

MONSTERS HOLLOW #1

The
Grac

and the **MANNY**

A COZY M/M MONSTER ROMANCE

CHLOE ARCHER

THE ORC AND THE MANNY

A COZY M/M MONSTER ROMANCE

MONSTERS HOLLOW

BOOK ONE



CHLOE ARCHER

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THE ORC AND THE MANNY: A COZY M/M MONSTER ROMANCE (Monsters Hollow 1)

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THE ORC AND THE MANNY: A COZY M/M MONSTER ROMANCE



**Welcome to Monsters Hollow, where love knows no bounds
—even in a town full of monsters!**

Targan Wildethorne

A confirmed bachelor, and a historian by training, I haven't the faintest clue how to care for twin orclings when I unexpectedly become their guardian. I'd love to retreat into the comforting sanctuary of my study, surrounded by my books and papers, but first I need to hire someone to help me with the children. Someone who can teach me the ropes of this new role.

Thank the Light for the All-Species Specialized Employment Services! In my most dire hour of need, they find the perfect nanny—ahem, *manny*—to help me look after my young wards. Now I can finally get back to writing my history of orc folklore for a few hours a day.

Or so I thought.

Instead I find the captivating new man in my home far too distracting. Max is so much more than I had expected. I've never fallen for a human before, but I can't get him out of my mind. Could he ever feel the same about an orc? Humans are usually too intimidated by our large size and outer appearance. Can Max look past my green skin and tusks to see a man with a heart that yearns for him? And if he does, when he learns the truth about the children will the danger on the horizon send him running?

Max MacLeod

Working with kids is totally my jam and I'm damn good at what I do. Just call me Maxy Frickin' Poppins! When a new job prospect comes my way, I'm intrigued. A chance to move to Mystic Hollow (aka Monsters Hollow) to be a well-paid nanny for two adorable orclings? Talk about a dream position. Sold! But when I lock eyes with the seriously sexy orc who's their guardian—and my new de facto boss—for the first time, I'm a goner. Big, muscular, and green all over—he's giving me full-on Hulk meets stern professor vibes—and I *like* it.

As I get to know him, over meals with the kids during the day and soft-spoken conversations about history at night, I soon realize there's so much more to Targan than the gorgeous orc who keeps starring in all my naughtiest dreams. He's quite possibly the kindest, gentlest man I've ever met. And he accepts and appreciates every part of me and my flamboyant, full-figured fabulousness. I just want to feed and take care of him—and find out if he's so deliciously big *everywhere*. Before I know it, I'm dreaming of being part of a forever family with him and his adorable twins. But an unexpected threat looms in the shadows that could threaten the safety of us all...

The Orc and the Manny is a (94k words) cozy small town M/M monster romance featuring a Hulkalicious silver fox orc professor who's better with books than kids, a flamboyant human nanny with ALL the skills (think Nathan Lane in The Birdcage meets Mary Poppins), an age gap, a size difference, a three-headed hellhound and a feisty rescue Chihuahua, two adorable orcling twins, and copious amounts of orc...joy!

CHAPTER 1



Orcs are broadly misunderstood to be a brutish and violent species. Their naturally powerful and muscular physiques tend to be intimidating to more fragile species of Otherkind, as well as to humans. However, orcs are keenly aware of their size difference in comparison to others and learn the importance of moving carefully in public spaces. If you encounter an orc who appears to be glowering, fear not. It is very likely they are concentrating on not bumping into anyone or knocking things over. With great size comes great challenges.

—*Green But Not Inherently Mean: A Nuanced History of the Orc* by Dr. Targan Wildethorne

Targan

“HOW DO MY TUSKS LOOK?”

Vash arches a dark eyebrow at me. “You’ve buffed and polished them three times in the last bloody hour. They damn well sparkle at this point.” He shakes his head. “You look very distinguished, as always. Quit your fretting.” His distinctive Scottish burr has barely faded over the last thirty years he’s been here in the United States, and I find it oddly comforting right now.

I run a comb through my short salt-and-pepper hair and frown at my bushy eyebrows. I’ve been told they make me look rather stern but there’s not much I can do about them. Sighing, I take off my gold-rimmed glasses and clean them.

Again.

“Targan, my old friend, you need to relax.”

Even I can hear the note of exasperation in Vash’s voice.

After settling my glasses back on the bridge of my nose, I begin to pace my study. “But he’ll be here soon. Everything needs to be perfect. First impressions are so important.”

We both hear a crash from somewhere upstairs and I cringe.

Light, save me!

Vash sighs. “Hiding in here isn’t going to help, let alone magically conceal the situation he’s entering into.”

Please don’t let him take one look and run away.

The thought has me nearly hyperventilating.

I head directly for the crystal whisky decanter and glasses on the sideboard behind my desk. More noises of chaos and laughter ensue upstairs. I grit my teeth, pour myself a double of the Highland single malt Vash bought me for Winter Solstice, and toss the warm amber liquid back with desperation. While I’m usually more civilized and prefer to savor the expensive spirit, right now I require liquid courage—and fast. The whisky burns going down my throat but creates a warm ball of temporary calm in my stomach.

Closing my eyes, I inhale deeply. “We can’t scare him off.”

I won’t survive it.

Vash sighs and leans against one of the floor-to-ceiling bookcases that line the walls of my personal sanctuary—currently the only safe place I can find any peace and quiet in my own home. “I know we haven’t had many promising applicants, but I think this guy is a perfect fit. I talked to him personally. He nailed the teleconference interview with the highest possible marks. My agency did an extensive background check on top of the one All-Species Specialized Employment Services conducted, and everything came up squeaky clean. This guy is legit and he has a ton of experience.

From what I saw, I don't think he'll be scared off easily either."

"But he's *human*." I wring my hands. "They can be so... delicate. I'm worried I might frighten him, or Light forbid, accidentally hurt him."

"Give yourself, and him, some credit. You're not thinking clearly right now. All your mind is doing is spinning worst-case scenarios, and that won't help anything."

I sigh and run a hand through my hair. "I'm just at my wits' end right now. If this man can't help me, I don't know what I'll do."

Goddess knows, I haven't been able to deal with everything on my own. For once in my life, my PhD in Otherkind History has been utterly useless. My carefully ordered world has been falling apart around me for days.

Weeks, if I'm honest.

I need a savior, and I need one now.

Vash crosses his muscular, gray arms. "Humans are hardier than you think. Besides, All-Species Specialized Employment Services has a stellar track record when it comes to their job candidates." He chuckles and strokes his chin in recollection. "This guy is no pushover, trust me. I have a good feeling about him. He's...saucy."

I'm not entirely sure what that means, but I'll listen to Vash's instincts. He's far more insightful about others than I tend to be. I do much better with my books. My current circumstances, however, have me ready to accept whatever salvation I can find. I haven't been sleeping, and the upheaval in my once orderly life is making me foolishly irritable and discomposed.

To say I don't handle the unexpected well is putting it mildly. All I want to do is retreat into the safety, silence, and comfort of my dusty tomes and stacks of papers. I need peace and harmony restored in my home.

Vash strides to my side and clasps my shoulder in his usual firm, reassuring grip. "You spend too much time cloistered

away here with your books and your papers. This change could be a good thing for you. Living like a hermit isn't healthy, even for an orc."

I sigh, feeling lost. It's become an uncomfortably familiar sensation of late. How could my life be turned completely upside down in only a few short weeks?

Vash's usually stoic features soften. "I know all of this is new for you. But you can handle it."

"You're right. I owe it to Sharna and her children." I choke out the words while I fight back tears at the thought of my best friend from childhood. Losing her is still a gaping wound inside even though it's been six months.

Vash's lip curls in a snarl and his eyes flash red. "I *will* avenge her. I swear it. Once I discover who betrayed us, I'll make them wish for a fast and painless death." He growls out the words as a loud roar of rage bubbles up inside him and his wings unfurl.

I'm an idiot. I shouldn't have brought up Sharna. Vash is a typical stoic gargoyle most of the time, but Sharna's death has hit him just as hard as it has me—maybe even more so. He still insists on holding himself responsible for what happened.

"It wasn't your fault, Vash. No one blames you, least of all me."

His countenance shutters and he turns away, his dark wings snapping back into place behind his back. "Who else should be blamed then? It was my people who were protecting her. I swore we'd be able to keep her safe." Now it's his turn to start pacing, his clawed hands clenching in obvious agitation. "It never should have happened. I should have been the one to watch over her myself."

Vash has been my rock the last few months as we've dealt with the fallout from Sharna's death and the custody nightmare with the children. Through it all though, I know he has been quietly tormented by an erroneous sense of guilt. He takes too much on himself.

And none of us expected a traitor in our midst.

“You were already on another assignment, one commissioned by your clan leader. You couldn’t have just turned it over to someone else midway through.”

Vash clenches his hand into a fist. “We lost her and two of my best agents.”

My heart aches. “I know, but Orrin’s and Mara’s deaths were not in vain. They were able to save Sharna’s children. You will see them again one day in the heavenly halls of Stonadaan.”

Vash shakes his head. “I cannot meet them again in the afterlife until I’ve avenged them.”

So stubborn, my dear friend.

“I will do whatever I can to help you. I too need to see Sharna’s killer, and the one who betrayed us, brought to justice.”

Before I can offer any further words of comfort, the sonorous gong of the doorbell echoes throughout the house and I nearly jump out of my skin.

“He’s here,” I whisper, trying to calm my racing heart. If this doesn’t work out, I might have a nervous breakdown and never get my manuscript finished by the deadline.

Please let this human be the answer to my prayers!

Vash straightens. “Everything’s going to be okay.”

For an instant, I maybe believe him. That is, until a wild cacophony of noise roars through the house, signaling impending disaster.

We look at each other and hastily exit my study just in time to see a screaming Yara wave a miniature battle-axe over her head as she chases her twin brother, Harn, down the curved flight of stairs. “Give it back! It’s mine!”

Harn clutches a book to his chest as he flees his sister. “It is not! Mom got it for both of us and I want to read it!”

Even at eight years old, the twins are larger than the average human child.

Stronger too.

Almost certainly louder as well.

How will a puny human survive this?

“Children,” I call out helplessly, “let’s all calm down.”

Yara ignores me and gives a bellow of rage as she charges after her brother with fire in her eyes.

She resembles a fierce warrior princess and reminds me so much of her mother that my heart hurts.

The doorbell rings again and out of the corner of my eye I spy my aged butler, Feldrick, steadily shuffle his way to the front door.

Just when I think things can’t possibly get any worse, an ominous baying sound echoes throughout the house. The twins’ pet hellhound is hot on their heels and eager to join in the fun as he draws near.

“Oh dear Goddess,” I whisper, my visions of restored peace in my home crumbling right before me.

Waffles comes tearing around the corner at the top of the landing, knocking over a decorative antique table before launching his enormous body after the twins, who both squeal in delight, seeming to momentarily forget their squabble in the face of new fun and mayhem.

Poor, nearly deaf Feldrick, his back hunched with age, remains oblivious—or more likely immune—to the madness around him as he opens the front door.

“Noooooo!” I yell and reach out a futile hand.

But I’m much too far away to prevent the inevitable as the stampede of doom from above reaches the entry hall and heads straight toward the open door.

And the gorgeous, purple-haired man standing wide-eyed on the front stoop.

CHAPTER 2



Not intimidated by fangs, scales, fur, or feathers? Open to the strange and unusual? Then you've come to the right place! All-Species Specialized Employment Services can help you find the right job just for you. We pride ourselves on finding the best position suited to each candidate's skills and expertise. Working with different species can be challenging but rewarding work. If you're willing to learn and have an open mind, bright new opportunities are just waiting to come your way.

*—The All-Species Specialized Employment Services
(A.S.S.E.S.) Handbook*

*M*ax

“WELL, PRINCESS PEACH, THIS IS IT.”

My sweet baby, a feisty rescue Chihuahua, gives a little yip of agreement and I scratch under her chin. She nuzzles me back with pleasure. Today she's wearing a cute little pink shirt with the words “I'm a princess” spelled out in silver sequins.

Princess Peach had a hard life before I rescued her. I don't know all the details, but the shelter found evidence that she'd likely been used for breeding purposes in a far from humane situation. They believe she was abandoned on the streets when she was no longer able to provide new litters of puppies for whatever illegal operation had been going on.

After her tough life on the streets, I decided she deserves to always look as fabulous as she is. She may have a torn ear and be missing half of her teeth, but she's beautiful through and through. I've matched our color scheme today by wearing a darling pink blouse with flowy pirate sleeves under my rainbow chiffon duster vest. The outfit is finished with a pair of shiny black leggings that hug my ample thighs and a sweet pair of purple ankle boots.

My foster mom would have been proud. I'm totally channeling my inner Stevie Nicks.

Adjusting my oversized purse—with everything a manny could ever need in a pinch—higher on my shoulder, I tuck Princess Peach gently under my arm and climb the steps to the front door of the enormous three-story Victorian. Painted gray with white and blue gingerbread lattice work, the home looks a bit tame for me, but I suppose I can see the classic appeal. It's still an impressive old house even with the bland exterior and I can't wait to get a peek inside.

After all, this is going to be our new home for the next little while, provided all goes well.

Pressing the doorbell button, I admire my freshly painted sparkly purple nails in the process. The fading twilight of evening starts to turn to darkness around me as I wait. It took me longer than I had planned to get here.

I hear the bell chime loudly within but get no response.

After several long moments, I ring it again. They are expecting me after all. Right?

Just when I'm about to press the bell a third time, the door slowly creaks open to reveal an orc with wispy white hair and stooped with age. He's wearing a butler's livery and shuffles to the side as if to bid me enter. I have a fraction of a moment to stare into the large entryway of the house before my brain has to process a whole lot of chaos all at once.

Two young orclings, presumably my charges, are headed my way as they chase each other. One of them is holding—is that an axe? Off to my left, I spy the intimidating but gorgeous

gargoyle who interviewed me for the job—*hello, sexy*—but I stop breathing when I lay eyes on the man beside him.

This orc is *not* old and he's hot like fire.

He's rocking full-on Hulk meets stern professor vibes and I am *so* here for it.

Unfortunately, I also suspect he's my new boss.

I don't have more than that flicker of an instant to admire him because an enormous three-headed creature comes barreling straight toward me as the two little orclings it's chasing deftly feint one direction and then swerve out of the way at the last second, leaving me to face my fate.

Talk about a trial by fire in my first few seconds on the job.

Also, why the heck did no one tell me there was a motherfreaking hellhound in this house!

On instinct, I tuck Princess Peach's head carefully in my armpit so I can cover both her ears. She settles in, trusting me implicitly, as always. Then I lift the whistle around my neck and give it a sharp blow, bringing the hellhound to a whining, screeching halt a few inches in front of me.

Phew! That was a close call.

As tall as the enormous front entrance, the gigantic beast towers over me, tongues lolling out of its three heads, momentarily dazed and confused by the dog whistle I always carry with me. You'd be surprised how handy it is when my baby and I go on walks. There are too many idiots out there with no control over their unleashed dogs, and I sometimes have to protect my precious little angel.

I reposition Princess Peach in the crook of my arm where she settles happily and kiss the top of her soft little head, getting a lick of appreciation in return before I take a deep breath and call forth my most dominant voice to utter the order, "*Sitz!*"

The hellhound cocks its three heads and looks at me confused.

Maybe he hasn't learned German commands? That's what my dog trainer taught me. Hmm...

Princess Peach snarls at him.

He immediately drops his rump to the floor with a ground-shaking thump.

I beam. "*Platz!*" I order next.

The hellhound cocks his three heads in the other direction, acting clueless.

My precious fur baby lets out a guttural growl and snaps out a warning.

The enormous beast lies in the down position, ears on each head flat, but all three tails wagging hopefully.

"*Gut,*" I praise as I reach into my purse—so much classier than Mary Poppins's carpet bag—to pull out a plastic baggie with my stash of dog biscuits, then pluck out a handful. I'm fairly certain they're fine for a hellhound if my dog can eat them.

After all, I baked them myself.

I give one to Princess Peach first because she's such a good girl, then I toss one to each of the hellhound's mouths. The beast crunches on them happily while I step forward to pet him, his dark coat of hair thick and soft beneath my hand. I smile. "What's your name, big boy?"

He nuzzles one huge head into my hand while the others whine for attention.

"That's Waffles," the little boy pipes up from the corner by the door, looking wide-eyed.

"What a great name! Is that his favorite food?"

The little girl pops out from behind her brother. "How did you know?"

I chuckle. "Lucky guess."

Mr. Hulkalicious comes striding toward us, a scowl on his rugged, square-jawed face.

“Hello, Daddy,” I whisper breathlessly to myself.

Evidently, not quiet enough.

He comes to a halt and frowns. “What?”

Get your act together, Max!

“You must be the daddy,” I say more loudly and nod to the two children.

He blinks in surprise. “Oh...well, I suppose that’s close to the truth. I’m not their biological father, but I am their permanent guardian now.”

Oops! Close one.

The man—er, orc—looks so adorably lost just saying those words that my heart starts to melt like a stick of butter in the microwave.

I’ve always been a bit of a softie, but this man immediately has my caregiver instincts on high alert.

The poor guy is disheveled and appears more than a little out of his depth—and probably at the end of his rope. He’s wearing tan slacks and a white button-down shirt with a tie, but the clothes are rumpled and his short salt-and-pepper hair is tousled like he’s been running his fingers through it. The bags under his pretty amber eyes speak volumes.

Well, he won’t have to worry any more now that I’m here.

“Dr. Wildethorne, right?” I reach out my free hand to shake his. “I’m Max MacLeod. ASSES sent me over. I’m your new manny.”

The children start giggling and snorting.

My new employer’s large, green hand engulfs mine, making me feel small for the first time in my life as he shakes it gently. The sleeves of his dress shirt are rolled up to reveal his thick but defined forearms. It’s almost like he knew one of my major weaknesses in advance! I’m going to have *so* many dreams about those forearms.

His touch is warm and oh so careful. *Swoon!* By all that is holy, I want to feel those hands *all* over my body.

When he lets go, I have to fan myself. Damn it. I *cannot* be getting turned on by a handshake.

“You said a bad word!” the boy shouts with glee.

I wink at him. “Sorry about that. Entirely unintentional. I was talking about the company that hired me, All-Species Specialized Employment Services. It’s their acronym, so it’s not technically a swear word in this context.”

The side-eye he gives me is one hundred percent calling bullshit, so I beam at him and reach back into my purse for the gift I prepared. Redirection is always an effective strategy. “You must be Harn. I’m Max. Hope you like chocolate chip cookies because I made some just for you.” I pull out the plastic bag tied with a green bow and hand it to him.

His eyes, which are the same amber color as Dr. Hottie Orcalicious’s, go wide. “You can make cookies?” The note of amazement in his voice is reassuring. If I can win him over with food, I’ve got this in the bag.

The bag of cookies, no less.

“I can bake all kinds of yummy things. We’re going to make and eat lots of fun food together.”

Harn starts shoveling cookies in his mouth as if he hasn’t eaten in days and I turn to his sister. “You must be Yara. Mr. DarkWing has told me a lot about you and your brother.” I hand her another bag wrapped with a gold ribbon. “He mentioned that you like peanut butter cookies.”

She licks her lips as she stares at the bag. Momentarily distracted, she hands her mini-axe to the butler who disappears with it—thank goodness!—before taking the cookies. I’m rewarded with a huge smile that curves around her wee baby tusks. *Too stinking cute.*

Opening the gift more carefully than her brother had, she pulls out a cookie and takes a bite. Her eyes flutter closed and she sighs dreamily. “These are awesome.”

I give an internal sigh of relief. Bribing children with baked goods is often a solid starting point in my experience.

Waffles decides he's bored of sitting around when no one is paying attention to him and moves closer to sniff at Princess Peach.

Her lip curls in response and she snarls at him again.

Waffles whines and prostrates himself on the floor.

My employer turns to the hellhound with a disapproving look. "Waffles, what did we talk about when it comes to playing in the house?" His voice is firm and oh so fucking deep, but also gentle.

Fuck me sideways. I sort of want to get scolded by him too.

Waffles's three heads droop and I watch in amazement as he starts to shrink down to the size of a Great Dane. Still big but a heck of a lot more manageable, especially inside the house.

My new boss smiles warmly. "Good boy."

He says those words in a way I wish was directed at me. Holy hotness, this orc is bringing some seriously sexy mojo without even trying. How am I going to live under the same roof with that much man-candy and behave myself?

The gargoyle who interviewed me in the final round with ASSES steps forward, arm extended. "Glad you made it, Max. I hope your journey here wasn't too bad." We shake hands and I appreciate that he's careful as well, especially given his gray-skinned fingers have short, thick claws at their tips. "Excuse my friend. He's a little overwhelmed by everything these days. He's not used to having kids around so this is a whole new experience for him. I'm sure you'll be able to help everyone adjust to this unexpected arrangement." He gestures around him. "Welcome to your home. We hope you'll be happy here."

"Mr. DarkWing—"

"Please, call me Vash. I'm sure we're going to be seeing a lot more of each other. I come over when I can to help out Targan and the kids." His Scottish accent is still superhot, but I find I'm more drawn to his hunky friend.

“Thank you, Vash. I appreciate that warm welcome.”

“Er...yes, welcome,” my far-too-sexy boss offers belatedly, his cheeks flushing a darker shade of mossy green. He clears his throat. “Children, let me properly introduce you to your new caretaker. This is Max. He’ll be watching over you while I’m working.”

I bend down closer to their level, although I don’t have to go too far. They’re bigger than the average human child of eight, but at five foot ten, I’m still taller than them for now. “It’s good to meet you both. I hope you enjoyed the cookies I brought.” I notice they’re all gone. Boy, was that fast! “I’m going to be your new manny.”

My manny mode has already been activated and I’m making a mental list of things to remember. Cookie baking is probably going to be a weekly activity for us from now on. After all, baked-goods rewards are always a solid motivation with most kids—and I make some damn good cookies!

“What’s a manny?” Harn asks me, his round-cheeked face smudged with chocolate. I have to fight back a squee at his cute little baby tusks poking out from his bottom lip.

“It’s a term for a male nanny. I’m here to help take care of you and get you ready for the transition to public school in the fall.”

Harn’s shoulders slump and he collapses to the floor in a melodramatic heap. “School? I’m sick of school!”

What a little ham. We’re going to have so much fun together.

“Me too,” Yara says, crossing her arms over chest and jutting her chin out. “Homeschool was boring.”

Ah, she’s the fearless and strong-willed one. Facing down an adult, especially a stranger, is a scary prospect for many kids. Bold and brave—I love it!

I laugh. “Learning can be fun with the right teacher. Besides, at public school you’ll get to make new friends and have a lot more fun. It’s going to be great.”

They don't look convinced despite my enthusiasm, but I'm not worried. My mind is already awhirl with plans for fun but educational activities we can do in the upcoming months to get them ready for fall.

Dr. Wildethorne clears his throat. "I'm sorry for the rather chaotic welcome. The children are quite...energetic. Let me show you the house and your quarters. I know you've had a long journey here."

"The drive was nice but longer than I expected." I hesitate. "I have a number of things in my car outside—"

"I can get your bags, sir." The elderly butler has reappeared like a ghost at my side.

I startle and clutch my hand to my heart. How the heck did he sneak up on me like that?

"Don't worry about it, Feldrick. Isn't it almost time for your show to start? I'll bring Max's things up to his room," Vash offers.

The butler smiles softly, the wrinkles in his face becoming more pronounced with the action. "Most kind, sir. I do find *The Young and the Monstrous* very entertaining. Thank you." Then he shuffles off to his own devices once again.

Vash turns to the kids, his features softening as he smirks. "Okay, weans, how does an hour of screen time before baths and bed sound?"

"Uncle Vash rules!" Harn yells.

"Thank you, Uncle Vash!" Yara does a little happy dance.

As he unlocks a cabinet and hands them each a tablet, the children crow in victory and race off with their devices.

I study the intriguing gargoyle. He's just as big and muscular as Dr. Wildethorne, but he has a more dangerous vibe to him. I get the impression he's not the kind of guy you want to mess with. However, although he might look a bit scary on the outside, I'm beginning to suspect he's a rather tenderhearted guy underneath, at least for those he cares about.

It's clear he loves the children and their guardian. My gut tells me he's someone I can trust.

Dr. Wildethorne slumps with relief. "That will keep them occupied until it's time for bed. Thanks, Vash." He turns to me with tired eyes. "Shall we start the tour? You'll have plenty of time tomorrow to get to know the place better."

I have to fight back an urge to hug this poor man. He looks utterly exhausted and out of his depth. "A quick tour would be great. I can explore more tomorrow with the twins after a good night's rest."

He gives me a grateful smile and proceeds to lead Princess Peach and me around the grand old Victorian, but I have trouble focusing on anything but him. I've never met an orc before and I'm starting to realize I've got a bit of a problem. To put it bluntly, I'm insanely attracted to this man and want to climb him like a jungle gym.

