that's more a vampire get up, don't you think?”

“Daisy, the jabot isn't exclusive to the blood suckers.”

I give Orcus an apologetic smile. “In that case, I think he'd look rather handsome.”

Oretta gives a triumphant whoop, and the younger sisters laugh and tease their brother. My gaze finds its way back to Orshana who is watching me with such affection my breath catches in my throat.

I love you, she mouths.

Blinking back tears, I mouth it back and revel in the flood of love shooting down the bond. My heart has never been more full. I've never been so secure in knowing that people care for me. Those niggling whispers of doubt, those nights I spent crying when my mother didn't even so much as tell me goodnight, are distant memories. Everything this world has given me more than fills me with the love I always wanted.

This is my happily-ever-after. It's what I've always wanted. It's what I've always dreamed of. I never really thought I would get it. I definitely never thought it would come with new best friends, a fire breathing dragon, and the best mother-in-law I could ever ask for.

But most of all, I never thought I'd find a prince.

Orcus tugs on the bond and I turn to look at him. His navy irises trace over my face, and he slowly leans in. “This is where you belong,” he whispers. “Here, you're always wanted. You're loved.” He presses his lips to mine, softly, achingly. “And my big guy is to your little flower like my grumpy is to your sunshine.”

“You remembered,” I whisper against his lips.

“How could I forget the shortest story ever told?”

I laugh and grab his tusks, smashing his mouth against mine and ignoring the groans from our friends and family.

Don't you just love, love?

Hecate's Promise

Deep in the forest between the land of were-creatures and the land of vampires, a speck of magic appears seemingly out of nowhere. The wind howls and fallen leaves tumble together, as though vying for the magic's attention. The little speck shimmers, growing brighter and brighter and brighter until all at once everything goes still. The leaves collapse to the ground. The branches no longer sway. The breeze is gone. It seems as though everything is frozen, well, everything but that iridescent whirling magic.

The work of a goddess.

Expanding. Wider. Bigger. Taller. Reaching across the still night until it's big enough for an ogre to step through, only what comes next isn't an ogre. It isn't a monster that takes that first delicate step onto the still forest floor.

It isn't a witch or a warlock or a mage.

It isn't even a trull.

No. Rosy cheeks. Deep brunette hair, almost as dark as the night itself. Cupid's bow lips painted the most violent shade of red.

It's a human.

And her coppery blood and musky scent smells like supper... or endless nights to be filled with pleasure.

The only question is, will she make it out of this world alive or will she find herself mated to a most fearsome creature

with teeth as sharp as knives and dreams so filthy her legs
already clamp together with need?

The human tips her head to the side, as though sensing the
creatures waiting for her in the night, creeping closer at the
fresh scent of her arrival. And she smiles.

Tick, tock, little doe.

Time to run.

THE END

Acknowledgments

Thanks for reading Monster Mishap! I hope you loved Daisy & Orcus as much as I did. They were a lot of fun to write and I'm excited to explore this world some more. If you're interested in more from this world, please consider joining my group Rory's Readers for updates or leaving me a review.

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Lindslee. Goddamn. Fox of Twilight. Or whatever your name is. The character art is AMAZING. Thank you for making it so pretty and for hyping me up! You're the best <3.

To the readers, thanks for taking a chance on my first monster romance! I was a little nervous as I primarily write why choose omegaverse or paranormal romance, but I thoroughly enjoyed this adventure and I hope to write more!

Also By Rory Miles

[Knot for Me - How a Bad Omega Finds Love](#)

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Blood Taken

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Dead Wolf Walking

Dead Wolf Falling

Dead Wolf Rising

About the Author

Rory Miles is a fantasy romance author. She loves cats, memes, gifs, books, writing, her children and her husband. Especially when he makes fried chicken. She loves writing about romantic shenanigans and does her fair share of reading. Her all time favorite books are: #whychoose.

For new on more adventure filled romance, make sure to follow her on Facebook and Instagram.

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