He's big and broad—his bulky torso and sizable arm muscles look like they're a hot minute away from ripping the fabric of his dress shirt at the seams. Wouldn't that be something?

Honey, you can Hulk out on me any day.

I'm not a small man by any stretch of the imagination. All my life I've been what one of my teachers used to call "husky," but I prefer to think of myself as full-figured and fabulous. My thick thighs and meaty ass are some of my best assets and deserve to be worshipped accordingly.

I'm no gym bunny and I don't pretend to be. My stomach is rounded and soft, and I've learned to love it over the years. I'm a man who likes to eat. There's no low-carb nonsense happening all up in this! I bake my own bread every week and could out-Martha Martha Stewart.

But as a result, it isn't often I meet a man I am totally confident could pick me up, carry me, and manhandle me in the very best ways possible without breaking a sweat—or his back. *Mmmmm*. But Dr. Targan Wildethorne fits that bill. Just watching his broad shoulders and muscular body navigate the

house with surprisingly graceful but careful movements due to his size is a treat. It makes me want to explore whether *all* of him is so deliciously big. Next to him, I feel almost dainty.

I have *never* felt dainty before.

He shows me through the house, regaling me with its unique history in his soft, super deep voice that resonates all the way to my core. The man should narrate audiobooks. His rumbly baritone is both sensual and supremely relaxing.

By the time we reach my quarters on the second floor, my eyelids are drooping and both Princess Peach and I can't refrain from yawning. We drove a good ten hours in my beat-up old Toyota with, for all intents and purposes, all my worldly possessions crammed into the back.

As a manny for hire, I've learned to embrace minimalism as much as possible. Being able to fit everything I own in my car when I'm ready to move on to the next family is a godsend. Thankfully, I've had the ability to be selective in the jobs I've decided to take over the years, always opting for live-in positions that have provided room and board.

It also makes it that much easier to pack up and go. I've never had to cart around furniture or deal with breaking a lease. Where I do allow myself to indulge, of course, is in my clothing and accessories, as well as my cookware for baking—and, of course, Sally's cookbook. Then there's all of Princess Peach's stuff too. My baby needs her own wardrobe and coordinated stash of toys, after all!

The small apartment I've essentially been given is impressive. Right away, I can tell it's the nicest setup I've ever had. My quarters consist of a large bedroom, a small adjoining sitting room, and an en suite full bath with a clawfoot tub that I *fully* intend to enjoy on a regular basis. The space is furnished with older antique furniture that is tasteful and sturdy, and the original wood floors are polished and clean. When I go to the window, I see that I have a stunning view of the lake.

I turn to my boss and grin. "This is lovely and will suit me very well, Dr. Wildethorne."

For an instant, I swear he flushes again, his green cheeks darkening for a moment as he scratches almost nervously at his yummy five o'clock shadow. "Ah, yes. About that. Please, call me Targan. Since you intend to be on a first-name basis with the children and Vash, you and I should do the same." He adds hastily, "If that's alright with you, that is."

He is too freaking sweet.

I peer up at him—he's got to be at least six foot five, a good half a foot taller than me—with a grin. "That sounds wonderful, Targan." I roll his name on my tongue, liking how it sounds. "Thank you."

He clears his throat and steps back. "Very good. Well, I'll leave you to get comfortable." He gestures toward the corner of the room where everything from my car is now neatly stacked. "Vash has brought up all your things and moved your car to the garage."

I slump with relief. Vash DarkWing is my hero. After my long journey here, I didn't have it in me to haul all of this into the house and up two flights of stairs. Bless the man—I mean, gargoyle.

"I'd love to thank him for his generous help. Are there any baked goods he particularly enjoys? Bread? Cookies? Muffins?"

Targan's thick brows scrunch up in thought. His glasses give him a bit of a Clark Kent nerdiness that I am eating right the fuck up.

"He's originally from Scotland and I know he loves fresh scones with butter and jam. He claims good ones are hard to get around here."

I clap my hands together, unable to contain my glee. "That's perfect! The children and I will invite him over soon for tea and fresh scones."

He regards me with a glimmer of something in his eyes that makes my pulse quicken. "That's very kind of you. I'm sure he would be delighted to join us."

“Wonderful. Don’t worry,” I add with a wink, “I’ll eventually figure out what you like too.”

Targan studies me intently and opens his mouth as if to say something when Princess Peach disrupts the electrical energy building between us by pawing at my leg to be picked up. I reach for her and Targan retreats to the door.

“Tomorrow morning, I’ll meet with you in my study downstairs at 8:00 a.m. so we can go over some more specifics about the children and your responsibilities. Does that sound acceptable?”

“Of course, I’ll see you then. Good night, Targan.”

He gives me an awkward nod and leaves, closing the door softly behind him.

I sit down on the enormous four-poster bed and sink into the heavenly soft mattress. Princess Peach sniffs around a bit before flopping onto her back and rolling around happily. Evidently she likes the bed too.

“Well, Peaches,” I tell her. “It looks like this is going to be our most interesting job yet.”

And I suspect one filled with a whole lot of big green temptation.

CHAPTER 3



Orcs are known to have a rather competitive drive. Striving to be the best is a prevailing mentality among the species, and something taught within orc family and kinship structures. It is why so many orcs excel at the things they choose to pursue—they are strategic and self-aware, opting to find avenues in life that allow them to make the most of their greatest talents and strengths. While this has produced many powerful and famous orcs throughout history, it also points to a rarely discussed weakness. Such single-minded focus can often come at the expense of important relationships with family and friends, as well as with one's community more broadly. As with all things in life, balance is essential but often easier said than done.

—Green But Not Inherently Mean: A Nuanced History of the Orc by Dr. Targan Wildethorne

T argan

DIRTY DREAMS about the new nanny—er, manny—torment me all night long.

I'm quite confounded by my brain's sudden and rather insistent fixation on this human man. From the moment I saw him standing in my doorway, taking on a full-sized hellhound without the faintest hint of fear, I was intrigued. The fact that the man is incredibly attractive took my budding interest to the next level. I've always preferred partners with some meat on their bones, and Max is sweetly rounded in all the right places. Like most orcs, I tend to like partners with enough padding to

enjoy an enthusiastic pounding should we get carried away in the bedroom.

When I get out of bed at my usual time, I scold my libido. After all, I need to focus on my manuscript that has been languishing ever since the children came to live with me. Or if I'm really being honest, ever since Sharna was killed nearly six months ago. The aftermath, including the custody case, has been a lot to deal with.

In the privacy of my shower, my rock-hard cock refuses to listen to rational arguments, demanding gratification before I can begin my day.

As I stroke myself to completion, grateful for the shower's convenience since orc ejaculations can be quite copious and messy, my mind conjures up images of Max. Already, I wonder what he looks like underneath those colorful clothes he was wearing.

Once clean and sated for the moment, I go through my morning ablutions and scold myself anew. Max was hired here to do a job. He doesn't have time to indulge my desires. Even if he did, there's absolutely no guarantee that he'd reciprocate my interest. I don't want to scare him off just when I need him most. From my personal experience, as well as my scholarly research, I've found that humans tend to be wary of my species. I was honestly surprised that he agreed to take a position caring for two orclings.

The differences in orc physiology are off-putting to our usually smaller human counterparts. Furthermore, it doesn't help that many of their stories have erroneously envisioned orcs as monstrous, battle-minded brutes who are all about violence and bloodshed. Tolkien certainly didn't do us any favors when he wrote his fantasy novels! He never should have consulted a fake expert on orcs. What a travesty.

To be fair, there are some violent orcs in this world, just as there are violent humans. Sharna's abusive ex-husband is an example of that. However, most orcs use their naturally muscular physiques to help others or to create. My mother had been a doctor who treated across species in our community,

and my father was a master carpenter who used his strength as well as his creative talent to craft beautiful pieces of furniture for all shapes and sizes of beings, from giants to leprechauns. They're both retired now and enjoying their twilight years together here in Mystic Hollow. It's one of many reasons I chose to settle here when I took my own early retirement from academia after spending several decades teaching and conducting research at a number of prestigious universities around the world.

At forty-eight, I found I was surprisingly lonely. In my years-long quest to become the preeminent scholar in my field, I had ignored important relationships in my life—including the one with my family. I needed to take the time to rebuild some of those bonds.

Prior to moving here, I'd never lived in a Sanctuary Haven before, but I have quickly grown to love the peace and quiet of a small town where I feel completely safe and free to be myself for the first time in my life. Growing up, I'd lived with my parents in New York City where Mom had worked for a massive hospital dedicated to Otherkind health care. My academic studies eventually took me to Oxford University until I completed my PhD and then several different countries over the years. Although I built a highly respected professional reputation in the human world, I never felt like I was wholly welcomed or entirely trusted. My skin color, my size, and my tusks always seemed to overshadow my stellar intellect.

Early retirement became more of a realistic possibility for me when I began to see success publishing nonfiction Otherkind history books aimed at a more general audience rather than an academic one. I hit upon a niche category that readers flocked to with enthusiasm, especially humans curious about the history and folklore of different Otherkind species. When I secured my first seven-figure publishing deal, I took early retirement to write full-time and reconnect with my parents and Vash, who'd moved here to start his own business and put some distance between him and certain members of his clan.

I scrutinize myself in my full-length mirror. For the first time in quite a while, I am presentable in the manner I prefer to be, and I actually have high hopes I can keep my attire in pristine condition most of the day. Since the twins came to live with me, I've found it to be a bit of a lost cause. My preferred clothing leans toward professional and is poorly suited to chasing after and wrangling rambunctious children and a boisterous hellhound on a daily basis. But today, I can actually sit at my desk and work on my manuscript. To that end, I've dressed in a crisply ironed pair of gray linen slacks, courtesy of Feldrick as I am hopeless with such things, and a pale lavender button-down shirt that contrasts nicely with the sage green color of my skin.

There is no particular reason for caring about my appearance today. I am absolutely *not* trying to impress Max.

I opt for a more casual gray bow tie, hoping it gives me a less severe appearance.

Again, no special reason.

As I comb my hair, I reflect on the fact that it's getting warmer now that we're only a few weeks from the summer solstice. Although the mornings can still be cool and misty, it's often warm enough by midday that I need to unbutton my cuffs and roll up my shirtsleeves. Before long I'll have to shift to my short-sleeve dress shirts.

When I make my way down to my study, I can hear the sounds of the children eating breakfast and making a ruckus in the kitchen. Thankfully, Feldrick is managing their morning meal today while I prepare to talk with Max about his duties. Honestly, I cannot fathom where children get so much boisterous energy first thing in the morning, let alone how it can last all day long. My parents have tried to assure me that I was much the same in my youth, although perhaps a bit more inclined to finding odd places to curl up with a book, but I have trouble believing I was ever so loud and...lively.

I sigh just thinking about my parents. They came and helped out for the first two weeks after Harn and Yara moved in with me, but they were scheduled to take a trip together that

they'd been planning for several years. Of course they offered to stay, but I refused to let them cancel their plans. After all, I have a doctorate. Surely I should be able to care for two children without relying on others.

Ah, how naive I was.

My parents, being far smarter, had insisted Feldrick move in and help in their stead. He's been with our family for many years and he has helped me keep my head above water since my mother and father went on their trip. No one knows quite how old he is, but he's shrunk a bit with age, which only happens to orcs when they've made it to very advanced years.

I find my usual morning breakfast tray waiting for me in the study—a French press with hot steaming coffee and a plate of scrambled eggs and toast. The coffee is passable but I eat the food with minimal enjoyment. Feldrick is adequate at making simple meals but his cooking is by no means spectacular, especially when one eats the same few things he can prepare on a daily basis. Still, I can't complain since I'm even more hopeless in the kitchen. I spent years in school relying on the cafeteria and coffee shops near campus to provide most of my food.

I'm sipping the last of my coffee when I hear a knock on my door and sit up straight, heart racing with hope and trepidation. Is it Max? Or is Feldrick coming to inform me the children have set the kitchen on fire?

“Come in.”

To my relief and pleasure, Max MacLeod sweeps into the room as if he's walking onto a stage for an enthusiastic crowd. Today he's wearing a vibrant knee-length multi-colored caftan cinched at the waist with a wide belt and paired with white leggings that encase his shapely legs. Bangle bracelets adorn his wrists and he's lined his full, plump lips in a tinted gloss that makes them look ripe for kissing. He's trailed by his little dog who's clad in a rainbow tie-dye shirt with the word “fierce” stitched on the back.

He gives me a sunny smile as he floats into a chair opposite my desk and plucks up his pooch, positioning her in

his lap, and then studies me with his mesmerizing bright blue eyes.

“Good morning, Targan.”

Hearing my name on his lips sends an unexpected shiver through me and I frown. Evidently, this allure he holds for me isn't a fleeting thing. It's odd because I'm not usually one to experience such instant attraction toward another.

But there's something about Max that is utterly captivating. I can't ignore my reaction to him. As a scholar, I know all too well that outliers are not to be dismissed cavalierly. Max seems to be a most unusual anomaly to enter my world—and I don't quite know what to make of him, or my attraction to him, just yet.

Rationally, I recognize that I haven't had a sexual partner in several years. No doubt biological needs I was not entirely aware of have surfaced at a very inconvenient time. However, I can't simply use that as an excuse to explain away my avid and immediate interest in Max. I feel something stronger and more instinctive within me that draws me to him in a way that is completely foreign.

It certainly complicates things.

Pushing those problematic thoughts aside, I give him my full attention. “Good morning. I trust you slept well?”

He sighs dreamily as he pets his dog, who basks in the attention, a look of pure bliss on her little face and her enormous, pointed ears twitching with delight.

“Honey, that bed in my room is absolutely divine. I don't think I'm ever going to want to leave here.”

Something deep in my belly rumbles with satisfaction at the idea of Max never leaving.

I blink in surprise and clear my throat. “Ahem. That's good to hear. I'm glad to know your quarters are satisfactory.”

He sweeps one hand through the air, making the bangles on his wrist jangle. “More than! The room is wonderful.”

I stare at him for a moment and his smile goes megawatt bright. “You mentioned you wanted to talk with me about my duties. I’d like to get that squared away before I begin the day. Nothing like the present and all that.”

My cheeks warm. “Of course. I know that Vash has spoken with you about some of the requirements for the position, but I figured we could iron out details together and make sure we’re on the same page.”

He nods eagerly. “Absolutely. In fact, I think it would be advisable for us to come to some kind of consensus on a schedule for the children.”

I perk up. “A schedule?” Children can have schedules? For some reason, that thought had never occurred to me.

For the first time in my life, I begin to question the value of my PhD.

Max winks at me and it’s like a reward that sends a zing of awareness straight to my balls. “Children thrive when they have order and routine.” His smile fades. “And given the little I know of the trauma Yara and Harn have experienced, they’re going to need that more than ever to rebuild their sense of safety and security in their new home with you.”

This man is speaking my language—I thrive with a schedule and order in my life as well. Max talking about re-establishing order and routine in this house gets me far hotter and more bothered than it should. I shift in my seat as my cock throbs. “That makes a lot of sense. I have my own schedule, but I never actively thought about creating one for the children. I’ve tried to establish some set times for certain things, but it’s been hard to be consistent and a lot has fallen by the wayside in recent weeks.” I wince. “In all honesty, I feel like I’m being constantly pulled in multiple directions, trying to get work done on my own projects while also attempting to entertain the children and keep them appropriately occupied. It hasn’t been going well.”

To my amazement, Max rises from his seat and leans forward across my oversized desk until he’s nearly lying half across it and takes hold of my hand, giving it a gentle squeeze.

His touch is soft and downright electrifying.

I feel a strange pang of loss when he lets go and pulls his hand away before settling back in his chair.

“Don’t worry, that’s exactly what I’m here for. My first suggestion is to make sure we establish a few areas of overlap between your schedule and the children’s. After all, it’s important that you commit to spending some quality time with them each day. This will help build your own relationship with them and their sense of belonging.”

“Our family therapist mentioned something similar at our last appointment,” I admit. “Tell me what you’re thinking.”

He returns to stroking his dog’s head and she groans with happiness. “That’s wonderful. Working with a family therapist together will be a huge help. I’m so glad to hear you’ve been proactive about doing that.”

“The principal at the children’s new school where they’ll be enrolling in the fall recommended it, actually. We’ve only just started going together but I’m making it a priority.” I squirm in my seat. “I have to be upfront with you. This whole situation has been trying on me. I never imagined having children. Adapting to newfound parenthood has not been easy for me.”

Max cocks his head, but his face is clear of any kind of judgment. “Vash suggested as much in our interview. In other words, for you, fatherhood is basically like having to become an expert in a completely new discipline. But you have to start from scratch rather than build on your scholarly background?”

I sigh in relief at his understanding. “Indeed. That’s a perfect analogy. Just like I’ve been an expert on Otherkind history for most of my adult life, I’ve also been a confirmed bachelor who hasn’t lived with others in years. Usually I’m more interested in books than people.”

“Oh! I’ve actually started reading one of your books on orc history,” Max offers with a winsome smile. “It’s quite fascinating. Better than most nonfiction books. I tend to prefer fiction.” He sighs. “Give me a good gay romance any day!”

“Well,” I offer without thinking, “if you have any questions while you’re reading it, don’t hesitate to ask me.”

Max’s eyes sparkle at me. “Deal! Now, back to my proposed plan to get started. Vash and Feldrick have brought me up to speed on how things have been operating thus far and I have thoughts. First and foremost, I think you need to share at least breakfast and dinner together with the children every day, barring any special events or other things that might interfere. Having a consistent routine where they see you at the beginning and the end of the day reinforces stability and builds a stronger connection among all three of you. Sharing a meal together where you can talk and enjoy good home cooking as a family is a very simple and easy way to begin building a solid foundation.”

I lean back in my chair with a frown. “This idea has merit. However, I’m not so sure about the home cooking aspect of it. I’ve never been much of a cook myself, so I leave most of that to Feldrick.” I grimace. “Alas, he’s a passable cook at best and can only make a few simple dishes.” I hum in thought. “I suppose I could hire someone else—”

Max begins waving his arms wildly as if he’s trying to signal an airplane. “No need for that! I’ve always been responsible for preparing meals for the children in my charge, so I fully expected that I’d be doing that here. I flatter myself but I’m a rather good cook and an *exceptional* baker.” He rubs a hand over his lovely, rounded belly. “If you hadn’t guessed, I’m a man who likes to eat, and honey, I like to eat well.”

My cock plumps up in my pants at the sight.

How on earth is this man turning me upside down?

Max continues, seemingly unaware of my predicament. “I learned to cook when I was young. My last foster mother became quite ill in the final few years I was with her as a teenager, so I took over all of the cooking and cleaning responsibilities in the house. She shared many of her personal recipes with me and I inherited her cookbook when she passed away a few years after I aged out of the system.”

I can't help but feel an ache in my chest. "You were in foster care?"

"Since I was about five years old. I don't remember much before then. My mother apparently fell into drug addiction and passed away from an overdose. I never knew who my father was. When my mom died, there was evidently no one in her family who wanted to take me in. So, I became a ward of the state and entered the foster care system." He shrugs. "Unfortunately, I was too old to be of much interest to most families looking to adopt. Things didn't get any better as I got older and it became quite evident that I was super fucking gay."

The ache in my chest is slowly replaced with an ice-cold rage at the thought of anyone mistreating this beautiful man when he was a helpless orphaned child.

"There were some tough years, but it wasn't all bad. Then Sally took me in when I was twelve." He sighs fondly. "She saved me, really. Taught me what it was like to be loved and cared for in a way I'd never known before. She was one of a kind. She's the one who inspired me to go into childcare. I wanted to be able to give back and share some of what she taught me."

I'm humbled by his willingness to divulge his personal history with me. "Thank you for sharing that with me. I see now why All-Species Specialized Employment Services thought you would be a perfect fit for this job. It's not only your years of childcare experience, but you're more likely to be able to relate to Harn and Yara than anyone else." I swallow back the tears that still come every time I think of Sharna. "Losing their mother almost six months ago was a devastating blow to them, and to the many others who knew and loved her."

"May I ask what happened?" he inquires delicately.

This is where I need to tread lightly. "It was a horrible tragedy that never should have occurred." I sigh. "What I'm going to tell you needs to be kept private." He nods. "Their

mother Sharna was an amazing and talented woman who fell for a man who turned out to be a criminal and an abuser.”

Max pales. “Oh no.”

I feel my mouth set in a grim line. “Sharna had just divorced him and was granted custody of the children. She was getting ready to start a new life here in Mystic Hollow, but Yargef couldn’t accept it. He became unhinged when they were no longer under his orbit of control.”

Max gasps. “Dear god.”

“Sharna and the children went into hiding. They’d been living in San Francisco, but Vash and I were moving them across the country so they could get set up here in Mystic Hollow where they’d all be safe.” I swallow back the pain at what was never meant to be. “But they didn’t make it in time. Yargef is involved in the orc criminal underworld, and he used his connections to hunt them down.”

Max clutches a hand to his heart. “Are you talking about an orc mafia?”

“More of an Otherkind criminal network, but essentially, yes. Yargef is a pretty big player with considerable reach and influence. En route to Mystic Hollow, their final safe house on the journey was attacked late one night. One of the agents was able to get the children out and to safety before succumbing to her injuries. Her partner stayed with Sharna but...they were overpowered and killed.” My hands clench into fists. I’m not normally a violent man, but if I ever encounter Yargef, I won’t be satisfied until I’ve choked the last gasp of air out of him. “The only small comfort I take from all this is that the children didn’t have the unbearable trauma of witnessing Sharna’s death. They don’t have that horror imprinted in their minds forever.”

Big, fat teardrops roll down Max’s cheeks and he snuffles. His little dog rears up on her hind legs and licks at his face, making faint whining noises of concern. He strokes her back before focusing back on me. “How terrible. I’m so sorry, Targan. For you and for them.”

I take a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I hadn’t known that Sharna named me guardian to the children in her will. No doubt she was far too aware of the possibility Yargef would come after her. She was prepared for a worst-case scenario. He’s not a man who likes to be thwarted.”

“Dear god. Do you think he planned to have the children killed as well?” Max asks, his face the picture of horror.

“I suspect he planned to take them away from Sharna. With her dead, he’d be better able to make a case for custody so he could have control over them.”

“Holy shit, is this guy still out there?” Max gasps in realization, face paling. “Could he try to come after the children again?”

I grimace. “Unfortunately, he’s gone into hiding. We don’t know where he is. But,” I hasten to assure him, “there’s no way he can get at the children here in Mystic Hollow. As long as they don’t leave town, they’ll be safe. The magic that protects a Sanctuary Haven is too powerful for Yargef to even dream of defying, I promise.”

Max’s body relaxes in his seat but he frowns. “I’ll feel better when he’s caught though.”

Me too.

“I’m sure it’s only a matter of time. Vash’s agency is working in conjunction with Otherkind authorities to track down Yargef and his cronies, but the process has been slow going. He’ll make a mistake eventually. Yargef isn’t as smart as he thinks he is. He never realized Sharna was always a better chess player than him. She outmaneuvered him on several fronts. Not only did she leave the children in my care, but she was also smart enough to establish a well-endowed trust for them that will keep them provided for all the rest of their days.”

Max’s eyes widen. “A trust?”

“Sharna came from money. That’s why Yargef was interested in her from the start. She must have sensed something was amiss even then but couldn’t or wouldn’t back

out. By that time she was already pregnant. However, before they married, she tied most of her wealth up in a trust for her future heirs. None of it can be touched except by the trustee until the children come of age. Your salary comes from the trust and certain other expenses, but that won't even make a dent in what's there for the twins."

Max frowns. "So even if Yargef was able to kidnap his own children, he wouldn't be able to access the money?"

I grin and tap one of my tusks. "Exactly. The trustee has full control."

Max nods. "I'm sure you're a very responsible one."

I startle. "Oh, I'm not the trustee."

Max stills, staring at me in shock. "Wait, what? Aren't you the one who hired me?"

I frown. "Sort of? I had partial say as the children's guardian, but technically you're employed by the trustee."

"Who the hell is the trustee?"

"Vash DarkWing."

CHAPTER 4



Maintaining a professional decorum within the workplace is always a must, regardless of the position. While it is natural to develop a rapport with one's employer, we advise against forming any deeper relationships. After all, this can often muddy the waters. Keeping appropriate boundaries between one's personal and professional life is essential to a healthy and happy work dynamic. That said, not all species have the same views on what boundaries are considered 'appropriate.'

—*The All-Species Specialized Employment Services
(A.S.S.E.S.) Handbook*

*M*ax

“YOU’RE NOT MY BOSS?!”

I practically shriek the words and poor Targan startles again, his jaw going slack with surprise.

“No. I do provide your lodging here, but your salary and board are paid by the trust, which is managed by Vash. He signs your checks.”

Sweet motherfucking hell. Professor Hulkalicious Hottie isn't my boss. Oh, the possibilities!

But I must be sure. “In other words, Vash is paying me to help you and the kids out. He’s the real employer.”

Targan nods slowly. “Yes. I thought this was already explained to you when you interviewed?”

I squeeze Princess Peach and focus on not breaking out into a *Footloose* dance number right here and now. “Apparently not.” I think back. “He did mention a trust was paying me, but I just assumed you were the trustee.”

He tilts his head, worry written all over his face. “Is this a problem?”

“No! Not at all,” I hasten to assure him. “Sorry. I was just a little surprised by this news. It’s all good. Please carry on.”

As we continue to talk, my thoughts keep straying to those flashing stage lights in my mind that illuminate one thing.

TARGAN WILDETHORNE ISN'T YOUR BOSS!

Which means we could actually do all the fun things I’ve been imagining since I arrived here.

If he’s into that too. I’m not really sure since I haven’t gotten a good read on him just yet.

Pace yourself, babydoll. You can’t come on to him until you get some kind of sign he would be cool with that. He may not be your boss but he is the children’s guardian. Don’t make things awkward!

We confirm that for the first month I will only take Sundays off until the children have acclimated to me and their new routine. Feldrick and Vash will alternate assisting Targan on Sundays until he gets the hang of handling the twins on his own. It’s clear that he doesn’t quite know what to do with children, so we decide he’ll spend Saturdays with us too so I can work with all of them to develop that relationship better.

When we’re done ironing out these details, I beat a hasty retreat with Princess Peach at my side, needing time to process this new information about our professional dynamic and the possibilities it opens up. But I don’t have time to think about this right now when I have two adorable orclings to get to know better! Today is Day One of our new relationship, and I mean to get things going on the right foot.

I find Yara and Harn in the kitchen, having just finished their breakfast.

“Good morning, kids.” I use my softest tone and brightest smile as I feel them out. Some kids are full of beans and some are grumpy grouches first thing.

They eye me with wary smiles. Our introduction last night had been brief, but I can tell that my cookies made a small dent in their armor. *Those adorable baby tusks they each have are slaying me with cuteness!* I have to fight back the urge to hug the stuffing out of them both, especially knowing all they’ve been through. Experience has taught me to give them time and let them come to me first though.

“As Dr. Wildethorne told you last night, from now on I’m going to be taking care of you two during the day.” I glance up at a drooping Feldrick who seems like he might topple over at any moment. “I’m sure Targan has spoken with you already, Feldrick, but I’ll be in charge of preparing the children’s meals from now on. You’re free to go back to your regular duties.”

The look of pure relief on his face speaks volumes. “Very good, sir. I shall attend to the laundry,” he murmurs before disappearing from the kitchen with due haste. For such an elderly man, he manages to move fast when it matters!

I turn back to the children. “I was thinking we could make lunch together today and we’ll invite Dr. Wildethorne to join us. How does that sound? Since I’m going to be cooking meals from now on, I want to learn all your favorite foods!”

“We call him Uncle Targan.” Harn gives me a look that screams *duh*.

“Even though he’s not really our uncle,” Yara adds. “That’s what Mama told us to call him when we met him. She said he was like her brother from another mother, whatever that means.”

I beam, encouraged that the children seem comfortable talking about their mom. “That’s wonderful.”

Harn looks me up and down dubiously. “Are you sure you can cook?”

Yara elbows him. “Duh. Of course he can. His cookies were awesome.”

“Cookies are *dessert*, dummy. Cooking other food is different. Maybe cookies are all he can make.” He pauses, considering. “I’m sure I *could* eat cookies for every meal though.”

Yara crosses her arms and scowls. “Mama always said name-calling was nasty, *dummy!*”

Harn growls.

Yara takes a fighting stance. “Bring it, fool!”

I clap my hands together loudly to dispel the quarrel and prevent any impending fisticuffs. “Your mom was right. Let’s stop with the name-calling”—I give them both a meaningful look—“on both sides, please.”

They grumble an agreement.

I bend down to Harn’s level and whisper conspiratorially, “I can cook *all* kinds of things. Delicious hamburgers, gooey lasagna, and the cheesiest mac and cheese that ever cheesed.” His eyes sparkle and he licks his lips. “You name it, and I can make it.”

“Yes! All of that!” He jumps around and waves his hands in the air like his favorite sports team just scored a point.

I glance at Yara. “What’s your favorite food, honey?”

She bites her lip. “Pizza.”

I grin. “We will definitely have a pizza-making party one day soon with all your favorite toppings.”

That cheers her up considerably.

I straighten and put my hands on my hips. “Now that we’ve settled the question of my cooking skills, shall we invite Uncle Targan to join us for lunch?”

Harn’s enthusiasm diminishes as a shadow of doubt falls over his face. “He’s always in his study with all of his... books.” His voice is filled with disgust. “He doesn’t ever want to play with us.”

“Well, maybe that will change?” I offer in a gentle tone. “What do you think we can lure him out with? Do either of

you know something he likes to eat?”

They consider this.

“He told us Mama always used to make him her chicken pot pie when they were in college,” Yara says.

Interesting. I really need to get the story about Sharna before things went bad.

Harn nods. “Mama was a good cook. Her chicken pot pie and beef stew were yummy.” He shakes his head sadly and adds in a whisper, “Feldrick tries hard but he kinda sucks in the kitchen.”

Yara winces in agreement. “I hate to admit it, but my brother’s right.”

Harn grins like mad.

I school my features. *Poor Feldrick!* “Which of your mom’s dishes you mentioned do you guys like best?”

They think about this and agree on the chicken pot pie.

“Do you really think he’ll have lunch with us if we make it?” Yara asks. There’s a note of hopefulness in her voice.

Oh, baby girl. I will drag him here by his tusks if I have to!

“I do. Would you guys like to help me cook?”

Their eager nods tell me all I need to know. It’s evident that they care for Targan and desperately want more of his attention. That makes sense. He’s the one constant adult in their life now that they look to for stability and reassurance. While they have Feldrick and Vash as well, which is really great, Targan is still their guardian and the one who has to step into the tough shoes of parent. Sharna believed he was the right person for the job, and I think she was correct.

He just needs a little help from Maxy Poppins!

“How about we go on an adventure downtown so we can pick up what we’ll need? I’d like to also make fresh bread to go with our chicken pot pie.”

Harn licks his lips, eyes bright and hopeful. “What about more cookies?”

I pretend to ponder this quite seriously for a moment as they wait for my answer. “What do you say to brownies instead? We can make them for dessert tonight.”

They shout their enthusiastic support of this plan and I chuckle.

A short time later, I’ve got my collapsible rolling grocery cart by my side and Princess Peach secured in her harness. For a small dog, she loves to go for walks and those tiny legs of hers can sure move! The children are already dressed and once everyone has shoes on, we depart the house. I check my phone to make sure we’re going in the right direction, but I recall seeing the grocery store on Main Street when I drove into town.

All-Species Specialized Employment Services explained to me that, as a Sanctuary Haven, Mystic Hollow is protected by a strong magic that will not allow those who mean harm to enter its borders. Targan had further confirmed this when we spoke earlier. I’m not entirely sure how that works, but it does give me some peace of mind about bringing the children on an outing, especially after hearing about their evil father. I’m relieved to know they will be safe as long as they stay in town until he’s caught.

The store’s not far, just a nice twenty-minute walk that allows the children to burn a bit of morning energy. They skip along and talk animatedly over each other as they tell me about their varying interests and activities.

I learn a lot in a short amount of time.

They both like playing sports; Harn is into baseball and Yara loves soccer. Yara likes to read, while Harn is a big fan of video games in his spare time. They both love art, which Vash had told me when I interviewed. I file away all the valuable nuggets of information they’ve given me.

At times they mention friends where they used to live, but none here in Mystic Hollow. I suspect they’re both rather

lonely after losing their mother and having to leave all their old friends behind to come and live in a new town. I make it a top priority to find opportunities that will help them make some friends their own age in the next few weeks.

In seemingly no time at all, we arrive at the quaint little grocery store on Main Street. It's like something out of a Hallmark movie meets *The Addams Family*. Shelves are stocked with an array of familiar human foods, as well as Otherkind products the likes of which I've never seen before.

One of the cashiers near the front of the store, a smiling lamia with short, dark hair, greets us. I try not to stare at her snake-like lower body, even as it undulates. "Good morning! Welcome to Mystic Hollow Foods."

With a friendly wave that makes the bangles on my wrist jangle, I saunter over. Extending my hand, I take a quick glance at her name tag and introduce myself. "Hi, Amber! I'm Max MacLeod. It's probably no surprise to you, but I'm new to town." With a polite expression, I point to my two charges. "This is Yara and Harn. I'm their new manny."

Amber's dark eyes flash with understanding. "Ah! You're working for Dr. Wildethorne?"

Well, technically I'm not employed by him—*hallelujah!*—but that's not something I'm going to talk about with nosy folks in town. Although I fully intend to think about it a lot later tonight!

"Just arrived last night but I'm so excited to explore Mystic Hollow with the kids. Right now, we're on a grocery shopping mission though."

She chuckles, her forked tongue flicking out. "Good to meet you, Max, and welcome to Mystic Hollow." She grins down at Harn and Yara. "It's good to meet both of you as well. If you need help finding anything you let me know, all right?"

I give her a wink. "We shall, madame."

In order to keep the twins focused on our task, I turn our trip to the store into a bit of a scavenger hunt by giving them each one half of the list of items to try and find in the store.

However, they stump me for a moment when they look around confused.

“What’s the matter?” I ask.

“This is our first time grocery shopping,” Yara explains. “How do we know where to find things?”

I gape at them. Then I remember what Targan told me about their parents.

Harn confirms my suspicions when he adds, “We always used to have groceries delivered to our house.”

I clap my hands together decisively. “Okay! Let me give you a quick tour of the store and show you how to find things.”

After I’ve shown them the ropes and gotten each of them set up with their own basket shopping cart, I unleash them on the store but trail behind to offer assistance along the way.

While I wouldn’t ordinarily encourage competitiveness between siblings, all the reading I did to prepare for this position emphasized that orcs have a strong competitive drive and that it is important to nurture this in healthy ways in orc children.

They eagerly begin scouring the shelves of the store, trying to find the various items on their respective lists, while I hunt down the more difficult things we need. Thankfully, the store’s small enough that it’s easy for me to keep them both within my sight the whole time. Within twenty minutes, they’re shouting, “Done, Max!” Since the store is empty apart from us and the employees, I let them race back to me, their basket carts filled with all the items on their lists. I go through and examine each basket with a serious eye, giving them both praise all the while.

“Amazing! This was an excellent tie. You’re both winners.”

They stick out their tongues at one another but seem satisfied to share the win. “I have a special prize for each of you.” I reach into my oversized manny purse—murse?—and

pull out a packet of temporary tattoos designed to work on all skin colors.

“You can each pick one of these temporary tattoos to put on when we get home.”

Harn’s eyes go comically wide. “Tattoos! So cool. I’ve seen those online before but I’ve never had one.” He frowns. “Our dad didn’t let us try stuff like that.”

I reach out and squeeze his shoulder. “Well, we’ll just have to fix that now, won’t we? Since this will be your very first tattoo, make sure you choose wisely.”

“Heck yeah,” he says, regaining his excitement and taking the booklet to flip through it. After careful consideration, he chooses a T-Rex one.

I give him a high five. “Most excellent choice.”

Then I turn to Yara, who looks at the booklet skeptically but takes it and starts thumbing through the pages. Her mouth curves into a huge smile, her little tusks glinting in the light, when she finds a kickass Valkyrie brandishing a sword tattoo.

I grin conspiratorially. “We’ll put these on as soon as we get home and you can surprise your uncle with them later.”

They giggle with excitement and start chattering back and forth as we bring all of our items to the register.

After we check out—thankfully Targan gave me a credit card for food and other purchases that he negotiates with Vash—I’m able to fit all of the bags into my carrier and we soon start making our way back to the house.

I’m utterly charmed by Mystic Hollow so far. The town is quaint and there’s an air of peace here that seems to imbue everything and everyone we meet along the way. A troll, a group of gnomes, and a puck greet us on the sidewalk with friendly words of welcome. It’s odd being the lone human out on the street but I don’t mind. Otherkind could teach humans a thing or two. Everyone here operates in a surprising kind of harmony with each other regardless of their differences. In another situation, I might find it eerie or even creepy, but here it feels right.

It's bright and mild this morning, although I can tell that it's going to warm up quite a bit later today. For now, I bask in the temperate breeze and the balmy sunshine of a beautiful June morning as the children and I wander home. Princess Peach trots along with me, guarding the rear and keeping an eye out for everyone. My sweet baby is tiny but fierce. She's a serious protector, not only of me, but it seems she has immediately welcomed the children into our pack and is keeping watch over them as well. It fills me with contentment.

When we arrive back at the house, the twins are practically vibrating with excitement to have their tattoos done. Harn decides he wants to put his on his right bicep. When I pull away the paper backing, he admires it in the mirror, making ridiculous flexing poses. "I look bad to the bone!" he crows.

Yara rolls her eyes at his antics and decides her Valkyrie tattoo will go on her right forearm.

Once they're both situated and happy with their prizes, I have them wash their hands and help me get the dough ready for fresh bread and for the pot pie crust. For all that I was told these kids were hard to handle, I'm finding that to be far from the case. Sure, they need a steady stream of activities to keep them occupied like most kids their age, but mainly they just crave order and a sense of security in their lives. It's clear their mother was raising them right. Under my watchful eye, I guide them through our food preparation and give them plenty of praise. They have a blast playing with and kneading the dough, ending up wearing half the flour all over themselves, but I don't mind. That's half the fun, after all!

The bread dough needs time to rise, however, so when it's ready to rest for a while, I set it aside and we get cleaned up. Then I take them for a rock treasure hunt down by the lake. Their house is close enough to the water that it'll be an easy spot for us to enjoy plenty of fun this summer.

I let Princess Peach off her leash and she quickly takes to sniffing and exploring the shoreline with enthusiasm. We left a disappointed Waffles behind since I'm not quite sure how to handle him at home, let alone in public just yet. I'll need to talk to Targan about that soon.

Staring out at the lake, I immediately have fantasies of us in and on the water. Visions of *The Sound of Music* rowboat scene flash in my head and I stifle a snort of laughter. Honey, I am so much more stylish than Maria but I bow to Julie Andrews's superb vocal range!

When I ask the twins if they can swim, they nod enthusiastically.

"Mama took us to swim lessons," Yara explains.

"I'm fast!" Harn boasts puffing out his chest.

Yara rolls her eyes. "He splashes around like a dog."

"Do not!"

They start to bicker and I clear my throat. "Now, now. I look forward to getting to see each of you in the water. I'm sure you're both excellent swimmers. In fact, how about we have a picnic and go swimming tomorrow afternoon? How does that sound?"

They're immediately on board with this idea.

Yara looks out at the water, her smile fading. "Mama said we'd get a rowboat when we moved here and we could learn to fish." Her lip trembles and my heart breaks for her.

Harn seems to instinctively know his twin needs comfort, and for the first time I see him grab her in a fierce hug. "It's gonna be okay, sis."

Warmth blossoms in my chest like gooey caramel as they clutch one another for support. The moment ends when Harn starts tickling Yara and they break apart, laughing and trying to poke one another in the best ticklish spots.

When we arrive home around mid-morning, a collection of colorful rocks to mark our journey in hand, we get their art supplies, and I set them to the task of making lunch invitation cards for their uncle. They're both eager and regale me with happy stories of art projects with their mom. Given she'd been a graphic designer, I'm not surprised she passed down her love of art to them both. My manny mode mental list adds regular art activities to our daily schedule.

While they're hard at work on that, I start the bread baking and put the pie together. I decide to prep the brownies last so I can bake them now and let them cool for later.

At a quarter to noon, I have everything cooked and ready on the side board. Harn and Yara are full of eager but somewhat nervous anticipation as we take their cards to their uncle. With Princess Peach in the lead and Waffles taking up the rear, we make an adorable little procession as we march to Targan's study.

When we get to his door, I turn to the twins. "Okay, on the count of three," I whisper.

On three, they knock on the door together like they're an invading army ready to storm the castle.

There's a momentary pause and then a wary, "Come in."

I fight back a snort and push open the door.

Targan is seated at his desk, surrounded by stacks of books and papers.

And his motherfreaking shirt sleeves are rolled up to tempt me with those stupidly sexy forearms of his. I swear, it's like he *knows* that's a weakness of mine.

"You look like you could use a *break*," I tell him. "And the children have something they want to give you."

Harn rushes forward and thrusts his card at Targan, while Yara hands hers over a bit more warily, as if she is unsure of what to expect.

Targan takes them in his large hands and sets them side by side on his desk as he reads them. The colorful cards are earnest and sweet. Harn and Yara worked so hard on them. If he says no, I will beat him over the head with my manny purse—a dangerous weapon in its own right—and drag him to lunch on Princess Peach's leash if I have to!

But as I suspected, there's nothing to fear. Targan is momentarily flustered by the outpouring of enthusiasm, but his cheeks flush with pleasure as he smiles warmly at them. "Thank you for these wonderful cards. I'm very touched.

They're the best ones I've ever gotten. How can I say no to such an invitation?"

The children glow at his words and whoop with joy.

Harn immediately lifts his shirt sleeve, vibrating with excitement. "Uncle Targan, look what I got! It's a tattoo." He proudly explains how he earned his mega cool prize.

Targan listens attentively to him and then Yara, admiring both of their tattoos and applauding their choices. The man doesn't realize it, but he's a natural in his new role as their guardian. He just needs more confidence in himself. And I'm determined to help him find it! I'll even give him some special private tutoring if you catch my drift. Mmm...

"Lunch is ready," I interject after I rein in my wayward thoughts.

Targan's stomach rumbles loudly and that sets the children to laughing hysterically.

I lead the way back to the kitchen. Although there is a formal dining room in the house, I've already discovered that the table in the kitchen is much homier and more comfortable.

The twins entertain Targan with stories of their morning adventures and updates on our plans for a picnic and swimming tomorrow, each of them talking a mile a minute and jockeying for his attention. It's adorable.

Once they're seated, I dish up the food and serve everyone before joining them at the table.

Targan inhales and stares at his plate in amazement. "You made this?"

"We helped!" the twins exclaim.

"I helped the most," Harn boasts.

"Did not!" Yara says with a scowl.

I clear my throat and give them a meaningful look. "You both helped equally and that's why you're going to have brownies for dessert tonight. *Right?*"

Their attitudes suddenly improve. “Yes, Max,” they chorus, eyes staring at the brownies cooling on the stove behind me.

Targan shifts awkwardly. “Thank you all for helping to make such a wonderful meal. I’m honored.”

I pass him the butter. “Put some on your bread while it’s still hot.”

Everyone begins eating with gusto, but my eyes remain fixated on Targan, who savors his food with obvious pleasure. “This is amazing,” he says, regarding me with an appreciative gaze. “We haven’t had good food like this in ages.”

The twins hastily agree, scarfing down their lunch like it might disappear.

“Uncle Targan burned my toast when he tried to make it!” Harn chortles.

Yara gags. “Feldrick made us eat nasty oatmeal every morning. It was slimy and cold!”

I reach out and take a hand from each child. “Never fear, Max is here! You’ll never have to eat gross food again!” *Sorry, Feldrick.* I’m grateful he’s nowhere to be seen while the children brutally critique his cuisine.

Yara and Harn cheer and dive back into their meal with vigor.

I warm with satisfaction. Like my foster mom Sally, I tend to show my love and care through food. It’s my way.

Targan gets up to serve himself seconds with a sheepish grin. “It’s very good.”

“Thank you. Have as much as you’d like. Yara and Harn told me about their mother’s pot pie. I don’t have her recipe, but I hope mine is in the same league at least.”

Targan’s lips quirk. “I have a feeling you’re in a league of your own.”

The soft, suggestive words and the glint in his eye ignite a wildfire inside me. Hot damn, but I think my sexy silver fox

orc professor just flirted with me!

If feeding him good food makes him frisky, then I've got this in the bag.

CHAPTER 5



When it comes to food, orcs have sizable appetites. This is not unexpected given the species' large and powerful physiques. Higher caloric intake is necessary to maintain proper bodily function on all levels. While orcs are rarely picky about food, so long as there is plenty of it, they have a strong appreciation for good cuisine that can be made in sufficient quantities to satisfy them. It is often said the fastest way to an orc's affections is through the offering of delicious grub.

—*Green But Not Inherently Mean: A Nuanced History of the Orc* by Dr. Targan Wildethorne

Targan

TODAY IS a day full of surprises.

Spending lunch with the children proves far more enjoyable than I anticipated it might be. As always, they are full of energy and talking a mile a minute while we eat, but Max is able to keep them focused and deftly reroutes them anytime a disagreement starts. I knew from his resume that he had nearly ten years of experience in childcare, and a degree in early childhood education, but it's a beautiful thing to watch a true professional in action.

Yara and Harn are unexpectedly enthusiastic when explaining how they helped Max prepare lunch, each of them boasting to me of their contributions to the effort. And what a meal. I can't remember the last time I ate so well. The fresh bread, still warm from the oven, is divine. I shamelessly eat

several thick slices slathered with butter. The chicken pot pie is probably the best I've ever had, all full of some kind of magical home-cooked goodness that I can only attribute to Max himself. There's something special about him and it definitely comes through in his food. I'd never say it to the twins, but Max's recipe is even better than Sharna's.

I chuckle just thinking about her. She would have gotten all fired up to have a cook-off with Max to see who made the better pot pie.

By the Light, I miss her.

Max's meal fuels me for the rest of the afternoon, and for the first time in far too long, I make excellent progress on my current chapter. When dinner rolls around, I feel comfortable calling it quits for the day. Once again, I join Max and the children for dinner in the kitchen. He's made another superb meal of pot roast, mashed potatoes, roasted cauliflower and carrots, and more of that delectable fresh bread. Yara and Harn go into raptures over the brownies for dessert, but I pass on them since I don't have much interest in most sweets. However, their response does make me consider trying some in the future if Max is making them.

Per the schedule Max and I agreed upon, the children have an hour of media time after dinner, and I find myself dragged into watching some animated show that they love with them. At first, I want to protest and retreat to my study, but Max gives me such big, pleading eyes that I can't possibly say no. The appreciative look he gives me in return makes me feel like I've won a reward.

It isn't long before the twins' eyelids start drooping and by 8:00 p.m. Max tells them it's bath time.

"Come and help me get them ready for bed," he says with another bright, encouraging smile.

"Feldrick's been handling that for me."

Max rolls his eyes. "Poor, sweet Feldrick needs a break. Last I saw, he was fast asleep in that comfy recliner chair in

the laundry room. I totally want to hear the story about that someday by the way.”

I flush at the mention, not wanting to share my role in that for some reason.

“Come on,” Max cajoles.

I hesitate and he takes hold of my arm. His touch sets me on fire and I can’t help but follow his lead.

“Trust me,” he says. “This will be good for you and for them. Plus, they need to start sticking to a more consistent bedtime routine.”

When we get to the second floor, Max pulls me aside and explains quietly, “Okay, I’ll help Yara get her bath started. You need to help Harn. We’ll swap tomorrow and so on.”

I blink at him. “Can’t he do it himself?”

Max chuckles. “Mostly. You need to get the bathtub filled halfway for him and have the water at a temperature that’s comfortable. Make sure he has a washcloth and a towel, and a fresh pair of pajamas. Remind him he needs to shampoo and rinse his hair well and use soap to wash the rest of his body. He can have the bathroom door closed but not locked. He can have fifteen minutes in the bath but then he needs to finish up, so he can’t spend the whole time playing. Wait in his bedroom for him and make sure you verbally check in on him a few times, reminding him when his time is running out. When he’s done and dressed, you may need to help him towel-dry his hair if he hasn’t done a good job of it. You’ll also need to make sure he brushes his teeth.”

My mind is reeling a bit at all this information but I nod. “Okay. I can manage that.” This parenting stuff is more complicated than writing a book on orc folklore! I stare at Max in awe. This man is brilliant and so damn capable. Seeing him in action stirs something inside me and ignites my libido.

He bats his eyelashes at me. “Reading them a story before bed is a great way to end the day for everyone. Bring Harn over to Yara’s room and the kids can listen together.” With that order, he skips off to help Yara get ready.

When I enter Harn's bedroom, he grins at me, already having taken off his shirt and admiring his tattoo in the mirror.

I clear my throat awkwardly. "Why don't you pick out some pajamas and I'll get your bath started?"

He abandons the mirror and races over to his dresser where he starts tugging out clothes until he finds a pair of pajamas he likes. I head into the bathroom and get the tub going, making sure he has everything else he'll need for the bath.

This is fine. I can do this.

Harn comes tearing into the bathroom butt naked, pajamas clutched in his hand. He tosses the clothes on the sink counter and gets in the bath with a splash.

Now I understand why I was told to only fill the tub halfway.

I clear my throat nervously when he looks up at me. "Can you take things from here?"

Please say yes.

He scoffs and rolls his eyes at me. "I'm not a baby. I can wash myself, Uncle Targan." He takes the cloth I hand him and his expression goes dead serious. "But I can't wash my tattoo. I have to protect it so it lasts longer."

I observe the dinosaur on his arm. "A most sensible plan. Just be sure to wash everywhere else, all right?"

He salutes me and then seems to dismiss me from his thoughts as he pulls out some toys he has stashed on the bathtub ledge.

Quietly, I exit the room and close the door shut behind me with a sigh of relief. I still find the children rather mystifying at times, and it's a struggle to recall what I was like at their age. Needless to say, this whole situation has made me appreciate the trials and tribulations of my own parents far more.

Noises of Harn splashing around and enjoying himself in the tub filter through the door as I wait for him to finish. I peruse his bookshelf and find a book I know his mother used

to read to him and Yara often. Tears blur my vision for a moment but I dash them away. Reading is definitely something I can do well, and a way for me to continue a tradition Sharna started with them.

Shortly after I tell Harn his time is up, he comes out with his pajamas stuck to his skin in places he didn't fully dry off first. I at least help him dry his hair and make sure he brushes his teeth. We also polish his tusks, and he beams at them proudly in the mirror.

“Will my tusks be as big as yours some day?” he asks, peering up at me.

“They'll continue to grow until you reach adulthood.” I give him my most serious professor face. “I'm sure they will be very fine tusks indeed.”

His answering grin is dazzlingly bright, and I feel a tendril of warmth unfurl in my chest.

“Come, let's go to your sister's room. Max suggested we read a story together before bed.”

When I show him the book, he gives an excited whoop and races out of the room and down the hall toward Yara's chamber. I follow behind at a more sedate pace, secretly pleased I chose my reading material well.

Entering Yara's room, I see that she and Max have been busy. They've created a nest of pillows and blankets on the floor where we can all sit while we have this pre-bed storytime together. As usual, Max is far more prepared than I am. There's no way all of us would have been able to comfortably sit on Yara's twin bed.

I give Max an approving nod. My entire body thrills at yet another display of his superior skills. Max is not only attractive, good with children, and a talented cook—he's also naturally attentive and empathetic to the needs of others. I admire and envy him for that since I struggle with such things. His intelligence and competence, as well as his dazzlingly colorful personality, turn me on like nothing and no one else.

I will away my burgeoning erection as this is neither the time nor the place to be lusting after the children's manny.

I'm pleasantly surprised to find that Harn and Yara are in good spirits and settle in quietly together, eyes bright and eager for me to read one of their favorite books aloud. Max has also helped Yara plait her hair into two braids, and I know I'm going to need his help in learning how to do that for her when it's my turn.

"Now, before we start storytime," Max tells them, "let's ask your uncle about the plan we came up with earlier today."

I arch an eyebrow at him. This is the first I'm hearing of said *plan*.

"We want to have a tea party next Saturday," Yara explains, practically glowing with excitement.

"And we're gonna invite Uncle Vash," Harn adds. "Max says we can dress up in costumes too!" He rubs his hands together with a cackle of glee.

I immediately worry about what he has planned but fully intend to leave the dress-up details to Max.

"We're going to bake all kinds of delicious foods to thank your Uncle Vash for hiring me and for taking such good care of you all before I arrived," Max adds.

The children nod enthusiastically. My stomach does a bit of a happy dance as well. I could get very used to Max cooking for us all the time.

"Uncle Vash works too much," Yara says knowingly, her little face serious. "He needs to take better care of himself. Mama always said so."

"We're making cards to invite him to the party," Harn adds. "Mine's going to be super cool."

Max grins at me. "I hope this is okay. You're invited as well, of course. And Feldrick if he wants to join us. We're going to give the tea party a little bit of a Scottish theme for Vash, so I'll be making stuff from back home." Max's eyes go dreamy. "Do you think he might wear a kilt? I've never seen a

real one before. From what I've read, it is considered formal wear, so still very professional."

I hear a little growl of irritation rumble deep in my chest and Max's eyes widen in surprise.

Hell, *I'm* surprised. But just the notion that Max might find Vash attractive has me on edge.

Misunderstanding the direction of my thoughts, Max hastily adds, "You can wear a kilt too, if you want. In fact, that would be downright se—I mean, awesome. But if you prefer to keep your buttoned-up professor look going, that's cool too." His cheeks redden and I can't help but stare.

Perhaps my attraction to him isn't as one-sided as I'd feared?

The twins disrupt my wayward thoughts. "Come on, Uncle Targan! We want to hear the story," Harn whines, his face the picture of irritated impatience.

I shift my attention back to the task at hand and as the children settle, I begin to read one of their favorite books. It's an orc fairy tale about a valiant brother and sister duo who go on a magical journey together and defeat many foes while helping and protecting one another along the way.

I've only been reading for about twenty minutes when Max places a gentle hand on my forearm, his other holding a finger to his lips, encouraging me to remain silent. Looking down, I see that both of the children are out for the count. Harn's mouth is half open and he's gently snoring while Yara is curled around her favorite stuffed Pegasus.

"Let's get them into bed," Max whispers to me.

With quiet, careful motions he lifts Yara into his arms with a grunt before laying her in bed. I'm secretly impressed and a little hot and bothered once again. Yara is larger than the average human child her age, but Max moves her with the ease of practice. I like that he's strong in his own right. That thick, full-figured body of his just makes me want to rub up against it and purr like a cat.

Oblivious to my lusty thoughts, he reclaims the pillows and blankets from our impromptu nest and tucks her in with care. She doesn't even crack an eye open, already deep in sleep.

I lift Harn's dead weight into my arms more easily and we exit the room on silent feet. Max pulls the door behind him so that it's left open just a crack. Following his lead, I get Harn situated in his own bed and tucked in tight. He nestles into the blankets with a sigh but doesn't wake during the whole process.

When we exit his room, Max raises his hand in the air and I give him a gentle high five, my fingers tingling from his touch. I nod my head downstairs and lead the way back to my study where I go straight for my whisky decanter.

"Would you like a drink?" I ask him, my heart pounding. Now that we're alone together, me and my libido are all too aware of his presence.

Max laughs but a quick glance at his face tells me he's tired as well. I pour him a small nosing glass. Handing him his drink, I move toward the sitting area and he follows, taking one of the two comfortable armchairs I have in that corner while I sit in the other.

We sip our whisky in silence for a few moments.

I've never been particularly good at making small talk, so I automatically default to educator mode. "Do you know much about Scottish whisky?"

Max curls his knees up under him in my oversized armchair and studies me with bright, interested eyes. "Not at all. Tell me about it."

My balls tingle and warmth ignites in my gut. "Like wine, whisky takes the flavor from whence it comes. A Speyside like this one," I say, holding up my glass to the light, "comes from near the Spey River and is distilled using water from its cold springs. Light on the peat, fruit forward." I swirl the liquid in my glass and take another appreciative sip. "Apple, pear, and honey notes. Like a summer's day."

Max takes a sip from his glass and coughs. “It’s definitely strong.”

I stroke one of my tusks and grin at him. “A good whisky will have ‘legs.’ Just be careful. The smoother it goes down, the more dangerous it is.”

He chuckles. “I’ll try to remember that.”

After slowly savoring more of his whisky, Max lets out a long sigh and slouches back in his chair, his body limp and more relaxed. “First days are always a bit intense, but I have to say I think this one’s been a success.” He reaches out his now half-empty glass and I clink mine to it in a silent toast before we take another sip together.

“It went far better than I expected. I’m impressed at how fast you gained their trust.” I salute him with my glass. “And keeping them occupied most of the day meant I could get a lot of work done. It was the most productive writing day I’ve had in quite a while.” My voice softens. “Thank you.”

Max waves a hand in the air. “No thanks necessary. That’s what I’m here for.” He gifts me with a beautiful smile. “Besides, the kids are awesome. For the most part, they’re well-behaved and well-mannered.”

I raise a skeptical eyebrow and Max laughs again.

“It helps that their mother raised them well. Like most children, they just need a guiding hand and a sense of safety and security. I know they haven’t been here in the house long, but they’re already starting to acclimate.” He shakes his head. “Children can be remarkably resilient.”

“You’re quite right. It’s been nearly six months since their mother died but they seem to be processing their grief far better than I have been.”

Max hesitates, uncertainty written all over his expressive face.

“What?”

“I hope I’m not overstepping, but may I ask how you and Wash knew Sharna? Obviously you were all close.”

Memories flood me and I sigh sadly. “It’s a very understandable question given our roles in the twins’ lives now.” I settle back in my own chair. “Sharna and I grew up together in New York City. Her parents and mine were friends. The orc community in the city was comparatively small in those days, so our families were pretty tight-knit. Sharna and I both got into NYU for undergrad and that’s where we met Wash.” I chuckle in recollection. “He’d just arrived from a small Highland town in Scotland and was overwhelmed by the city. Sharna and I took him under our wing from the moment we met him.”

“Aww,” Max coos, clutching his hands to his chest.

“You must understand, in those days, Otherkind had only been integrated into the human education system for about twenty years. That might sound like a long time, but it really wasn’t. Average enrollment and matriculation rates for Otherkind at such institutions were very low. Most still are, unfortunately. A lot of us stuck together, for protection and community.”

“That makes sense. It was the same for me as a queer kid. All throughout my middle school, high school, and university years I gravitated toward my fellow rainbow spectrum comrades for community and safety.”

I nod. “All three of us were ambitious and driven. We completed our degrees but then ended up going our separate ways. I went abroad for grad school and Wash did a stint working for the human government before eventually opening his own security firm.” I pause, swallowing back my sadness. “Sharna was running a very successful graphic design business for almost fifteen years until her parents died in a tragic car accident. I was working in Europe at the time. From what Wash tells me, Sharna sort of went off the rails afterward. She’d been very close to them and losing them hit her hard.”

“Poor Sharna,” Max murmurs, his brow furrowed with concern.

I drain the last of my whisky. “By all accounts, Sharna became quite reckless. I didn’t know how bad it was until it

was too late, and by then she'd gotten together with Yargef and was pregnant. Like most abusers, Yargef was able to isolate Sharna and keep her away from her friends for a long time. Vash and I tried to make contact with her many times, but Yargef and his underworld connections blocked us at every turn. It wasn't until she was ready to leave him and reached out to us that we reconnected with her after nearly eight long years." I take off my glasses and rub the bridge of my nose. "You know the rest. We weren't able to save her, but we did rescue her children."

Max frowns. "I'm a bit confused. You said she was killed six months ago but I thought Harn and Yara only just came to live with you about a month and a half ago?"

I grimace. "There were some legal holdups after Sharna's death. Even though Yargef was in the wind, and with a warrant out for his arrest, the twins' paternal grandparents contested Sharna's will. They wanted to take the children under their care."

Max's face morphs into a look of pure outrage. "How dare they? When their own son murdered those poor sweet kids' mother?"

I nod. "They're not much better than he is, but they tried to fight the matter. Thankfully, Vash has a network of powerful people. He was able to hire one of the top Otherkind lawyers to defend our case and my right to be the children's guardian. While Sharna's will was very clear-cut, it still took time to sort everything before the children could be officially turned over to my care."

Max frowns. "Where were they before that?"

"They were required to stay with an orc foster family."

"How was it?" Max's face creases with worry. "I don't know much about orc foster care, but among humans it can be difficult to find a truly good foster home."

"We were very fortunate that the children's placement was an excellent one. The wife is a retired school teacher and the husband is a retired psychiatrist. Their own adult children have

families of their own and they missed having children to care for, so they've started fostering in their retirement years. To be honest, they were probably better equipped than I was to handle the children in the first stages of their loss. They made sure Yara and Harn had daily therapy sessions with a grief counselor, and the wife homeschooled them too so they wouldn't fall behind in their studies while they were waiting to come stay with me."

Max nods, his eyes far away in thought. "They must have still been scared though."

"No doubt they were. But then again, they'd been living in fear for some time. Sharna had been on the run with them for several weeks, trying to move from one safe house to the next in her efforts not to be followed as she made her way to Mystic Hollow." My hand clenches tight around the glass I'm holding and I have to set it down so I don't break it.

Max leans over and places a warm hand on my knee. "I'm sorry. We don't need to talk about this if it's hard for you."

I shake my head. "Nothing's going to make it easy, but I think it's important that you know what the children went through before they came here. Their resilience is all the more remarkable for it."

He leans back in his chair as if giving me space to continue at my own pace.

I hear a jingling noise and see Princess Peach come prancing into the room with Waffles trailing behind her. The little Chihuahua jumps up into Max's lap, circles a few times, and then settles down with a huff of contentment.

Waffles flops down at my feet and I absentmindedly scratch one of his three heads, making his tails beat hard against the floor.

"What the children have gone through isn't something they're going to get over right away, if ever. But they're also young and will be able to move through the worst of the grief and pain with the support you've put in place. The individual therapy and family counseling you all are doing together are

hugely helpful in this process. But I would also encourage you to make sure they understand that if they're feeling sad sometimes, it's okay for them to express that. They might not yet be entirely sure where they stand with you on this." He hesitates. "Do you talk to them about their mother very often?"

Max's question is a bit of a stab of guilt in my heart and I cringe. "I haven't been able to talk about Sharna at all with them. I think I've been scared doing so might upset them or bring their grief back full force." My throat tightens just thinking about her. "And I'm worried about being able to control my own feelings in front of them. So I just...find myself clamming up."

"From what I've seen just in my first day here, they both deeply loved their mother and they miss her, but they also enjoy being able to talk about her and remembering good times that they had together. This may be something that becomes even more important as time passes and they start to forget details about her."

"We do have some pictures we were able to recover, but not as many as we were hoping for. I can look through my things for pictures of Sharna when we were growing up though."

Max beams. "I'm sure Yara and Harn would love that! But their recollections of their time with her will start to fade. And given how young they are, their memories in general will be hazier, especially as they get older. But by encouraging them to talk about her and those times, they can still keep her alive in their hearts and minds in ways that can be very healing and comforting to them."

I swallow back the lump of emotion in my throat. "You're a wise man for someone only thirty years of age."

Max throws his head back and gives a throaty laugh. I can't help but find my eyes drawn to the line of his throat and subtle curve of his Adam's apple. Is it wrong that I want to lick him there?

"Well, honey, I'm probably quite a bit older in years on the inside than most people." He shakes his head. "Being raised in

foster care the way I was can age you a lot faster. You have to grow up almost overnight.”

“How so?”

He sighs. “Unfortunately, the human foster care system is riddled with issues. Like I told you before, I got lucky eventually, but I know many others who never did. Some spiraled into terrible life choices and one bad decision after another after they turned eighteen and were summarily dumped on the streets. A lot of foster parents don’t have interest in kids once they aren’t bringing in a government check anymore. The system stops even pretending to care about you once you’re technically of age.”

I can’t begin to imagine what Max has gone through in his life—losing his mother the way he did, never knowing a father, trying to survive in a system that could have destroyed him. He truly is a remarkable man.

I’m unable to contain my curiosity. “How have you remained so hopeful and optimistic? You have such a vibrant personality, one that doesn’t seem to have been dimmed by your experiences.” I know I was unsure about having a human nanny at first, but in no time at all, I’ve been proven completely wrong. Max has shown he is the perfect person for the job.

He’s quite extraordinary, especially given everything he’s gone through in his life.

Max holds a hand to his chest. “You flatter me, Targan, but I wasn’t always this way. There was a period during my years in foster care when I became quite sullen and withdrawn. It was my foster mother Sally who pulled me out of that, both literally and figuratively.” He sighs fondly. “She didn’t put up with any shit. And no matter what I tried to throw at her, she just continued to smother me with love and affection until it snuffed out all of the pain and the anger and the hurt inside me and washed it all away. I had nine glorious years with her before she passed away. She was in many respects the only mother I ever truly knew since my birth mom died when I was so young. Sally taught me to live each day to its fullest

because life is short and unpredictable. We never know how much time we'll have, so I want to make sure that I live my life to the fullest and have no regrets when my time comes."

We lift our glasses and salute one another again as we take another sip of our whisky. By now the liquor is having a warm, calming effect on us both. Max begins to slouch in his chair, his colorful caftan slipping slightly to expose part of his bare shoulder. I have to cross my legs to conceal my erection as I try to stay focused on lighter topics and not his creamy smooth skin. But soon enough, Max is yawning.

"I think that whisky has damn near knocked me out, honey," he admits.

The word *honey* rolls off his tongue like molasses and I fight back a shudder of need.

Carefully holding his dog, he gets up and gives me a sleepy yawn. "I'm off to bed but I want you to know you did a great job today too. Keep up the good work, 'Uncle Targan,' and I'll see you at breakfast tomorrow at 7:30 a.m. sharp." Then he gives me a slightly tipsy wink before sashaying out of the room, the sleeves of his bright tropical-themed caftan floating behind him as he leaves.

Watching him go, I can't stop myself from wondering if Max MacLeod would ever be interested in dating an orc with two kids. I'm starting to think I'd like to be his *honey* for real.

CHAPTER 6



When working for different species, it is important to take the time to learn about their different cultural beliefs, traditions, and values. Studying things critical to your role in their lives is particularly helpful in ensuring you can perform your duties to highest standards. This might involve studying their cuisine, their familial structures, their major holidays, and so much more. Be sure to consider how to best educate yourself to better assist your employer in your new role.

—*The All-Species Specialized Employment Services
(A.S.S.E.S.) Handbook*

*M*ax

WHEN I WAKE up bright and early, I'm singing like I'm Madonna, Cher, and Beyonce all in one because I'm feeling full of diva power!

I don a pair of purple leggings that match my hair, a long, sleeveless tangerine-colored tunic, and a white, fluttery chiffon kimono duster. Feeling myself this morning, I also dab on some tinted lip gloss and take extra care styling my artfully messy hair with my trusty products. My nail polish is still holding up well, but I'll need to redo it before our tea party next weekend.

Satisfied I'm looking fabulous, I dress Princess Peach in a lightweight purple shirt with "diva" written in sparkly gold lettering so I can take her for her morning walk. I boldly decide to include Waffles in our promenade.

Attaching his harness, which goes over all three heads—talk about tricky!—I stare down all of his hopeful faces. “I expect you to be on your very best behavior, young man. No yanking me on the leash and no chasing any critters. Got it?”

Three heads tilt in confusion as he pants up at me.

Princess Peach steps in front of him, curls her lip, and barks twice.

Waffles bows his heads in submission, ears flattening as he slinks down on his belly with a whine.

Princess Peach huffs at him and turns for the front door as if dismissing him from her thoughts.

I give a snort of laughter. “All right, Peaches. Waffles. Let’s go.”

After a refreshing morning walk, during which Waffles follows my baby like he’s her minion ready to do whatever she asks, we get back in time for me to start whipping up a tasty breakfast for everyone.

As I discerned yesterday, and from my reading on the subject, including one of Targan’s books, it seems that orcs consume quite a bit more food than the average human to sustain their larger and more powerful bodies. I’m not gonna lie, cooking for a little mini army of my own just warms something in my big ole squishy heart. Feeding people is one of my favorite things.

As I cook, I also work on drawing up a list of more grocery items that I’ll need. Feldrick assured me that he is happy to do most of the weekly shopping. As long as I provide him with a list of staples that I need, he can pick them up for me. I’m sure I’ll make my own trips for any special meals I’m going to cook, but it’s good to know that I won’t have to constantly be refilling the fridge on my own. I know that Targan and the twins are going to go through stuff faster than I’m used to.

I end up whisking together a dozen eggs and making a big batch of them scrambled with plenty of cheese—always a kid favorite—then fry up some bacon and country potatoes while

toasting the last of the homemade bread I made yesterday. Normally a loaf lasts me a week, but with all four of us enjoying it now, I'm going to have to start making several loaves at a time to feed everyone. I hum happily to myself at the thought. Cooking for others is where I'm truly in my element although I've never had any interest in being a chef. While I must admit I'm quite good, I'm really more suited toward home-cooked comfort foods than gastronomic delicacies.

When everything is nearly ready, I cover the food to keep it warm and head upstairs to check that the children are getting up. Much to my delight, they're both awake and have already dressed and brushed their teeth. I help Yara brush her hair and section it into two cute pigtails that she keeps admiring in the mirror.

"You're good at this, Max." Yara shakes her head. "Uncle Targan can't do any cute hairstyles. Mama used to do my hair every day." She pauses and her lip trembles. "I miss her."

I can't stop myself from leaning down and wrapping her in a big hug. "Of course you do, sweetie. She was your mom, and from everything your Uncle Targan's told me, she was a pretty amazing lady. And she loved you and Harn so much."

Yara snuffles and I squeeze her tight.

"I want you to know that I'm so happy that I get to be here and help take care of you and your brother. I understand how you both feel because I lost my mom when I was kid too, so I know what it's like."

She pulls back and studies me intently. "Your mom died too?"

I nod my head sadly. "When I was five. I don't remember her much, and I never knew who my father was. After Mom died, I had to spend the rest of my childhood in foster care."

Yara frowns with worry. "You didn't have anyone you could live with from your own family?"

I shake my head. "I wasn't lucky like you and Harn. You're both so fortunate to have so many people who care

about you, especially your uncles Targan and Vash.”

To my surprise, she lunges forward and gives me a hug with a reassuring pat on the back. “Don’t worry, Max. Now you can be part of our family. I’m glad you’re here too.” She pulls back and gives me a gap-toothed grin—her little tusks too stinking precious for words—and skips out of the room, her moment of melancholy passed.

I’m left breathless, as if I’ve been sucker punched in the solar plexus. She just welcomed me into her family in a way that I don’t think anyone has done for me since Sally.

It was a small statement, no doubt given with little thought, but it means the world to me and I have to sniff back my own tears. I’ve only been here two days and I’m already falling for these kids—hard.

And maybe their superhot and very sweet uncle too.

We troop downstairs and I get Yara and Harn to help me set the table, making sure they feel like they have important responsibilities and are contributing in valuable ways. Once we have everything just about ready, Targan appears in the doorway.

Today he’s in what I’m starting to think is his standard buttoned-up professor garb. I wonder if it’s a habitual thing from the many years he worked in academia. It’s not as if he has to teach any classes today, but he seems to always wear these outfits, even around the house. His navy slacks are crisply ironed and paired with a white button-down shirt and a light-gray sweater vest with matching bow tie. His gold-rimmed glasses are perched on his nose and his salt-and-pepper hair is neatly combed. While on the one hand, the style gives him a decidedly older-scholar appearance, it’s counterbalanced by the raw, powerful masculinity of his bulked-out muscular body.

The combination does all kinds of naughty things to my libido. Hulkalicious for sure!

I serve everyone plates loaded with cheesy scrambled eggs, country potatoes and bacon, then I place a big platter of

battered toast in the center of the table. Joining them, I groan with pleasure when I see that Targan has poured each of us adults big mugs of steaming hot coffee.

I doctor mine with cream and sugar before taking a sip and giving a blissful sigh. “Bless you, honey.”

He flushes and smiles almost shyly. “You’re quite welcome.”

I’m a hearty eater, but I derive considerable pleasure from watching the twins and their uncle tuck into their food with obvious relish.

“Max, I’m so glad you came here,” Harn proclaims, talking loudly around a mouthful of scrambled eggs and toast. “Your food is the best. Feldrick’s eggs were crunchy!” He shudders.

Yara darts a glance around the kitchen to make sure Feldrick isn’t nearby before she makes a gagging noise in agreement. “It was bad,” she whispers to me.

Targan frowns but his lips twitch at the corners as if fighting back a smirk. “Now, now, poor Feldrick did his best. And believe me when I say his food is better than anything I would have come up with in his place. Granted, I now understand why my parents never had Feldrick cook meals when I was growing up.”

Yara gives him a saucy look. “Uncle Targan, you should get Max to teach you because he knows what he’s doing. Besides, you’re supposed to be super smart so I think you could figure out how to cook if he taught you.”

I reach over and give Yara a high five that leaves her grinning with delight. “Well said, girl! Everyone should know how to cook for themselves. You can’t always rely on others to do it for you.” I give Targan a meaningful look. “You’re gonna need to think about what you’ll do when I have days off. Or if I get sick or something.”

He startles. “Sick?”

I shrug. “It happens. Working with children puts me in a slightly higher risk category since children frequently get all

kinds of bugs and viruses.”

Targan ponders this for a moment. “Well, that might be less of an issue with orc children. It’s very rare for any ailments to cross species lines between orcs and humans.”

It’s my turn to be surprised. “I didn’t know that. Good to keep in mind, but I could still catch a cold somewhere else. If I’m going shopping or take the kids on a trip to a library, I could easily come into contact with some yucky germs. And if they make me too sick to fulfill my duties, I’ll need to take a day or two off, so it’s good for you to be prepared. After all, you’ll be responsible for arranging meals in my absence.”

He gives me a slow, mischievous grin that wrinkles the corners of his eyes and juts out his tusks in a manner that has my heart doing cartwheels in my chest. “That is what takeout is for,” he assures me in a dignified tone.

The twins and I dissolve into fits of laughter.

When the meal is finished, Harn and Yara help me clean the dishes, which earns them an extra half hour of screen time before bed, while Targan disappears into his study to work on his book. Once we have the kitchen nice and tidy again, we decide to take a walk down to the lake for a second day in a row. Unfortunately, our rambles along the shore are cut short by what looks to be a thunderstorm coming our way. When the wind starts to pick up and the temperature drops, I decide to have us head back to the house. We’re only inside about ten minutes before thunder rolls in, followed by a torrential downpour. The weather doesn’t appear like it’s going to clear anytime soon so our afternoon swimming plans are on hold for the moment.

The children are disappointed, but I quickly divert them toward the playroom where we pull out their arts and crafts materials so they can begin working on invitations to the tea party. Their enthusiasm for drawing and coloring is boundless and I aim to continue the traditions their mother started by encouraging this creative outlet.

As they’re working away, I’m startled when my phone rings in my pocket. I pull it out and look at the screen. “I have

to take this call really quick,” I tell the twins. “You two keep working and I’ll be back in a moment.”

I step outside the room but leave the door open so I can keep an eye on them as I answer the phone.

“Hey, Ryder.”

I feel my lips curve up as my best friend’s voice comes over the line. “You’ve been at your new job for over twenty-four hours and I haven’t heard a peep from you. I’m calling for proof of life.”

I laugh. “Sorry. I know I promised to call but I’ve been super busy. It took me much longer to drive here than I thought, and the first few days on a new job are always a bit of a transitional whirlwind regardless.”

“Tell me everything,” he demands.

I give him a quick summary of my first couple of days here and when I finish, there’s a loaded silence on the line.

“Oh, my freaking god. You totally have the hots for your big orc professor-boss, don’t you?”

I feel my cheeks warm and I groan.

“Fess up,” he orders.

I sigh. “Okay, I *am* attracted to him.” *Stupidly attracted.* I peer down the hall to make sure I’m alone. “Who wouldn’t be? He’s hot as fuck. He’s all Hulk meets Professor X and I want to climb him like Mount Everest.” And he’s *not* my boss! I practically need to pinch myself every time I have the thought to confirm I’m not dreaming.

Ryder snorts. “I have no doubt. You’ve always had a thing for big, muscular men with brains. I just didn’t know you happen to like the green-skinned variety.”

“I thought that last orc romance novel you wrote was superhot,” I admit. “Maybe that sparked my interest?”

Hardly. Sure, I enjoyed Ryder’s book, but I’ve always found the Incredible Hulk sexy. But he doesn’t need to know that.

Ryder is a famous romance writer best known for his Otherkind romances featuring humans falling in love with beings from all kinds of species.

“That’s fiction though. Real life is always different.”

I don’t know about that. Targan could totally be on the cover of one of Ryder’s novels. Preferably shirtless and sweaty...

“Earth to Max? Are you listening to me?”

No. My mind had been pleasantly distracted. “Sorry. Look, it’s not like I’ve met a lot of orcs in my life. But this one is pinging all my erotic hotspots, honey.”

Ryder’s tone shifts to concern. “But isn’t that going to make things kind of awkward? You work for him.”

“I was worried about that at first too, but it turns out, Professor Hulkalicious isn’t actually my boss.” Hoo boy, do I ever have some wicked thoughts about that tasty fact!

“Say what now?”

I grin. “My real boss is actually the gargoyle who interviewed me, Vash DarkWing. He manages the children’s trust that pays me. Go figure.”

“Gargoyle?” Ryder asks, instantly diverted. “Do you think you could arrange an interview for me with him? My next book is a gargoyle romance and it would be super helpful for my research to be able to talk with a real-life one!”

I brighten as an idea forms. “We’re having a tea party next Saturday, and Vash will be here. Let me see if I can invite you too—if you’re free?”

“Please! I will clear anything on my schedule. Besides, now we finally live so much closer to each other again. Syracuse isn’t too far. It should only take me a little over an hour to get there.” Ryder lets out a familiar happy squeak. “I’m so excited! Talking to a real gargoyle is a top priority right now. They’re very private as a species, and I’ve had a hell of a time finding anyone who’ll humor a writer like me.” I can practically hear him grinning over the phone. “Plus, I’ll

get to see you and my baby girl. How is she? Does she miss her other daddy?"

I scoff. "Princess Peach is just fine. And I'm the only daddy in her life, thank you very much."

Ryder laughs. "Whatever you say. Just get me that invite! I need to grill this gargoyle for information."

I rub my temple. I love Ryder but he can be intense when he's working on a new project. He immerses himself in it all a bit too much at times. "I'm only going to get you an invite if you promise *not* to overwhelm Vash with your questions."

"But—"

"No buts. He's technically my boss and this tea party is a way to thank him, and give him a chance to spend time with the twins, so you can't monopolize him with questions, and if he doesn't want to talk to you, you need to accept that."

Ryder lets out a growl of frustration. "Fine. I'll be on my best behavior."

Why do I doubt that?

We hang up shortly thereafter and I return to helping the kids finish their cards.

Later that morning, I look out the window to find the rain has cleared and the sun is coming out again, so the kids and I decide to hand-deliver our invitations to Vash at his work. Our little group, including a remarkably obedient Waffles who Princess Peach keeps in check the whole way, troops downtown, my phone's GPS telling us where to turn down First Avenue from Main Street.

We immediately spot the sign for DarkWing Security Services on the ground floor of a two-story red brick building. Before the children can go racing in, I pull them aside.

"All right, we need to be on our best behavior. This is Uncle Vash's place of business and he might be busy, so we don't want to interrupt him. If he can't see us right now, we'll try again later, okay?"

The children nod in understanding and we head inside.

A young gargoyle administrative assistant greets us with a cheery wave. “Good morning! Welcome to DarkWing Security Services. How can I help you?”

What a cutie! “Hi, honey, I’m Max MacLeod. Mr. DarkWing hired me to help take care of Harn and Yara for him and Dr. Wildethorne. We don’t have an appointment, but we were hoping to surprise Mr. DarkWing if he’s free.”

“We have cards for Uncle Vash!” Harn exclaims, unable to contain his enthusiasm.

Yara rolls her eyes and elbows him.

The administrative assistant winks at them. “Let me call and see if he’s free.”

A few moments later, he gets off the phone and leads us down a hallway to a closed door, knocking twice before Vash’s gruff voice calls out, “Come in.”

The twins barge in with all the energy and force of mini tornados while I hold the dogs back. “Uncle Vash!” they shout in unison.

Seated in an oversized chair behind his massive desk, Vash is wearing a uniform-like black suit and tie today, one that instantly brings to mind secret service agents. All he needs is an earpiece and some aviator glasses!

His sharp, angular features soften the instant he sees the children, and he scoops them up into his lap. They’re not small kids, but they look tiny perched there.

Picking up Princess Peach but keeping a firm grip on Waffles’s leash, I stand back and watch as the children talk animatedly about the tea party, happiness blossoming in my heart. Vash listens attentively to them and nods at all the right places. When they finally wind down and he’s had time to admire their cards, he glances toward me.

“So, I gather I’m invited to a tea party next Saturday afternoon?”

I chuckle. “Yep. The kids wanted to show their gratitude for all you’ve done with them since they moved here and I

wanted to thank you for hiring me, and for bringing all my belongings into the house the other day. It was a huge help.”

“No thanks are necessary. I wouldn’t want you to go to any extra effort for me.”

“Honey, I love to cook and bake. Let me thank you by feeding you, or I won’t be satisfied.”

He grins, flashing a fang. “Well, I suppose I won’t say no to some home-cooked food.”

“Max cooks real good,” Harn assures him.

“His cookies and brownies are the best,” Yara agrees.

Vash strokes his chin. “Do I need to bring anything to this illustrious affair?”

“You need to wear a costume!” Harn beams at him. “I can’t wait for you to see mine.”

Yara cackles with almost evil glee. “It’s gonna be so much fun!”

Vash looks at me for help. I shrug. “The kids want to dress up. Our tea party has a Scottish theme, just for you, so if you have a kilt, you should totally wear it.”

Yep, I tossed that suggestion in there real casual-like...

He throws his head back and laughs. “I think I can oblige you.”

Oh, goody!

I hold my hands together in a pleading pose. “Also, would you mind if I invited my bestie to join us too?”

He frowns. “A human?”

“Yes, but he’s a really good guy. He’s actually a writer, and he’s hoping to learn more about gargoyles. But you don’t have to answer any of his questions if you don’t want to. And if you’d prefer he didn’t come, I totally understand.”

He considers for a moment. “If he’s a friend of yours, I will trust he’s a safe person to be around the children. Besides,

the magic won't let him enter Mystic Hollow if he poses any kind of danger to others.”

“Thank you! I swear, Ryder wouldn't hurt a fly. He's a sweetheart who just happens to have a very overactive imagination. It serves him well in his profession, but it can make him awkward when it comes to dealing with actual people.”

While the children talk with Vash for a little longer, I hastily send a text message to Ryder.

Me: 3:00 pm next Saturday. Don't be late! I'll text you the address later.

Ryder: Fuck yeah! You're the best. I owe you big time.

Me: Don't make me regret this.

Ryder: Promise!

Soon, we take our leave and the twins skip home, full of loud chatter as they discuss their plans for our tea party. Apparently, they are preparing a performance for the crowd as well. Bits and pieces of their grand plan filter my way and I have to bite back a laugh. I sincerely hope their *uncles* are prepared to sit through what sounds like an elaborate and lengthy production.

I have a feeling our tea party is going to be one to remember!

CHAPTER 7



In instances when an orc wishes to express interest toward another being, they will often stroke one of their tusks in invitation. Although technically elongated teeth, they are rather sensitive after one reaches maturity. Many orcs also possess a great deal of vanity when it comes to these dental badges of pride. In the legends of yore, the size, shape, and color of one's tusks were often evaluated to determine whether an orc was a worthwhile romantic partner.

—*Green But Not Inherently Mean: A Nuanced History of the Orc* by Dr. Targan Wildethorne

Targan

I AM UTTERLY MESMERIZED by Max MacLeod.

He's a colorful butterfly who's all of a sudden flitted into my gray and rather lonely world and I can't look away. From his vibrant purple hair to his lively outfits, he shines like a beacon of joy wherever he goes. He's downright dazzling.

His first week with us passes in a blur. It takes no time at all for the twins to fall under his spell, and they follow him around like he's Willy Wonka, ready to lead them on a fairy-tale adventure—only with a less macabre ending than the original story.

It probably helps that he seems to have an almost never-ending supply of goodies stashed in the oversized bag he always carries out with him.

But best of all, Max has magically restored peace and order in my home.

All of us have firm schedules now, and we stick to them. I join Max and the twins for breakfast, lunch, and dinner every day. Originally, I'd only planned to attend breakfast and dinner, but now I find myself hurrying to each meal with them, full of anticipation. Max fills our bellies with some of the best food I've ever had, but I also genuinely enjoy spending time with him and Harn and Yara.

It's a surprising revelation.

Once the children acclimated to a schedule and had ways to expend their energy every day, I found myself less frazzled and more able to concentrate on my manuscript and being a parent to them when I'm not working. Max has a real gift and seems to intuit what they need and when they are struggling in ways I can't, at least not yet.

Nonetheless, I've been shocked to find the children actually enjoy spending time with me too. They're always eager to tell me about what they've done each day, and how they've helped Max with different parts of each meal. Harn is especially enthusiastic about cooking and baking. Meanwhile, I bask in the glow of approval Max gives me every time I talk with them.

I assist him at bedtime as well. We alternate supervising the kids' baths every night and have storytime together before they go to sleep. Max has told me to enjoy this for as long as I can because it won't be too long before they won't want to be read stories before bed anymore.

When I first read Sharna's will, I thought she had to be out of her mind to appoint me the children's guardian. As a confirmed bachelor with almost no experience with young children—even my past teaching posts had always been with college-aged students—I was far from an obvious choice for such a huge responsibility. I wasn't sure I could handle it either. At my age, I'm rather set in my ways and children were never something I factored into my life plans. But already,

with Max's guidance and support, I'm starting to feel as if I might actually be able to do this.

There are still ups and downs, of course, and days when Yara and Harn are grouchy or temperamental, but as our therapist has told me, that's normal for any child, but especially ones who've lost a parent. While I struggle at times with how to respond, Max is guiding me every step of the way. The twins are less wary around me and I around them, and I can feel us growing closer with each passing day.

Near the end of this week's family counseling session, Dr. Sumarian—a sphinx—has one of her assistants take the children to the playroom for a few minutes while she talks privately with me.

“Now that we're alone, tell me how things are going from your perspective, Targan.”

I relate to her what's been happening since Max arrived in our lives.

When I realize I've been going on and on about him, I grind to an awkward halt.

Dr. Sumarian grins at me. “This is all excellent news. It seems this nanny, Max, has helped you find your equilibrium.”

“That's putting it mildly. He's been a gift from the Light. Before he came, I was really struggling. But he's helped restore order and harmony to my life. The kids adore him already. He's so good with them. Feldrick doesn't have to cook anymore, thank goodness, and gets to focus on keeping the house tidy and running errands in between napping and watching his favorite shows.” I chuckle. “And Waffles is in love with Max's little Chihuahua, Princess Peach.”

She nods. “Many of the twins' stories this week were about Max and his dog, but I was also glad to hear them talking about you as well.”

“Me?”

“Of course. You're their parent now. And you're finally starting to be involved in their lives in ways that are impacting them positively.”

“I don’t do much. Max does all the hard work. I just join them for meals and help with bedtime.”

Dr. Sumarian smiles. “It might seem small to you, but it means a lot to those kids. This is a vital and important step forward in solidifying your relationship with them and making certain they know you care.”

I fidget in my seat, uncomfortable with the praise. “Honestly, I still don’t really know what I’m doing. But with Max at my side, I feel like I can do this.”

“I get the impression that you’re starting to develop feelings that are more than mere friendship for Max. What do you think about that?”

I tug at my bow tie and then clasp my hands together in my lap. “I find myself...drawn to him. More so than I have ever been with anyone else, but I’m not sure if I should tell him or not.”

“Because he works for you?”

“Technically, he works for my friend Vash, who manages the children’s trust.”

“Then what’s holding you back?”

I sigh. “Lots of things. He’s so much younger and more vibrant than me. Why would he want to date a stodgy old professor like me?”

She arches an eyebrow. “You’re hardly headed for the senior living facility anytime soon, Targan.”

I run a hand through my hair. “We’re very different, that’s all.”

“Sometimes those are the best kinds of romantic connections.”

“I’ve never dated a human before, and I have no idea if he’s ever dated any Otherkind before, let alone an orc. Even if he is interested in me, what if we dated and it doesn’t work out? Then he’d want to leave and I’d be on my own again. As for the children, I simply couldn’t do that to them.” The very

idea makes my gut clench. “They’ve lost far too much already.”

She hums in thought. “I can see where that could turn sticky rather fast. But what about the other side of the coin? What if he is interested in you and it does work out?”

I stare at her. “That would be...”

Amazing. Wondrous. Beautiful.

She sighs. “I’m not trying to tell you what to do, but don’t live your life only focusing on the worst scenarios. Consider the best cases too. You’ve experienced loss and you’ve witnessed how quickly a life can end. In this short time that we have, most people have fewer regrets over the things they have done than over what they have not.”

“I will think on it,” I assure her, my voice suddenly hoarse.

She bows her head graciously. “In the meantime, keep doing what you’re doing, and I look forward to hearing all about this tea party when I see you next time.”

When the children and I leave our appointment, we find Max waiting for us outside. As always, he’s a flamboyant flower that magically blooms to brighten everyone’s day. This morning he’s wearing silky bright yellow harem pants, a multicolored sequined camisole, and a diaphanous purple shawl. To complete the ensemble, he carries a frilly rainbow pride parasol in one hand and Princess Peach in the other. Enormous mock-jewel-encrusted sunglasses cover his eyes.

Not surprisingly, Princess Peach has a mini matching pair perched on her tiny face.

“Hello, my darlings,” he says to the children as they race up to him and Princess Peach, already full of things they want to tell Max about their counseling session. He listens to them patiently with a broad smile on his open face.

He sets Princess Peach down on the ground and takes a firm hold of her leash. Instead of her usual shirt, today she’s wearing a bejeweled collar that sparkles in the light in an almost blinding fashion around her throat. It matches the glasses, and just the sight of it makes something in my chest

swell as I think of Max coordinating this little ensemble with so much care. Princess Peach shows signs of a hard life on her body, from her torn ear to quite a few missing teeth, but Max dolls her up every day because he genuinely believes everyone deserves to feel beautiful. Max is truly one of a kind and I'm so grateful to have him in my life.

“Are we ready to go have our tour of the school?”

The children's enthusiasm immediately diminishes at Max's question.

“Do we really have to go?” Yara tugs on one of her braids with a pout.

Harn kicks his foot on the sidewalk. “School is stupid.”

Max bends down and lowers his glasses to the end of his nose so he can address each of them. “Remember what we talked about before? If we go in with a negative attitude, we're going to have a negative experience. We don't want that, now, do we?”

“No, Max,” they agree sulkily.

He reaches into his voluminous *manny purse*, as he likes to call it, and pulls out a rainbow-colored lollipop for each of them. Their eyes light up and that special ache in my chest when I look at Max flares again.

“Since both of you did such a great job in your counseling session, and you're being such good sports about going to check out your new school today, I decided you deserved a special reward.”

The lollipops, which look to be about half the size of their heads, are taken enthusiastically. With a twirl of his hand to gesture where we need to go, Max leads the way to the school. The children and Princess Peach follow him like he's the Pied Piper, licking their lollipops, and I scurry after them, moving so I can walk alongside Max but still keep an eye on Harn and Yara. They're surprisingly docile now that they have candy to keep them occupied.

I chuckle. “You know, you remind me a little bit of Willy Wonka,” I say, giving voice to my earlier thoughts.

He throws his head back and laughs. “I like to think I’m more like Mary Poppins, just the gayer and more fabulous version—and that is no shade on Ms. Julie Andrews, who is a wondrous gay icon in her own right.” He does a little pirouette, twirling his parasol as he dances along the sidewalk. “Maxy Poppins at your service.” The horrible attempt at a prim British accent, along with the grin he directs at me, make my heart thud loudly in my chest and a strange, bubbly feeling starts up in my stomach.

I can’t take my eyes off this man who dazzles me at every turn. Dr. Sumarian’s words echo in my mind, and I know I need to do something about these feelings—and soon.

Before I know it, we’ve made our way to the large and rather Gothic-looking former hospital building that now serves as the town’s elementary school. It’s adjacent to a park, but I can see that the school grounds are fenced in and fairly well contained.

As we make our way to the front entrance, the enormous double doors open and a cloaked figure stoops under the archway and steps outside. The impressive horns on his head make him appear far taller than even me.

The twins freeze in their tracks at the sight of him, their lollipops momentarily forgotten as they stare up at the red-eyed man whose face is partly shrouded by his cloak hood.

I step forward, hand extended. “Principal Bogey, I presume? I’m Dr. Wildethorne.”

He tilts his head and the black swirling marks on his face become visible in the light as he grins, flashing his fangs. “It’s a pleasure to meet you in person, Dr. Wildethorne.” His British accent is the same I’d heard over the phone when I called him a few weeks ago for guidance.

“Are you the boogeyman?” Yara asks, looking up at him, her twin brother cowering behind her and peering over her shoulder.

I’ve started to learn in the past week that although Harn tends to be the louder and more brash of the two, it’s Yara who

is firmer and more courageous.

Principal Bogey leans down and extends a clawed hand toward her. “You must be Yara. I’m Principal Bogey. And yes, I’m a bogeyman.”

Yara shakes his hand but then tilts her head and frowns. “A bogeyman? Is that the same thing as a boogeyman?”

He sighs as if he gets asked this question a lot, which I suspect he does. “I think it is more of a linguistic cultural difference, but for all intents and purposes, I am. Do you know much about bogeypeople?”

She shakes her head solemnly. “I’ve only heard stories that bogeymen like to hide under little kids’ beds. Is that true?”

Principal Bogey chuckles. “Well, there are some bogey people out there who like to hide under beds, but that method of trying to scare children to keep them safe is a bygone relic of a long ago past. Most bogeypeople, like myself, prefer to find other, more appropriate ways to keep the children under our watch safe and protected.”

Yara sizes him up silently for a moment and then crosses her arms. “You look like you could keep us safe. That’s good. Some bad men killed our mother and some of our Uncle Vash’s friends who were protecting us. Uncle Targan says they can’t come here and hurt us, but I worry sometimes that they might find a way.”

Her matter-of-fact words are a knife to my heart. I had no idea she was worried about this. Yara has never mentioned it to me before.

Max gives me a worried look.

Harn pipes up. “Can you protect us from bad guys?”

Principle Bogey’s expression turns very serious and his eyes flash an even deeper shade of red. “I will protect all of the children under my care with my life.”

Harn sizes up the claws, the fangs, and the wicked-looking horns on Principal Bogey’s head and nods with conviction. “You’re like a superhero principal. I bet you could kick serious

butt.” He grins. “If you’re here at school with us, then me and my sister will be safe.”

Principal Bogey eyes me with concern and I mouth at him that we’ll talk more soon.

Professional to his core, he straightens. “Welcome to Mystic Hollow Elementary. I’m delighted to be able to show you around. We’re just waiting on—”

His words get cut off as the front door bangs open again and a harried human man comes rushing out the door. “Sorry I’m late. I got caught up in something and I lost track of time.” He stops in his tracks. “Oh, you’re here.” He grins. “I’m Mr. Bell. You must be Yara and Harn. I am going to be your teacher this year.”

Yara crosses her arms yet again, arching a dubious eyebrow that makes me want to laugh. “You look young for a teacher. Our last one had a white beard and lots of wrinkles.”

He chuckles. “Don’t worry. I may not be ancient, but I know what I’m doing.”

“Max says that the right teacher can make learning fun.” Yara puts her hands on her hips. “Are you the right kind of teacher to make it fun?”

I glance at Max, who looks like he’s torn between pride and a strong desire to laugh.

Mr. Bell’s eyes twinkle with mirth. “I’ll just have to make sure that I am, won’t I?”

Yara doesn’t appear entirely convinced and Harn seems to be focusing his attention more on the playground.

“Why don’t I show you where your classroom is going to be?” Mr. Bell offers. “You’ll get a sneak peek at all the cool stuff I have set up in there for things that we’re going to do together this year.”

This seems to momentarily intrigue the twins, so Mr. Bell leads them into the building. Max and I follow with Principal Bogey. We get a quick tour of the main school, cafeteria, and, of course, the children’s classroom.

They ooh and ahh over the art station that Mr. Bell has in one corner of the room. The children have always had a strong interest in drawing and painting, one their mother encouraged and Max has continued to nurture in them. I'm relieved to know they'll get plenty of support and guidance with art in school.

Mr. Bell also shows them an area where they'll conduct their science experiments and some of the fun projects they'll be doing. Harn's eyes get wide with excitement when Mr. Bell starts telling him about one involving a simulated volcano they're going to work on together, and he starts talking animatedly about dinosaurs and volcanoes.

Principal Bogey clears his throat. "Jay—er, Mr. Bell, do you think you can handle things here for a few minutes while I speak with Dr. Wildethorne and Mr. MacLeod?"

The children's new teacher gives him a nod. "Of course, take your time, babe."

Principal Bogey flushes and Mr. Bell covers his mouth with his hand before giving us a wink.

"We'll be back in a few minutes," Max reassures the twins, but they barely pay any attention to us, too excited about all of the interesting things in the classroom. Yara has already made her way to the room's little library and is working her way through the shelves of books, doing a happy dance over all of the new reading material she'll have access to.

We follow Principal Bogey to his office and sit down.

"Thank you so much for making time to do this for us," Max tells him, Princess Peach perched quietly in his lap.

The principal settles into his chair, retreating deeper into the folds of his cloak. "It's my pleasure. I have to be here during the summer most days anyway, at least for a few hours, so it's not a problem. Mr. Bell"—his cheeks darken—"is an exemplary teacher and has already been hard at work preparing his classroom for the fall even though we have nearly two months left until term starts." He clears his throat. "And as you probably deduced a moment ago, we're dating."

Max claps his hands together and wriggles in his chair. “How wonderful! Congratulations!”

I’m immediately intrigued. A bogeyman and a human dating. If they can make it work, perhaps Max and I could, as well? The thought gives me hope. Principal Bogey clasps his hands together. “Thank you. Jayden and I have only recently started dating. But don’t worry, we’ve established that my vice principal is his direct supervisor and in charge of his professional review to avoid any conflicts of interest.”

Max leans forward with obvious interest. “A bogeyman and a human dating? That’s awesome. May I ask—has it been hard? Are there many interspecies couples in Mystic Hollow?” Max winces. “Sorry, I’m probably overstepping. Feel free not to answer. As a new resident in town, and as a human, I have a lot to learn about Otherkind.”

His words hit me in the gut as I contemplate their meaning. Could it be that Max is also considering what it might be like if we were to date one another?

“I believe there are challenges with any new relationship,” Principal Bogey admits hesitantly, “but the differences in our species, while they occasionally pose some logistical difficulties, are not detrimental to us being together. I was worried at first that Jayden might be frightened of me. My appearance is often intimidating to humans. But Jayden wasn’t the least bit bothered about any of that.” His cheeks flush again. “In fact, he was the one who asked me out and found a way for us to be together while still working alongside one another.”

Max leans back in his chair and strokes Princess Peach’s ears, which she leans into with a look of doggy bliss on her tiny face. “I’ve known a few people in interspecies romances before. Not in Mystic Hollow but in other towns and cities.”

Principal Bogey nods. “Indeed, the law in most states allows for interspecies marriage, and it has become more socially accepted on the whole. However, in the human world, it can be a little bit more of a dangerous proposition for some couples, depending on their communities. Xenophobia and

bigotry still exist everywhere. It's Sanctuary Havens like Mystic Hollow where Otherkind are safest, which means we are also freer to pursue relationships that might not be as well received elsewhere."

Max hums contemplatively. "ASSES—excuse me, All-Species Specialized Employment Services—briefly explained to me that magic protects this town from any danger, but I still don't fully understand how it works. Vash DarkWing tried to fill in some of the gaps during our interview, but I'm afraid most of it went over my head. I don't know the first thing about magic or how it works."

Principal Bogey strokes his chin. "It is its own rather complex mystery. But the magic was designed to protect this town and others like it many centuries ago. When you first arrived here, you had to cross a bridge to get to Mystic Hollow, did you not?"

"There was a small security post at the entrance to the bridge and I had to show my visa for coming to work here and my identification. I suppose it was a little bit like border control going up into Canada."

"Yes," I tell Max. "But even with your documentation approved, if the magic had sensed any ill will residing within you, or a threat that you might pose to the people of this town, you wouldn't have been able to cross the bridge."

Max gapes at me.

Principal Bogey nods solemnly. "The magic would have repelled you and stopped you from coming into the town's borders."

"Wow, that's pretty amazing. Good thing I passed the test!"

I can't hold back a smirk. Even knowing Max for such a short time, I can tell he doesn't pose any kind of threat.

Except maybe to my heart.

"There are some interesting books on the subject," Principal Bogey continues. "Although, of course, some of the history behind this magical protection has remained secret to

ensure it cannot be perverted by someone else's efforts. I'm sure you understand."

Max nods furiously. "Of course, of course."

"We have an excellent public library in town, but most of our scholarly texts are contained within the new night school's library."

"Night school?" Max asks.

Principal Bogey nods. "Yes. It only recently opened. It's very similar to what humans would understand as a community college, offering a variety of two-year degrees, certificates, and trade courses, as well as ongoing continuing adult education classes, all of which can be taken at night. It's specifically geared to some of the town's residents who are more nocturnal in nature. But we found that there are a number of others who work during the day and only have time to take classes in the evening. It's already slowly but surely working to recruit new residents to our town too." He spreads his hands wide. "If you had interest in pursuing further information, the night school library will have the kinds of resources you would need to consult, and they have several excellent librarians who can assist you. One of them is human too."

"Wow, that's great. Thank you. I must say I'm already falling in love with your beautiful town. It's so peaceful here and more than a little wondrous."

Principal Bogey chuckles. "It certainly grows on you after a while. I didn't know entirely what to expect when I moved here from England, but I've come to think of it as home and love it as such." His expression sobers. "I hate to be indelicate, but I feel I must ask about what the children mentioned earlier."

I straighten in my seat. "Of course. This is information you should have but I must ask that you keep it private as there is an ongoing criminal investigation."

Principal Bogey leans back in his chair, his red-eyed gaze riveted on me.

I relate the pertinent details about Sharna's murder, the children's rescue, and their father's subsequent disappearing act. When I come to the end, I sigh. "Harn and Yara have gone through a lot in the last year, but they're adapting to life here in Mystic Hollow and their therapist is pleased with their progress. I didn't realize they're still worried about their father showing up, but I have tried to assure them they're safe here. Until Yargef is discovered and captured, they will remain within town."

Principal Bogey inclines his head. "I understand. Thank you for sharing that with me. Mystic Hollow protects its own, so I have no concerns their father will be able to hurt them so long as they stay within the town's boundaries. Furthermore, I take my duties as principal very seriously. They will be safe here under my watch."

We shift to discussing details about the year ahead for the children. Max is put on the records as an approved adult to come and pick up the children as well as drop them off for school in addition to myself, Vash, Feldrick, and my parents. When we conclude our business, we return and find the children still engrossed in Mr. Bell's delightful classroom.

"It's time to head home," Max says.

Much to my surprise, Harn and Yara seem reluctant to go.

Max chuckles. "Don't worry. School will be starting before you know it and you'll get to spend plenty of time with Mr. Bell, as well as lots of other kids your own age."

Mr. Bell plucks two books from the classroom library and hands one to Yara. "You're welcome to check this out and bring it back at the start of school."

She looks up at him with wide eyes. "Really?"

He smiles warmly. "Just be sure to take good care of them and bring them back when classes start. You'll get to take out books every week."

Her eyes sparkle with excitement as she clutches the book to her chest. It seems my sweet girl has a love for reading, something that I share with her.

I freeze. *My sweet girl?* Where did that thought come from?

But as I consider her and her brother, to whom Mr. Bell gives a book about dinosaurs, I realize that I'm starting to think of them as mine.

As my children.

Not just my responsibilities, but my son and daughter.

The realization is earth-shattering and profound.

In a bit of a daze, I follow Max and the kids out of the school and we say our goodbyes to Principal Bogey and his human boyfriend, Mr. Bell.

I glance back to see them holding hands on the steps of the school, and a kernel of hope blooms in my chest. Perhaps Max and I could have something like that one day too. The notion takes root somewhere deep inside me and an inner voice rumbles with satisfaction.

Later that evening, Max and I get the children to bed. Both dogs choose to sleep with them, as they have taken to doing recently. Princess Peach curls up next to Yara, and Waffles positions himself at Harn's feet, his three heads resting across Harn's legs.

Max and I retreat to my study, which has become our evening habit since that first night, and I tingle all over with anticipation. I've grown to look forward to these times more and more with each passing day. Having him all to myself in these moments makes me yearn for more.

It's time to act. Dr. Sumarian was right. I'm not willing to let a chance of happiness with Max pass me by.

CHAPTER 8



Do you have a hobby or other way to relax? Finding rewarding and enjoyable pursuits in your free time will bring enrichment to both your personal and professional life. Indulge in your creative and adventurous side, within reason, of course. Maybe find a friend who shares your interest. After all, all sentient species crave community, connection, and camaraderie!

—*The All-Species Specialized Employment Services
(A.S.S.E.S.) Handbook*

*M*ax

“CAN I tempt you with some whisky?” Targan asks as he pours himself a glass.

I lick my lips. “Honey, you can tempt me with just about anything.”

For an instant, his eyes flare with lust but then he clears his throat and hands me a glass. “Let me introduce you to another good Highland Single Malt.”

I swirl the golden liquor in my glass like he’s taught me and take a deep inhale as I part my lips and sip slowly. My eyes water and I have to hold back a cough. It’s strong but it goes down warm and smooth, settling in my stomach like a caress.

Targan savors his drink. “A lovely peaty whisky with just the right hint of salt spray from the ocean.”

There's no way in hell I notice half of what he can detect in each glass of whisky, but I love hearing him talk about it.

I love hearing him talk. Period.

"How are things going with your current manuscript?" I ask.

He grins. "Very well, now that you're here."

"Tell me about it."

Targan's eyes glow with pleasure. "It's going to be a book on orc folklore."

"Oooh! You could call it *Forclore!*"

Targan's deep, rumbling laughter warms another part of my body the whisky hasn't touched. Namely, my dick.

As he shifts into his full-on professor mode and begins telling me about the project in great detail, I have to concentrate on not getting a chubby. The man's voice is downright lethal when he's like this. I lose myself in his deep, honeyed tone. So. Damn. Hot!

When he's winding down, I lose my composure and blurt out what I've been thinking ever since I first laid eyes on him. "I bet *so* many of your students were hot for teacher."

Targan freezes, eyes widening behind his gold-rimmed glasses and mouth dropping open as he gapes at me.

Smooth, Max. Smooth.

I brazen through my momentary embarrassment like a champ. "What I mean is, you're incredibly sexy with that hot Hulkalicious body of yours, but when you add on the killer voice it's full-on porn fantasy territory. I bet you had legions of students who wanted to get into your pants, honey."

Targan tugs at his collar. "Uh...that is...I would never date a student." He frowns. "It's highly unethical. There's a power imbalance there that just isn't right no matter the circumstances. I would never take advantage of a student like that."

Sweet, merciful heavens! This man knows how to melt my insides like sugar being turned into caramel.

He studies me with shrewd eyes. “You asked Principal Bogey about dating a human. Why?”

Holy fuck. He went there when I was starting to worry he never would. Hope balloons inside me and my pulse pounds. “I was curious.”

“Why?” The question is spoken softly but the heat in his eyes is anything but soft.

I swallow and shift awkwardly. *Boner, behave!* “I’ve never dated anyone from the Otherkind community before. I wondered what their experience as an interspecies couple was like.”

A low rumble sounds in Targan’s chest that thrills me to my core. “Does that mean you’re interested in dating someone here in town?”

Oh god. Keep it together. You need to play this cool, Max!

My plan goes right out the fucking window when that sexy bastard unbuttons the cuffs of his shirt and starts rolling up the sleeves.

I can’t hold back a loud groan. “Honey, are you trying to kill me right now?”

He pauses in his actions. “What?”

My eyes hungrily take in his exposed forearms. “That is so fucking sexy. It’s like my kryptonite.”

He shifts in his seat and I catch a glimpse of a very impressive bulge at the front of his pants. “Come here,” he demands, his voice gruff and commanding in a way I adore.

I shiver and waste no time in flying to his side and hopping on his lap to straddle him. It’s a good thing that his furniture is made large and equipped to handle heavier species.

“I’m here,” I announce breathily.

His two big hands take hold of my hips, their intense heat like a brand, and I gasp.

“You are pure temptation,” Targan growls. “I can’t stop thinking about you.”

My heart leaps in my chest. “I can’t stop thinking about you either.”

His hands move behind me and begin to knead my ass cheeks like dough. *Fuck yeah.* I don’t even try to hide the fact that my dick is already at full mast.

Targan nuzzles my neck, his hot breath against my skin making me shiver with need. “Every night I dream of having you naked in my bed and at my mercy.”

I arch my back and thrust my hips, feeling the glorious friction of my cock rubbing up against his. Even behind the layers of clothing separating us, I can tell he’s packing a boner bazooka in those pants!

“I want to kiss you, Max MacLeod. Will you let me?”

His earnest courteousness slays me, opening up something deep inside me that is sensitive and vulnerable. “Fuck yes, honey,” I whisper.

We move forward at the same moment, our lips touching for the first time. Kissing someone with tusks is a little odd, but there’s no denying the powerful charge between us when we connect. My mouth is smaller and more delicate than Targan’s, but he treats me like I’m fragile and precious. When his thick tongue seeks entrance, I open to him, and we both shudder with the glorious touch and taste of one another. I savor him thoroughly and boldly explore his tusks, nibbling and licking at them in a way that makes him growl.

Soon our kissing turns more frantic, and I moan shamelessly as he runs his fingers through my hair. Not even pretending to have game, I rub my erection against him, the front of my harem pants turning damp with pre-come.

“Please,” I whine.

“The scent of your arousal is intoxicating.” Targan nuzzles into my neck again, licking the sensitive skin there.

I hump against him, not bothering to care how desperate I seem anymore. “I need you to touch me...”

“Shhh,” he soothes. “Let me give you what you need, sweetheart.”

Before I can utter a peep, he’s managed to pull my leaking erection out of my pants. Holding it in his huge, green fist, he studies me intently. “Do you want this?”

“Yes! Yes! A thousand times, yes!”

His index finger swirls through the pre-come at my tip, smearing it all over the head. He removes his hand for a moment before spitting into it and taking hold of me once again, starting to jack me with sure, solid strokes.

His huge palm engulfs me. I don’t care that it makes my cock look a lot smaller than it actually is. Targan’s touch is full of heat, and the surprisingly soft skin of his hands feels divine around my aching erection. I can’t stop myself from alternating between watching his hand jerking me off and staring into his heavy-lidded amber eyes that glow in the dim light of his study. My balls draw up tight.

“Ahhh!”

It’s all too much. I wrap my arms around Targan’s neck and hold on for dear life as he carries me over the edge. My body jerks as I come, coating the hand he’s stroking me with. I shiver in his arms from the intensity of what just happened. When he lets go of my spent cock, I almost want to cry at the loss of his touch.

But when Targan then brings his come-covered hand to his mouth and begins to lick it clean while watching me with a sultry gaze, I feel my empty balls try to tighten again. “Fuck that’s hot,” I tell him.

“Mmm,” he rumbles. “Delicious, just as I knew you would be.”

With a clumsy hand, I manage to shove my now flaccid dick back in my pants before I stare at the massive bulge still outlined by the front of Targan’s slacks.

I swallow with anticipation. “Your turn. Let me take care of you.”

When I reach for him, he takes hold of my hand and halts me. “There’s no need. This was just for you.”

“But I want to make you feel good too.” And I want to get my hands on that massive orc cock!

“You did.”

I arch an eyebrow. “You haven’t come yet though.”

Targan chuckles. “I don’t mind waiting. There is pleasure in that too.”

I give him a dubious look. “If you say so, honey.”

Targan throws his head back and laughs. “Trust me on this.” He schools his features, turning serious again. “I don’t want to rush this. There’s still so much we need to talk about, especially regarding sex. Intimacy between humans and Otherkind can...pose some challenges.”

My grin is wicked. “I’m not scared of what you’re packing in those pants.”

He flushes. “Good to know. However, before we go further with one another, I’d like for us to start dating.”

I blink. “Really?”

“I want to see if the attraction we feel toward each other can lead to more. Something real and serious.” His cheeks darken. “I...like you very much.”

My heart squeezes tight in my chest. My sweet silver fox orc professor is positively precious!

I swallow back the ball of yearning that lodges in my throat at his caring words. “I’d like that too. I mean, it’s not like I’m angling for a serious commitment right out of the gate, but I’m also not interested in a fuck buddy—especially when I’m living under the same roof as you and was hired to take care of your children.”

“While we are dating, I won’t be seeing anyone else,” Targan says. “Would you be able to do the same?”

I nod eagerly. “Absolutely. You’re the only person I’m interested in.”

His eyes soften. “I didn’t expect this. But I want to be careful. I don’t want to ruin things, not only for how it would affect us, but more importantly, how it could hurt Harn and Yara.”

I completely understand where he’s coming from. There’s no way I will deliberately hurt those precious kids. They’ve experienced enough trauma and pain already. “No matter what happens, I will stick things out for those kids as long as possible. Even if things don’t work out between us, we are both agreed that the top priority has to be Yara and Harn.”

Relief washes over Targan’s face. “My sentiments exactly.”

I wriggle in his lap to get closer, making him groan. “Good. We’re on the same page.” Reaching up, I caress his square jaw rough with late-evening stubble. Then I trace his bushy eyebrows that I adore. “I’m not sure if anyone’s ever told you before, but your eyebrows are hot.”

He chuckles. “Can’t say that they have. Some people have told me they make me look brooding and intimidating.”

I shake my head. “No, they’re channeling Eugene Levy in *Schitt’s Creek* realness and I freaking love it. He’s kind of a silver fox too.”

He cups my cheek. “You are a remarkable man and you fascinate me. I want to learn everything about you.”

Swoon!

“You’re just a big, sweet cinnamon roll of a man—er, orc—aren’t you?”

His cheeks flush. “I don’t know about that, but I do know I want to take time to get to know one another better before we progress any further. Don’t misunderstand me. I do desire you, powerfully, but we will need to have some frank discussions about the differences in our bodies and what we need to build trust before we can enjoy certain types of intimacy together.”

I hate to admit it, but he's got a point. "You're right. I don't want to screw this up by rushing it either. I love this job and this town. If we're going to pursue something together, I want to make sure we have the best shot at making it work because I don't want to leave here anytime soon."

The very idea of leaving makes me sick inside.

With slightly stiff, awkward movements, I climb out of his lap and stand, unable to stop myself from staring at his unfulfilled erection.

Targan growls in a warning tone, "Max."

I look up into his eyes. "Right. I think I'd better call it a night before I do something I might regret." I give him a sly look. "But rest assured, once I'm in my room, I will be pleasuring myself and thinking of you."

His growl gets louder and I scurry to the door with a giggle.

"Sweet dreams, Targan," I call after him as I slip out the door.

I practically float to my room. Dr. Hulkalicious Silver Fox and I are dating! Can life get any better than this?

Back in my room, I twirl around like a giddy teen in a rom-com and flop down on my bed with a dreamy sigh.

Making out with an orc was even hotter than I'd imagined.

And I'd imagined quite a lot since I first met Targan Wildethorne.

Leaving him alone in his study after he ravished my mouth and jerked me off like a motherfucking pro is one of the hardest things I've ever had to do. Intellectually, I understand his reasoning about taking things slow. My body, however, has a very different viewpoint on the matter. I need to get my hands, and other parts of my body, on his big green cock STAT!

When he shooed me away from that glorious bulge in his pants, I'd wanted to weep—and I don't think he realized how badly I wanted to pleasure him like he'd pleased me. In fact,

I'm starting to think that he doesn't have the faintest clue about his magnetic sex appeal. My god, when he'd started rolling up his shirt sleeves to reveal those stunning, defined forearms, I'd nearly blown my load before he ever touched me.

After our lusty interlude in Targan's study—I'll never be able to *not* get horny in there from now on—I decide to do some preliminary research. Targan indicated that we need to talk about our anatomical differences, and I want to get a more realistic lowdown on what we are dealing with.

Sure, I've read one of Ryder's superhot and smutty romances with an orc hero, but there's usually a vast difference between reality and fiction.

Or so I thought, because it doesn't take long for me to pull up some orc porn on the internet—for research, I swear—and realize that Ryder had indeed done his homework well.

If what I felt of Targan's erection when we'd been making out was any indication, orcs in general *do* tend to be big all over. Watching the porn at low volume on my laptop, I can't keep my eyes from the huge cock of the orc actor.

It's not so much that it's all that much longer than a well-endowed human man, but the girth on that bad boy is at least twice as wide as a human's, if not more.

The thought of Targan's big, thick dick in my ass makes me want to ride him to my heavenly salvation.

The porn also opens my eyes to another anatomical difference between orcs and humans. Their balls are so much bigger and more pronounced than most humans. I soon discover why. Honey, let me tell you, when that orc on screen finally comes, he ejaculates a veritable fountain of spunk!

I'm not going to lie, the whole thing is seriously fucking hot. Sure, I've had fantasies of being drenched in come before, but it was never a realistic fantasy about human men. Orcs, I've just discovered, are another case entirely.

Just watching that scene on my laptop gets me hard again and I have to bust out one of my dildos. With almost desperate

need, I fuck myself on it until I find my release for a second time—all the while imagining that it's Targan inside me and filling me with a magnificent amount of his come.

I don't know why that gets me so fucking hot, but it sure as hell does.

CHAPTER 9



Navigating interspecies dynamics can be challenging in the workplace. It is quite difficult to know all the physical, linguistic, and cultural differences between species, which can make it easier to unknowingly commit a social gaffe or faux pas. Whenever possible, you should aim to be professional and polite in all new social contexts—even if another being displays behavior you find unusual or troubling. It is important not to impose your own cultural views and expectations on other species. That said, you need not put up with any inappropriate behavior directed at your person against your will or consent.

—*The All-Species Specialized Employment Services
(A.S.S.E.S.) Handbook*

*M*ax

NEEDLESS TO SAY, after all of that sexual release the night before, I wake up refreshed and full of energy in the morning. The weather forecast is perfect, so I decide the children and I are going to finally have our picnic lunch and swim at the beach today.

When Targan joins us for breakfast, we both hesitate for a moment and let our hungry gazes devour one another. I'm pleased to see he remembers last night in his study as fondly as I do. When he discreetly adjusts the bulge in his pants, I can't hold back a smug smirk.

He sits at the table and I explain my plan to him as I serve everyone up some spinach and ham frittata, homemade bread, and small bowls of oatmeal topped with maple syrup and fresh berries. The children exclaim enthusiastically around mouthfuls of food, even raving about the oatmeal being nothing like the “gross stuff Feldrick used to make.” I’ve taken to making extra at every meal that I set aside for the elderly butler. He’s been very grateful for the food and for me taking over the cooking.

Targan, much to my surprise, reaches out one of his enormous hands—*ah, the deliciously dirty memories*—and takes hold of mine. I still, a forkful of food halfway to my mouth. “If it wouldn’t be an imposition, I’d like to join you at the lake today.”

Oh, honey!

My heart’s pounding so wildly, it just about flies out of my chest. Targan’s thumb strokes the sensitive curve of my wrist and I shiver at the sensual touch.

“Are you going to swim with us, Uncle Targan?” Harn asks, eyes bright and hopeful.

“I am, indeed.”

Harn raises his hands in the air and gives a cheer. “I’m superfast! I bet I can swim faster than you.”

Targan strokes his chin. “Perhaps we’ll have a race then.”

Harn clearly likes this idea, humming happily as he shovels food in his mouth.

Yara is a little bit more subdued but she smiles at Targan. “Do you like to swim, Uncle Targan?”

He considers this. “I used to swim all the time as a child but haven’t for many years. This is the perfect opportunity to start up again. You may need to give me a refresher course.”

Yara beams, full of confidence now. “I can teach you, Uncle Targan.”

“Thank you.” The sweet look he directs at her is motherfucking precious.

Talk about cuteness overload! These orcs are slaying me with their adorable new-family vibes. I want to do a victory dance seeing how well they're getting on together in this moment. It feels like I've nudged them in the right direction and I'm thrilled.

But I'm a professional, dammit, so I hold it all in. "We'll head down there around noon if you want to join us then."

Targan grins, his tusks glinting in the light. "Perfect. That gives me a few hours to get some writing done, but I intend to take this afternoon off."

My eyes widen and joy rises in my chest like homemade bread in the oven. "Really?"

He never takes his gaze off me. "I'm committed to spending time with you and the kids. I told you I wanted to get to know you all better, and I intend to follow through on that promise." Taking hold of my hand, he squeezes it and I shiver at his touch.

Holy hotness, honey! Targan in dad mode is super fucking hot.

Yara, who's far more observant than her brother, points to our hands. "You guys are holding hands. Are you in love?"

We break apart as if jolted by a cattle prod.

"Uh..." is all I manage to say.

Targan recovers his composure and clears his throat as he focuses on the children. "Max and I have decided we want to start dating. We like each other very much."

I beam at him before turning my attention to the kids. "That's right. Would you be all right with that?"

Yara digests this information and considers each of us. "Are you going to get married? Is Max gonna be our uncle too?"

The words, so innocently spoken, resonate deep within me as if she's just plucked the very core of my soul like a harp string.

As someone who grew up without a family for most of my life, I've always had a secret wish that one day I would have one of my own. And although I've been a nanny for many different households over the years, it wasn't until coming here that I could imagine staying and making a permanent home.

There is so much more at stake here than I allowed myself to consider. If things go well between Targan and me, it could lead to something serious and permanent for all of us. I'm aware I haven't known him or the twins for very long, but I have a gut feeling that being with them and becoming part of their family is more *right* than anything I've ever experienced before.

I'm at a loss for words.

Thankfully, Targan responds to Yara's question. "It's too soon for us to know if marriage is in the cards for us, but if we fall in love and decide we want to stay together, then yes, it's very possible."

His words fill me with an unexpected warmth and giddiness.

Yara's round-cheeked face turns very serious and far too adult for her years. "Okay, but you have to promise that you won't fight and you won't hurt each other." There's a haunted look in her eyes for a moment that makes my chest ache.

"I promise you that we won't ever hurt each other or either of you," Targan replies, his voice hoarse. "We may not always agree on things, but we will be respectful and caring toward each other. That's the golden family rule in this house."

Yara sniffs back tears and nods.

Harn breaks the seriousness of the moment when his face scrunches up into a look of disgust. "You guys aren't gonna start kissing all the time, are you? That's just gross." He sticks his tongue out and then makes a *blech* noise.

Everyone laughs and the moment passes.

After we clean up the kitchen and Targan excuses himself to work in his study, the children decide to practice their

performance for the tea party on Saturday, informing me I am not allowed anywhere near the playroom until noon.

While they're occupied, I prepare a copious quantity of munchies for during our time at the lake. Eating on the ground outside with two kids, their gorgeous uncle, a territorial Chihuahua princess, and a hellhound who thinks food-on-the-ground means his, I keep the menu simple. Finger foods are the way to go, so I load up the hamper with sandwiches, bags of chips, juice boxes, fresh fruit, and several leftover baked muffins from the day before. Once I've finished, I check on the twins (after knocking, of course!) and find they've moved on to other activities. Harn is drawing on his sketch pad and Yara is reading the book she got from Mr. Bell.

When the appointed time gets near, I have the children put on their swim suits and collect their beach towels. Then we spend some time putting on sunscreen—even orc skin can burn—and finding various items they want to bring with them, which we pack into my beach bag. It's my sand-friendly manny-purse, honey!

By the time we're ready to go, Targan meets us by the front door. For once, he's out of his usual professor garb, having donned a lightweight pair of tan linen pants, a button-down white shirt with short sleeves, and sandals. He even wears a straw fedora hat to finish the ensemble.

It's way hotter than it probably should be. Then again, everything about Targan is. I'm going to have to start carrying a fan in all my bags to have on hand. My silver fox professor is *scorching!*

"You look amazing," I tell him, admiring the muscular biceps peeking out from the sleeves of his shirt. Already, I can't wait for him to take it off. He's positively scrumptious!

He eyes me up and down before swallowing thickly. "So do you."

I flutter a hand to my cheek. "Oh, this old thing?"

Okay, that's a lie. I *know* I look good. I've put on my formfitting but perfectly respectable sparkly purple swim

briefs and paired them with a gauzy white cover-up and a wide-brimmed hat to protect me from the sun's evil rays. Alas, I am a tragically pasty-assed white boy who burns with very little provocation when out in nature.

“Can we bring the dogs?” Yara pleads.

Harn sidles up to her in a united front and turns big, soulful eyes on us. “Pretty please?”

Targan chuckles and reaches out to ruffle the hair on both their heads. It's an unexpected gesture of affection that they both bask in.

My heart gives a little thumpity thump at the sight.

The twins start to talk loudly over one another, their excitement reaching a crescendo.

I make to step in but stand back and watch with pride as Targan kneels down and takes charge like a boss. Or rather, a parent.

“Let's calm down,” he says in that soothing but commanding professor voice I love. The children quiet and focus on him. “I'm sure Max was planning to bring Princess Peach already. Waffles can come too, but only if you promise to keep him under control in public.” He eyes them both soberly. “Do you think you can do that and help us out?”

Harn nods vigorously.

“We can help,” Yara says, her eyes full of determination.

Targan grins and opens his arms to them both. “Thank you.”

For a moment, the kids appear surprised but then they fling themselves into his arms for a long overdue group hug.

I sniff back happy tears. I'm so damn proud of all three of them. *My work with them is half done, honey!* This little family is coming together like my best batch of chocolate chip cookie dough.

While the kids get the dogs harnessed and ready to go—taking this new responsibility very seriously—I haul out all of

our gear.

“Let me help you with some of this,” Targan offers with a concerned look, pointing to my beach bag and the full hamper in my hands.

It’s silly, but his chivalrous offer makes me downright starry-eyed.

“That would be lovely, honey,” I purr.

He grins almost shyly at me as he heaves them up with ease and starts to carry them out of the house as if they weigh nothing.

My sexy orc professor has no idea how feral his sweet gestures make me. I want to do so many dirty, dirty things with him!

While I’m not incapable of handling things on my own, I have zero qualms about letting a strapping, muscular man carry heavy items for me. Besides, watching Targan flex those huge muscles as he carries our stuff is far too enjoyable a sight for me to deny myself.

Since he has that under control, I take hold of the dogs’ leashes and have Harn and Yara be in charge of carrying their beach towels as we leave the house and make our way down to the lake.

I bask in the beauty of the day. It’s a simply perfect one to spend by the water. Warm and sunny, but with a breeze to keep it from being too oppressive. Since it’s a weekday, we’re very fortunate to find no one else at the shore when we arrive. We find a nice spot under a tree that provides a little bit of shade, and I lay out our picnic blanket and begin divvying up food.

We eat our meal while enjoying the peaceful lapping of the water at the shore and the sun high in the sky, the faint breeze keeping things quite pleasant.

Before long, the children have wolfed down their food and are ready to move on to the main attraction—getting in the water. We revisit the water safety rules I insist on going over every time we’re near the lake. Once they’ve demonstrated

their understanding and agree to follow said rules, I help them each out of their outerwear covering their suits.

My lips twitch from holding back laughter when I find Targan talking seriously to Waffles, explaining that he needs to stay by the children and watch over them in the water. The three-headed hellhound eagerly barks in agreement and soon wades out into the water with Yara and Harn, who are already happily splashing around.

I secure Princess Peach's little doggy life vest around her torso and she trots off to join the twins, staying in the shallow water by the shore and surveying them, and Waffles, like a monarch overseeing her subjects.

My mouth goes dry, however, when Targan very casually begins to unbutton his shirt and I finally get to behold his upper body in all its majestic bare glory. Usually he's so professorial in his attire that I can only fantasize about what lies underneath.

Having so much of his beautiful body on full display knocks the breath right out of me. Even my wildest fantasies did not measure up to the magnificent reality standing before me.

Look.

I haven't met any orcs apart from Feldrick, Targan, and the kids, but I'm already a huge fan of Targan's physical...assets.

With all that glorious green skin exposed, my eyes hungrily eat up the sight of him. His broad chest and shoulders are muscular enough that he could probably easily win a bodybuilding competition or give the latest action heroes a run for their money. Those bulging muscles call to me like a siren's song, and I fully intend to lick every square inch of them one day.

Apart from a light smattering of dark hair threaded with a bit of gray trailing from his sternum down to the edge of his swim trunks—*yum!*—he doesn't seem to have much body hair, his arms and legs sleek and hair-free. I'm not sure if this is

common to orcs or not, but I mentally make a note to Google it.

Despite my immediate, visceral attraction, I'm also more than a little annoyed. How the hell does he have a physique like that when he doesn't seem to even work at it one bit? I mean, I know he's an orc, but come on! Seriously, I haven't seen Targan engage in a lot of exercise in the short time that I've known him, but right now he looks like he spends hours in the gym every day. It's criminally unfair. I'd have to cut calories and work out daily for weeks if I ever wanted to shed a pound or two. Of course, why would I tamper with perfection, honey? My body is fabulous as is! But I do feel for those gym rats who can never hope to achieve Targan's physique no matter how often or how long they work at it.

I get over my irritation fast though because I can't look away from Targan's washboard abs and bulging biceps. They make me want to swoon. I've always had a thing for large, muscular men who could easily toss me over their shoulder and carry me off to have their wicked way with me. Maybe I've read a few too many of Ryder's romances...

Whatever the case, Targan is giving me Professor-X-meets-the-Hulk realness.

Even as I unrepentantly ogle him, he seems unaware of the effect he's having on me. The navy swim trunks he'd hidden under his shorts are a little bit baggy but can't conceal that delicious bulge I wasn't allowed to explore last night. They end mid-thigh, leaving his thick, muscular legs on display.

Bless those gorgeous gams! He's not like some men I've met over the years, who bulk up their torsos and completely neglect their scrawny legs. No, Targan is naturally defined and ripped *every-fucking-where*. I'm full-on getting a boner in my tight swim briefs from the orc peep show he's giving me right now! Which makes watching the children during a beach day decidedly difficult.

I close my eyes and try to think of disgusting things, like maggots and MAGA Republicans. That will surely kill my growing hard-on.

“Are you okay?”

My eyes fly open to find Targan standing way too close to me in his semi-naked glory. I stumble back as he removes his hat and places his neatly folded clothes in my open beach bag.

Swallowing thickly, I try not to stare at his dark green nipples.

Lick them, lick them, lick them, my mind chants at me.

I have to shake my head to clear my thoughts. “I’m good,” I squeak out. “Why don’t you join the kids in the water and I’ll be along shortly?”

He cocks his head and considers me with a look of obvious confusion but then shrugs and heads into the water when Harn calls for him.

I place a hand on my chest in a futile effort to slow my racing heart as I watch Targan walk into the water, and once again I’m unable to stop staring at those muscles moving in his back and now the delicious bonus of his firm buttocks outlined to perfection in those swim trunks. *Good lord, the view from the back is just as amazing as from the front!*

Screw this taking things slow crap. I want to get naked with Targan and feel all of that hard-bodied hotness against my own skin as soon as motherfucking possible.

I don’t quite know how I’m going to make that happen though.

Once I’ve organized our belongings to my satisfaction and calmed down enough that my erection has mostly subsided, I make my way to the water to join everyone. I’ve slathered myself in enough SPF 100 sunscreen to hopefully protect all exposed skin for the next little while.

Dipping my toe in the water, I yelp, surprised to find that it’s colder than I was expecting despite the heat of the day.

“Come on, Max,” Harn yells. “Come play with us!”

I wave at him with one hand while shielding my eyes from the sun with the other. Thank goodness I kept on my large, floppy beach hat to protect me from the sun’s potent rays!

“I’m working on it,” I assure him.

Knowing I need to get on with it, I grit my teeth and wade deeper into the water. Once it’s up to my waist, I dunk down enough to cover my shoulders. I’m still shivering though, so I start paddling my way through the water to get the blood flowing and hopefully warm myself up.

When I join the kids, they cheer and I focus on them instead of their hot uncle. We toss a beach ball around in the water for a while in an improvised version of water dodgeball before devolving into just splashing and laughing.

After a half-hour game of water tag, I beg for a time-out and float on my back for a few minutes while Harn, Yara, and Targan decide to race one another in the water. Lordy be, my lovable orcs have a heck of a lot more stamina than I do! My hat is waterproof, so I settle the brim down to shield my eyes and let my body become one with the gentle lapping of the lake. I’m not sure how long I float like that, relaxing into the serenity of the moment, when I feel something brush against my leg.

Naturally, I shriek like I’m an extra in *Jaws*.

I flounder about, more than a little freaked by whatever I came into contact with. That’s when I notice I’ve drifted farther away from the others than I intended.

I flip onto my front and start dog-paddling back when I feel something large brush against my other leg. I screech again and start splashing about in a panic while trying to move toward my companions faster than my pathetic swimming skills will allow.

Targan finally seems to notice something’s wrong. He shields his eyes and turns his attention toward me, calling out, “Are you okay?”

“There’s something in the water! It touched me!” I work to keep the panic out of my voice. I don’t want to alarm Yara and Harn.

I must succeed because the kids start laughing, completely oblivious to my predicament.

“Of course. There’s fish in the water, Max!” Harn shouts back as if I’m a total doofus.

I paddle furiously, trying to swim toward them and away from danger. After all, I’ve seen enough horror movies to know not to trust what lurks in the dark watery depths!

“Ha, ha. Very funny, Harn!” I yell on a wheeze. Why is it taking me so long to swim back to them? Somehow I must have floated farther away than I noticed.

Targan starts swimming in my direction, a frown on his handsome face.

“Maybe it was lakeweed?” Yara calls out kindly. “That stuff tickles.”

I splutter as a wave splashes me in the face, forcing me backward a bit. It’s an inconvenient time to realize how out of shape I am. “I don’t think it’s lakeweed or a fi—”

My words are cut off as I’m pulled under the water.

I manage to hold my breath at the last minute, then kick my legs frantically and lash out my arms, hitting a very solid...chest?

What the fuck?

Before I can react, I feel strong arms wrap around my chest and I’m propelled to the surface, sputtering and coughing as I breathe in blessed air again.

That’s when I realize I’m in the arms of—*oh, crap*—a merman.

I’ve read about the species before, and the stories did not exaggerate in their descriptions of these beings as incredibly beautiful, ethereal even. The merman holds me in his rather-impressive-although-not-as-amazing-as-Targan’s arms and I stare at the beautiful long blue hair that floats like seaweed tendrils in the water all around me.

I crane my neck over my shoulder to glance up into his equally bright blue eyes. He grins back, displaying a mouthful of rather sharp teeth that are not terribly inviting. Merboy may

be hot, but those piranha teeth are a major turnoff to my poor penis.

“You’re new,” he purrs.

“Excuse me?”

He flutters his eyelashes. “I have not seen you here before.”

I give a nervous laugh. “Uh, I only moved to town a little over a week ago.” I gesture awkwardly in the general direction of the shoreline and our house across the street. “I live there and take care of those two children.” I flail my other hand at the twins, who are staring open-mouthed at us several hundred yards away.

Targan continues swimming in my direction, nostrils flaring as he closes in on me.

My hero! I swoon a bit inside.

“Kids!” I shout in my ultracalm manny voice. “Get back on shore with the dogs, please.”

“Are you okay?” Yara calls back, her little face creased with worry.

“Fine, sweetie. I’ll be right back.”

Thankfully, the dogs herd the children back onto the beach as Targan swims closer. I reach out my hand, almost able to touch him. To my amazement, however, the merman tightens his hold on me and propels us backward in the water with a single swish of his incredibly powerful tail, laughing merrily.

I’ve never met a merman before. Is this how they get their kicks? I can’t say I’m a fan.

However, I thrill to my very core when Targan roars in outrage and swims after us. The merman chuckles and changes direction, dragging me through the water at speeds that leave me more than a little dizzy.

When I’m certain I’m not going to hurl, I pound on his arm. “Hey, sir, I don’t know you, but I don’t appreciate being dragged through the water like this. I’m not the best swimmer,

and I didn't exactly invite you to grab my luscious body, irresistible though it may be."

The merman stops and shifts me to face him. One webbed hand caresses my hair and face. "You are most beautiful and unique. So colorful and bright."

Okay, I'll admit, I am a *bit* flattered by that. Who doesn't like to be told they're stunningly gorgeous? But his seduction game needs some serious work. Being dragged under and through the water is *not* my idea of fun, let alone romance.

Note to self, that sparkly lilac waterproof eyeshadow I dabbed on my eyelids is slaying!

"Of course I am, honey. But I'm sort of dating that guy over there." I jerk my thumb toward Targan, who is steadily gaining ground on us once again.

The merman pouts almost childishly and I have to wonder how old he is. "What a shame." Then his face brightens. "You should leave him and come with me. I am a far better lover, and I can show you the majesty of these magical waters like no one else can."

I arch an eyebrow at him. "Sweetie, that's a very kind offer." *Albeit, kinda creepy.* "And while my childhood self would have loved to have gone on a *Little Mermaid* underwater adventure with you, I'm afraid I have to decline." I pat him awkwardly on the shoulder. "You're very handsome, but my heart is set on the Hulkalicious orc professor coming this way."

Just saying the words makes me all warm and tingly inside.

Good lord, I'm totally repeating my *Sweet Valley High* era from my middle school years.

The merman heaves a long and tragic sigh. "You do not know what you are missing out on."

"Pruney skin?" I quip.

He blinks his long, wet lashes at me in confusion.

I once again pat him awkwardly, his skin surprisingly warm despite the temperature of the water. “I’m sure you’ll find your special someone one day.”

He leers in response and tilts his head. “What is your name, colorful one?”

“I’m Max MacLeod. And you?”

He takes one of my hands and kisses it. “I am Marius of the Neptune merpod.”

There’s more of them?

“Your, uh, pod lives here in this lake?”

He nods, grinning and flashing those pointed teeth at me again. *Yeesh!*

I’m immediately curious. “How do you manage that in the winter? Doesn’t the lake freeze over?” Knowing Targan, he probably has detailed information I can get him to share with me. Oooh! Maybe he’s even written a book on merpeople and I could get him to read it to me in that sexy professor voice of his?

Marius’s grin widens. “I told you there is magic in this lake. We have our own underground city that stays the same temperature all year round.” He shrugs. “We do not usually come to the surface until the late spring months when the rest of the lake has thawed. We can go on land for brief periods of time but have limitations as to how often and for how long we can walk on two feet.”

He flaps the end of his iridescent-scaled tail high in the water like a whale before letting it come crashing down, sending a huge wave right into an approaching Targan’s face and knocking him backward.

I wince.

Marius smirks. “We prefer to stay in the water most of the time.”

I try to distract him as he starts to flick his tail again. “Uh...that makes sense. Unfortunately, humans don’t do well

in the water long term. And, of course, we can't breathe underwater."

"There is magic to help with that too," he coaxes.

Before I can say another word, Targan is upon us. Reluctantly, Marius loosens his hold on me before letting go fully when Targan grabs me in his strong, possessive arms—*yum!*—and pulls me away with a growl.

Marius arches an eyebrow. "Ah, always so temperamental, the orcs."

Targan snarls at him and I'm momentarily shocked. I've never seen this more aggressive side of him.

Is it wrong that I find it hot, especially when it's for my sake?

"How dare you attack Max?" Targan bellows.

"I did not attack him." Marius scoffs before tossing some of his long, wet hair over his shoulder. "I was trying to seduce him."

Oh dear. This merman seriously needs to work on his game. He might drown the next person he hits on.

Targan splutters. "You...you..."

Marius continues. "Alas, he says he prefers you to me." He tosses his head—dare I say, deliberately?—so his lustrous locks swirl in the water while the sun glints off them and then refocuses his attention on me. "A shame, but I could not resist 'shooting my shot,' as the humans like to say, with such a beautiful and vibrant man."

Okay, this merman is kind of sassy and fun. I sort of hope we can be friends someday.

Targan's grip on me tightens as we tread water together. "He's *mine*." His voice is a deep rumble that makes my cock go rock-hard even in these frigid waters.

The merman gives an insouciant shrug. "For now, perhaps. He may grow tired of you eventually." He winks at me. "Anytime you want to fondle my flipper, you know where I'm

at.” His tail slaps the water to splash us one last time as he takes off with the speed and sleekness of a porpoise before disappearing into the dark depths and whatever magical realm exists below.

Grumbling the entire way, Targan keeps hold of me with one arm while he uses the other to take us back to shore.

“I can swim on my own,” I mention.

“No,” he grits out. “Please indulge me in this. It is quite rare for me, but my instincts are overcoming my reason at the moment. They are quite insistent that I must be the one to bring you safely to land.”

Who am I to say no to that? The possessiveness in his voice and the heat of his touch make me damn near euphoric. I’m more than happy to let him drag me back and do whatever he wants with me.

CHAPTER 10



It is not a widely known fact that orcs are quite fiery and passionate lovers. Orcs possess many talents in the bedroom, but they are truly gifted in their patience. Drawing out the most intense pleasure in a partner for as long as possible is especially enjoyable to this species as a whole. While an occasional quick tumble is acceptable, most orcs prefer to take their time and savor their partners. After all, lovemaking is an art in and of itself, and to a competitive orc, it is something at which they must strive to excel.

—*Green But Not Inherently Mean: A Nuanced History of the Orc* by Dr. Targan Wildethorne

Targan

MY DESIRE to strangle that lecherous merman is all-consuming.

However, once I have Max safely back on the shore, the children and dogs crowded around us in concern, my temper goes from a full boil to a simmer.

Only minimally shaken by the experience, Max quickly rallies and assures the children he's quite fine and simply has had an unexpected encounter with a merman who lives in the lake.

Yara and Harn immediately bombard him with all kinds of questions about said merman, disappointed they didn't get to meet him and get a ride around the lake too. Max patiently

listens and answers to the best of his ability. I marvel at the man's poise and professionalism when it comes to the children. He always puts them first. Max has the true heart of a caretaker and I want very desperately to protect it, for I know what a precious and rare thing that is.

We dry off and pack up our gear to return to the house. The children skip along happily and babble about all kinds of things. Their minds seem constantly at work, and when they aren't asking dozens of questions about the most unexpected things, they're educating us. For instance, they've each been reading the books that Mr. Bell gave them from his class library and are keen to impart their newfound knowledge to an engaged audience.

Max listens attentively, and although I try to focus, I find my thoughts continuing to stray to that merman lothario. How dare the scoundrel try to take *my Max* to his underwater kingdom!

Although I said I wanted to take things slow with Max, this encounter was a bit of a slap upside my head—by a merman's tail no less. I was brought up short by the realization, thrust most unpleasantly in my face, that I might have competition for Max's heart. Clearly, I'm not the only one who finds him so beguiling.

Every instinct I possess tells me I need to stake my claim and leave Max in no doubt of my desire. Nor do I wish to leave any room for another to come along and sneak their way into his heart. My inner competitive orc grins with the pleasure of a challenge. No one can beat an orc when it comes to perseverance and single-minded focus on an objective. Mark my words, I *will* earn Max's affections.

It's late afternoon when we get back, and we're all a little tired from spending hours in the sun. I volunteer to clean off the dogs in the mudroom while Max takes the children to have a quick shower so they can wash off all of the sand and whatever else might have been in that lake water.

"I think tonight calls for a special pajama dinner party!" Max declares and Princess Peach barks in agreement.

“What’s that?” Harn asks, tilting his head and tapping its side as if he got some water in there from the lake.

“It’s when we wear pajamas and eat dinner in the living room while watching a movie together as a family.” Max shoots me a covert wink at that.

Yara takes hold of his hand and swings it as they all start to head upstairs. “That sounds fun. Will you wear pajamas too?”

“Of course!”

“And we pick the movie, right?” Harn asks in his most serious voice.

Max’s lips twitch as he fights a grin. “Yep. You *and* Yara get to pick one together.”

“Woo hoo!” Harn howls like he’s trying to become a werewolf as he races up the stairs ahead of his sister and Max.

I can’t hold back a smile of my own as I hear their noisy little trio disappear upstairs. Much to my surprise, I’m quite excited about a pajama party with Max and the twins. And I can’t wait to see what Max will end up wearing.

Before Harn and Yara arrived at my home, I was surrounded by silence and calm. I was wholly unprepared for when they burst in and took over so much space. It was jarring and I was slow to adapt to the changes in my lifestyle. But I’m starting to enjoy the familiar sounds of their excited chatter, their laughter, and Max’s happy but reassuring voice in the background.

I shake my head in wonder. It’s quite remarkable how quickly one’s mindset can change under the right circumstances.

The dogs are not particularly thrilled to be getting baths of their own after their outdoor adventures at the beach, but they are both quite filthy. Princess Peach gives me a wary look, but after sniffing my hands thoroughly, she decides I’m acceptable and allows me to bathe her. With her nose in the air and her pose oddly regal, I begin to understand why Max named her as he did. Once she’s clean and dry, she trots off in search of her master.

Waffles is another story. Even in his smaller form, the still enormous hellhound requires quite a bit more work to wrangle as I clean him from all three heads to all three tails. He returns the favor by shaking himself vigorously and spraying me with a veritable fountain of water, leaving me drenched from head to toe. Once he's suitably clean, I manage to give him a quick rubdown with two of the less sandy beach towels before he finally escapes and scampers off, most likely in search of Princess Peach, who he follows around constantly. The little dog has yet to deign to give Waffles much of her attention, but he nonetheless strives to earn it every day.

Once I've tidied up the mudroom, I'm forced to admit that I too am a bit of a disaster, so I head upstairs for a shower of my own. After I'm clean and feeling far more like myself, I decide to don my gray and white-striped pajama set and a matching lightweight navy robe and slippers. If Max is coordinating a pajama dinner party, then I feel inspired to attend suitably attired.

I chuckle at my reflection in the mirror. No doubt I look a lot more formal in my nightwear than whatever Max will appear in, and I already can't wait to see what that is.

Also, much as I'm reluctant to admit it, I look a hell of a lot like my grandfather at this moment—minus his pipe—even though I'm not that old for my kind. It is true that much of my fashion sense comes from him, and he was definitely a man of his time, one who refused to adopt any form of casual wear for his entire life. As a result, my own style might be a bit old-fashioned compared to Max's, but I'm starting to see that we fit together so well precisely because of our wonderful differences.

Emerging from my bedroom, I'm just in time to intercept the children when they come racing down the hall. Hair still wet and dressed in their sleepwear, they look adorable. Harn has chosen a matching T-shirt and pajama pants set based on some video game he enjoys while Yara has a similar matching set featuring a warrior princess from a cartoon she loves.

Max trails behind them still in his beachwear and looking a little disheveled, but he lights up when he sees me. "You

dressed up for the pajama dinner party?” He gazes at me, his face aglow with happiness, and I feel like I’ve been gifted something special.

My cheeks warm and I clear my throat. “It seemed only appropriate.”

Max chuckles but I can detect a faint hint of tiredness in his voice. He’s had a long day wrangling our little household, not to mention being dragged about a lake by a merman. That was quite an ordeal in and of itself, I’m sure.

I’m struck by a rather brilliant idea, if I do say so myself, and I straighten. “Why don’t you go take a nice long, hot bath and then join us downstairs in an hour for our pajama party dinner?”

Max blinks at me with tired eyes. “Are you sure?”

I nod firmly. “Yes. Tonight, I’ll be in charge of dinner.”

The children gasp in alarm.

“Nooooo!” Harn cries and flings himself at Max’s feet. “This is going to be a disaster. Save us, Max!”

Yara crosses her arms and stares me down. “Are you *trying* to torture us, Uncle Targan?”

I cross my arms right back, expression serious. “Not at all. You have nothing to fear. I’ve got this in the bag.” Giving them my haughtiest professor look, I lift a defiant chin and keep my smile in check. “I’m going to order pizza. After all, I am a *master* at takeout.”

The children cheer, then dance around the hallway, shouting, “Pizza! Pizza! Pizza!”

Max surveys them with an amused expression before turning his attention back to me. “You’re sure?”

“Trust me, I excel at ordering pizza,” I assure him.

He grins. “All right, then. I’m gonna take you up on your kind offer. That tub in my bathroom has been calling my name ever since we got back.”

I wag a finger at him in warning. “One hour, okay? And no falling asleep in the bath.”

He gives me a mock salute. “Aye, aye, Uncle Targan.” Then he blows me a kiss and sashays down the hall to his bedroom, Princess Peach prancing along at his side.

Few orcs can resist the prospect of a game, so I bring Waffles and the children downstairs with me and pull out an old board game from my childhood that I offer to teach them how to play. Intrigued, they quickly settle in as we set it up on the coffee table in the living room. Waffles flops down at my feet, and soon all three of his heads are snoring while we play our game.

Like many orc board games, this one is competitive, but I opt to have the children play as a team against me so they can reinforce their sibling camaraderie while still indulging their drive to be the victor. Plus, I wanted to make sure we had a more even playing field since I’m older and more experienced with the game.

We manage to play two rounds—I win the first, but to my great delight they quickly destroy me in the second—before Max joins us on a cloud of warm vanilla-and sandalwood-infused air. The aroma, mixed with his own heavenly scent, is intoxicating.

He looks refreshed after his bath, his cheeks still pink from the sun and his hair slightly damp. As I expected, he’s colorfully attired. Tonight, he’s wearing a striking pair of magenta silk pajamas that complement his hair and hug his beautiful curves, flowing like water around him when he moves.

Trying not to stare, I focus my attention back on packing up the game with the children. They’ve already demanded a promise for a rematch soon so we can break our tie.

Everyone’s hungry so we discuss our pizza topping preferences before I call in an order to the local pizzeria in town. I order three different pies to accommodate our varied tastes, but also because I know we’ll have no trouble eating most of it—and if there are leftovers, they won’t go to waste.

Orcs have big appetites. I'm pleased that Max does as well. He hasn't batted an eye at how much the twins and I eat and always prepares a substantial amount of food for every meal.

I can only hope his sexual appetite is also one that can match my own. Orc carnal appetites often match those of our stomachs, particularly when we find a partner we click with.

While we wait for the pizza to arrive, Max sets up another picnic-style layout for us in the living room so that we can watch the twins' movie choice while we enjoy our food.

It's a simple thing, really, but Yara and Harn are delighted by the prospect of sitting on a blanket on the floor and viewing their favorite film while we eat. Once again, it isn't something I ever would have coordinated on my own, but Max seems to know exactly what the children will find fun.

In so many ways, he teaches me how to be a better parent. Believe me, I am taking mental notes on a daily basis, but I have a feeling he will always outshine me in this area. It is quite telling, in my mind, that such an idea doesn't bother me. Normally, I would feel far more competitive, even in this type of situation, but with Max I'm perfectly happy to play second fiddle to his far superior capabilities when it comes to Harn and Yara. It doesn't mean I won't continue to strive to be a better father to them, but I acknowledge that Max has talents in caregiving that I still need to develop. I also suspect I won't be able to fully match him, but he is one of kind, that's for certain.

As I watch Max and the twins settle into the impromptu picnic space complete with pillows and blankets, I have an uncanny sensation that echoes throughout my entire being—a yearning to experience this with Max often. A wish to be by his side, working together to care for Harn and Yara until they are old enough to venture out into the world on their own.

I want Max MacLeod to be more than just our manny.

I want him to be a permanent part of our family.

He is the missing piece of the puzzle that makes us whole, that makes us work on every level.

It's a profound and powerful moment of understanding that leaves me feeling almost light-headed, both giddy with joy at the prospect of making it a reality and anxious with fear that he might not want the same things.

On top of that, I know it's too damn soon. What I yearn for my rational mind tells me I shouldn't want yet. We *just* started dating and don't know one another well enough to be thinking about the future in such terms, and yet...

Every part of my being vibrates with the certainty that Max is my future—and very possibly my forever.

And for once, my books can't help me. I have to listen to my instincts. Max is meant to be ours, a part of our family—and I need to make sure he knows it.

CHAPTER 11



All work and no play isn't healthy for anyone. Remember, you must take time off from your professional obligations when you can. Finding a balance between work and one's personal life is challenging in any profession these days, but you must strive to do so. You will find you are happier and healthier as a result. In the same vein, self-care is not something to set on the back burner. Taking care of yourself, mentally and physically, is a must. Even small things on a daily basis can have a huge impact on your overall well-being. Setting aside time for yourself is a gift you deserve!

—*The All-Species Specialized Employment Services
(A.S.S.E.S.) Handbook*

*M*ax

DAMN TARGAN and his sexy professor pajamas! They are entirely too distracting.

All through dinner and the movie, my eyes keep straying to his broad, muscular body encased in those gray and white-striped pajamas and navy robe. They're really fucking drab and boring, but somehow they *work* on Targan. He makes prim and proper one hundred percent hot.

Now that I know what *most* of him looks like underneath, I just want to peel him out of those PJs and lick every square inch of his green skin.

After our successful pajama dinner party, we get the children settled in bed, both of them tuckered out from a long day of fun. Instead of inviting me down to his study like he normally does, Targan takes my hand and leads me to his bedroom. My heart is thumping like the sick beats of the latest hit song on a club dance floor.

When we get inside, he closes the door behind us and locks it.

Score!

Before I can think about what's going to happen next, I'm distracted for a moment as I take in the room. I've never been here before, but the space is so wonderfully Targan.

More floor-to-ceiling bookshelves line one of the main walls in the room, jam-packed with yet more books. The far end of the room is dominated by a wall of windows looking out over the lake, providing a stunning perspective that's even better than the one in my room. Dark navy velvet drapes and white sheer curtains hang to the floor on either side of the panes, pulled open wide to capture the glorious view. But those drapes no doubt come in handy in the winter to keep out some of the cold.

The room is tidy and minimalist. Targan, apart from his books, doesn't possess a great deal of knickknacks and bric-a-brac. The tasteful furniture is both classic and functional. A large antique bureau and wooden dresser, their surfaces clear of adornment—save for three framed photos of Targan, Wash, and Sharna during their college years—are stationed next to what I assume is a closet. Beside that is an open door leading into what looks like his en suite bathroom.

The bed, however, is really the showpiece of the room. It's positively enormous, dominating the space. Possibly an Alaskan King, if my guess is correct.

Then again, maybe orcs have their own mattress sizes that don't correspond to those of humans? I'm not sure, but this bed looks like it could easily host a small orgy with room to spare.

Well, maybe not if they were all orcs...

The enormous four-poster frame is a solid, thick cherry wood that's been polished to perfection, no doubt Feldrick's work. He takes his butler duties quite seriously when it comes to keeping the house tidy, for which I'm grateful as that is *not* something I ever agree to be responsible for in my nanny contracts. I will cook meals and clean up the kitchen, and I help the children pick up after themselves, but beyond that I am no one's housekeeper!

I wander over to the bookcase and once again find myself pleasantly surprised. While his downstairs study is filled with academic books and historical monographs related to his profession, here seems to be where he houses more of his personal reading material. I'm delighted when I see he has several shelves devoted to gay romance novels.

But I let out a shriek of excitement when I spot several titles by none other than my BFF, Ryder! I pull out the infamous *The Taming Touch of the Orc Lord*, with its deliciously scandalous cover featuring a mostly naked orc wearing half-undone breeches that showcase an enormous bulge and a rather fey-looking young man kneeling at his feet in supplication.

"You read Ryder St. James's books?"

Of course, that isn't *actually* Ryder's last name but his publisher thought it gave him a certain kind of panache that would sell. And they were right. He's regularly on the bestseller lists with every new release. I'm so proud of him!

A fellow foster kid, Ryder and I first met in a group home and then kept in touch after we got placed with families. I was the luckier one. While I got to live with Sally, poor Ryder ended up with a religious couple that kept him under their roof for the government check but made it clear they didn't accept him being gay. Ryder was booted out on his eighteenth birthday and never looked back. It's rather poetic justice that he now makes a boatload of money writing smutty gay interspecies romance novels that would disgust his former foster parents.

Targan's cheeks darken to a deep mossy shade of green and he shuffles his feet. "I find his books rather enjoyable. There are far too few romances featuring Otherkind characters that aren't horribly xenophobic, making us out to be horrible monsters and villains. Ryder St. James, although certainly fantastical in some of his imaginings, gets a lot of the core things right when it comes to the species he pens his stories about. It's clear he does his research and I find it heartening to read about Otherkind characters getting romantic happy endings." He looks away as he strokes one of his tusks and adds. "We deserve them too."

My heart melts like butter on hot popcorn. Targan is *slaying* me with his sweetness. I want to eat him up!

"You're absolutely right. Otherkind folks are just as deserving of love as anyone else. I know Ryder St. James has always been the kind of person to root for the underdog. He knows what it's like to be misunderstood or to be an outcast among others."

Targan's brow scrunches up in confusion. God, even that looks freaking adorable to me. "You seem to know a lot about him."

I laugh. "Of course I do! He's my best friend, the one you said I could invite to our tea party on Saturday. Remember?"

Behind his gold-rimmed glasses, Targan's eyes get comically large. "Your best friend is bestselling author Ryder St. James?"

I nod my head vigorously, unable to contain a huge grin. "What a coincidence, right?"

Placing the memorable book back on the shelf, I saunter over to Targan and lean up on my tiptoes to wrap my arms around his neck.

Note to self, I need to start wearing shoes with heels!

"Ryder's stories are fantastic." I smirk. "I've read that one by the way. *The Taming Touch of the Orc Lord*." I lick my lips and raise an eyebrow. "I've always wondered if what he wrote about orcs and their anatomy was correct."

Okay, the orc porn I watched confirmed that for me but Targan doesn't need to know that little detail.

Targan groans and his hands grasp my hips, the heat of his touch searing through the thin fabric of my silk pajamas. "You're just toying with me now, aren't you? Do you have any idea how tempting you are to me?"

I inhale and let out a breathy sigh. "Hopefully just as tempting as you are to me because, honey, I've wanted to climb you like a jungle gym since the first time I saw you."

That wonderful cross between a growl and a throaty rumble echoes in his chest as he leans down and captures my mouth in an all-consuming kiss.

Making out with an orc is a little different than with a human man. Targan's tusks do get in the way every now and then, but I'm a quick study and I learn how to navigate around those bad boys with ease. Once again, I even manage to throw in a sexy little lick to each of them that sends a delicious shiver throughout my big green guy.

He is mine, right? I mean, I know we just started dating but he did get rather possessive and protective at the lake today. And a gay boy can dream, right?

While we kiss, I begin to rub up against him, needing more friction on my very hard and needy cock. To my delight, Targan picks me up and I wrap my legs around his hips as he tumbles us onto the bed. He comes down on top of me, holding himself up on his forearms so that some but not all of his glorious weight rests on me, and I moan.

He starts to pull back. "Sorry. Am I too heavy?"

My hands scrabble at him, trying to pull him back down. "Fuck no. You're perfect. Get back over here."

He grins around his tusks in a way that leaves me breathless before settling back over me. Obviously in no rush, he presses his face into the side of my neck, inhaling deeply.

"You smell divine," he whispers, his voice hoarse with desire.

I shiver. “How about we get naked and you can smell me all over?”

He chuckles. “All in good time. I want to savor this moment.”

I push my hips at him impatiently. “Any chance you’re interested in savoring my cock?”

Targan’s grin turns utterly wicked, and I unlock a new fantasy as he reaches up and slowly removes his glasses before setting them on the nightstand. His beautiful amber eyes rove over me like he’s memorizing every inch of me.

Despite having such large hands, he unbuttons my pajama top with nimble fingers, and if I thought his eyes looked hot before, they’re practically on fire now as he stares at my naked torso.

“Like what you see?”

He reaches out a finger and traces the colorful butterfly tattoo over my heart. “Tell me about this.”

I swallow, unexpectedly touched by his interest. “I got it when...when Sally died. It’s sort of in remembrance of her. She always loved butterflies, admiring their ability to morph from a chrysalis into something so colorful and lovely. Their lives are fleeting, but they captivate with their rare beauty. Sally was kind of like that, although her true beauty was on the inside. Her time in this world was cut short far too early, but she impacted my life in a way I’ll never forget.”

Targan leans down and kisses the tears I didn’t even realize had begun to roll down my cheeks.

“Wow, talk about killing the mood,” I offer awkwardly. “I didn’t mean to get all emotional on you.”

Targan frowns and pulls me close. “There’s nothing to apologize about. I’m the one who asked about your tattoo. I had no idea it contained such a beautiful and sentimental meaning for you.” He leans down and kisses the butterfly reverently. “Thank you for sharing that with me.”

Where has this sweet, sexy professor orc been all of my life?

I pull him in close and kiss the stuffing out of him. Damn if he isn't the kind of lover I've been dreaming about but never thought could possibly exist. Clearly, I was searching in all the wrong places—and species.

Reaching out, I tug at the belt of his robe. “Off! I need to feel you against me.”

Targan laughs and pulls back to undo and toss his robe and then his pajama top aside, leaving that muscular green chest bare. When he settles against me again, I gasp at the molten-hot impact of his skin against mine.

“Mmmm,” Targan says. “You feel even better in my arms than I imagined.” He thrusts against me and I gasp with surprise at the heavy fullness of his erection between my thighs. I definitely hadn't been imagining things last time. Targan *is* massive all over.

My pulse quickens and my cock throbs at the thought.

“What do you want tonight?” he asks me.

“Everything. Anything. Just touch me,” I beg.

“I know I said I wanted to take this slow, and for some things I do, but I feel a strong need to bring you pleasure tonight.” He growls. “That obnoxious merman made me feel as though I must show you how much I want you.”

Maybe I should send Marius a basket of baked goods in thanks? What does one send to a merman who lives in a magical city at the bottom of a lake?

I turn my wandering thoughts back to Targan. “I'm *so* on board the pleasure-train adventure. Let's do that!”

Targan chuckles. “I think, for tonight, I would like to be naked with you and stroke our cocks together until we each find our satisfaction.”

I love frothing so I'm down for this one hundred percent. Besides, it will give me a chance to see what I'm working with

if I'm going to have his king-size dick inside me one of these days.

Using my superior talents, I wriggle out of my pajama pants and kick them to the floor. "Naked and at your service!"

Targan's answering smirk is amused. "Very nice, but I do sort of miss those tempting little swim briefs you had on earlier."

I reach out and tweak his nipple, making his eyes darken with lust. "Just wait until you see my lacy pink undies. I'll wear them just for you one day soon."

Lickety-split, Targan yanks his bottoms off too and grabs a bottle of lube from the nightstand. "You are pure temptation," he growls.

I barely hear him. All I can do is stare at his thick, green cock. *Holy hugeness, honey!*

Much like the orc in the porn I watched, Targan's cock is a decent length but the width is unlike anything I've ever had inside me. His balls are also easily several times the size of a human man's. I swallow just remembering the cascade of come in that video.

Squeezing a copious amount of lube into his hand, Targan begins to slick himself up, and it's like I'm getting my very own ultrahot peep show. Normally, I consider this part a perfunctory prelude to the main act, but watching Targan's large hand encircle his thick, meaty erection while he lubes himself up is more sensual than I anticipated.

He seems to notice my fixation on his groin and pauses in his movements. "It doesn't frighten you, does it?" There's a faint note of worry in his voice.

I hasten to reassure him. "Hell no! Your cock is big and gorgeous. I will admit, I think it might take some work for me to fit that sucker inside me one day, but we can build up to it." I grin. "I have a number of very nice dildos and butt plugs to help me along."

Fire burns in Targan's eyes. "I look forward to helping you take all of me inside you soon, my sweet."

“Oh fuck,” I whisper.

Seeming to recognize the challenges of our bodily size differences, Targan has us change positions so that we’re lying side by side on the bed, with our hips aligned. He uses one enormous hand to pull my hips forward until our cocks touch, and I cry out at the glorious sensation. Unlike a human man, the heat of him is damn near scalding and I want to bask in it for hours.

When he thrusts his hips so that our cocks rub together for the first time, I shout and my whole body jerks. Targan tightens his grip on my hip, holding me firmly in place as he continues to rut against me.

We both moan at the delicious friction.

“Take hold of us both,” he commands, his voice a deep growl that nearly makes me come right then and there.

Mega hot professor voice for the win!

“Fuck yeah,” I agree.

I have to use both hands to wrap around our cocks. Concentrating, I make my grip firm and stare in wonder as our cocks thrust in unison between the hole my hands have made for us. The large head of Targan’s green cock has me mesmerized and I lick my lips. I can’t decide if I want to try fitting that beauty in my mouth or my ass first!

I moan, panting like I’ve run a fucking marathon even though Targan is doing most of the work at the moment. Damn that porno and *all* the ideas it gave me. I want to try so many things with Targan.

Unfortunately, I’m not going to last much longer. Merciful heavens, I haven’t been this overeager since I was a clueless teenager making out with my first boyfriend in the back of his car after high school drama club!

With Targan’s sure thrusts and forceful hold on my hip—*fuck yes*—it doesn’t take long before I’m teetering on the edge. I’m so turned on right now, I won’t last. “Oh shit. I’m gonna come,” I warn him, my grip on us weakening as my balls tighten.

He gently bats my hands away, letting go of my hip to wrap his huge hand around us both with ease as he alternates between driving his hips forward and jacking us together.

Like before, I wrap my arms around his neck and hold on for all that I'm worth.

"Ohgodohgodohgod," I chant. As my own climax approaches, all I can see in my mind is that orc in the porno gushing a motherfucking come fountain. I've been fantasizing about it for *days*.

"I must warn you," Targan grunts. "Orc ejaculations are a bit more effusive than those of human men."

Is he reading my mind?!

"*Fuck yes*. Give it to me, baby!" I gasp out.

He jacks us twice more and I'm flying, my cock spurting with my release as I ride the wave of one of the best orgasms of my life.

I'm still coming down from my euphoric high, and slowly starting to soften, when Targan gives several frenzied jerks of his hips before he lets out a guttural noise and his cock *erupts*.

That's the only word for it.

One minute I'm lying there beside him replete and content, still feeling the echoing vibrations of my orgasm, and the next I'm being splashed with enough come to leave me open-mouthed with amazement. Some even hits me on the chin! Fascinated, I stare between us as Targan's balls draw in tight to his body while he continues to *gush* all over me, coating my chest and stomach with thick white jizz. There's enough I could fingerpaint with it! I fucking love it.

Heh. Now I'm the cinnamon roll and he just frosted me but good.

Oh sweet Jesus. Another new sexual fantasy unlocked.

When the spunk fountain that is his cock finally seems to turn off, all I can do is lie there like my body is the canvas of some erotic painting. Only instead of paint, he's covered me in come.

“Now that is what I call an...*orcasm!*” I chortle, unable to stop myself.

Targan runs a hand through his hair and blushes again. “Sorry about that. I tried to warn you.”

“Is it safe?”

He frowns. “What?”

“Are you negative?”

Recognition sparks in his eyes. “Ah. Remember when I told you humans cannot contract illnesses from Otherkind and vice versa? That includes sexually transmitted ones.”

In answer, I trail a finger through some of his release and bring it to my mouth, sucking suggestively on it. “Mmmm. Yummy.”

He moans and his cock twitches *again!*

With a groan, Targan leans down and takes my mouth in a wet kiss, tasting himself on my tongue. When he finally pulls back, we both have his drying jizz all over us.

He wrinkles his nose. “I think we need a bath.”

I waggle my eyebrows at him. “Just so long as we take one together.”

In one swift movement, he pulls me into his arms and stands, then carries me to his bathroom. “I think that can be arranged.”

CHAPTER 12



When courting a serious love interest, most orcs will take winning the heart of their intended as a challenge in its own right. When it comes to love, orcs are quite serious in their commitment and will do anything to achieve their goal. In some cases, this may require an orc to humble themselves and ask others for help. After all, an orc never wants to take the chance of failing in their attempts to woo a mate.

—*Green But Not Inherently Mean: A Nuanced History of the Orc* by Dr. Targan Wildethorne

T argan

“WHAT WAS SO urgent you needed to call me out here?”

I fidget in my booth seat opposite Vash. We’re having lunch at the 24-hour diner in town, which is kitted out in full retro ’50s human decor.

“Can’t I just want to invite one of my oldest and closest friends out for meal?” I ruin my attempt at nonchalance by fiddling with my utensils on the table.

Vash arches a dark eyebrow at me. “After all these years, I know you far too well. You’d much rather be eating a sandwich in your study and working on your manuscript than coming into town to meet me.” He leans back and crosses his bulging arms. “Besides, I’m going to be coming over to the house tomorrow afternoon for the long-awaited tea party.

There must be a reason you wanted to see me now.” His eyes narrow far too perceptively. “What happened?”

I feel my cheeks flush. Max happened, that’s what.

“I’m intensely attracted to my new nanny.”

Vash scoffs. “Tell me something I didn’t know already.”

I stare at him, flabbergasted. “You knew?”

“Targan, it’s more than a wee bit obvious. Almost anybody who sees you two together can discern the very obvious sexual tension going on.” He shakes his head. “Even at the first meeting, I swear I could cut the UST in the room with a knife.

I lean back in my seat, stunned. “I had no idea I was so transparent.” Then his words fully sink in. “Wait, you could tell Max was attracted to me too?”

Vash flashes me a pitying look. “You’re always so oblivious to these things. Of course he was! The man took one look at you and I might as well have been chopped liver. He directed all that flirty, saucy cuteness right at you instead.”

I preen and then clear my throat. “I may not have recognized his interest at first, but we’ve remedied that. In fact, we’ve started dating.”

Vash steepled his hands on the Formica tabletop and leans closer, his voice going low. “Oh? Do tell.”

I mimic his movements. “Well, after he learned I wasn’t his boss—I’m not entirely sure how his wires got crossed on that one—he started flirting with me more openly. It gave me hope and the courage to be honest about my interest in him too.”

Vash hums in thought. “So is this just a fling between you two, or is it something that could become more serious? Nice as a fling might be, it could also be risky. If things go sour, you don’t want to risk losing him as the kids’ nanny. Sorry, nanny.”

I take a deep breath. “It’s not a fling. We’re dating and have agreed to see only one another.”

“Oh, my sweet old-fashioned friend. Monogamy already, eh?”

“What’s wrong with that?” I ask defensively.

Vash shakes his head and grins. “Nothing. That’s wonderful news. Congratulations.” He reaches up a hand and strokes his chin. “Obviously, there must be more to your interest in the man than his body.” He winks, then continues. “I know how you like the curvier, more luscious men in your bed. On a physical level, he hits all your buttons. But what about elsewhere? Do you connect in other ways?”

Just thinking about Max makes me smile. “I’ve never known another man quite as fascinating as Max. He’s so vibrant and colorful, and he seems to bring joy and laughter everywhere he goes. It’s remarkable. I know now that I went about things all wrong. When Max showed up and turned things around in almost no time, I was forced to learn some hard truths. I’d erroneously thought the children were unmanageable, but it was really more that I didn’t know how to be a parent to them. I hadn’t the faintest clue about any of the things they needed to feel safe and welcome in their new home.” My smile widens. “But in the two weeks that he’s been here, Max has already restored harmony to our lives.”

Vash sighs. “The weans were never the problem. Sure, they’ve had a rough time of it, especially losing their mom the way they did.” His expression darkens at the thought. “But they’ve adapted well. And let’s face it, a lot of that is thanks to Sharna. She did a damn good job raising them despite that vile piece of garbage she married.”

His scowl softens and he takes a sip of his tea. “They’re good kids underneath it all. They just needed a steady guiding hand.”

“Max has provided that,” I explain. “He’s a miracle worker.”

Vash grunts. “Look, I don’t dispute the man’s talents. There’s a reason I hired him, after all, but you’re selling yourself short, my friend. Much like the children needed a simple guiding hand, so did you. I always knew you had it in

you and now it sounds like you're turning into a proper parent to them." His eyes crinkle with pleasure. "I can't wait to see it in action. If Sharna is watching over us beyond the Light, I'm sure she's over the moon with joy."

I shake my head slowly. "I think a part of me will never fully understand why, out of everyone who knew and loved her, she chose me. Yet with each day, I gain greater confidence that I can do this. I never thought I'd say this, but I'm grateful she chose me. Harn and Yara are amazing." I can't hold back a huge grin. "Yara loves to read and we talk about books together now. Harn is learning to cook with Max and every day he tells me about what new techniques he's practicing. I find myself eager to be with them as they grow into the fine orcs they are meant to be."

"The professor becomes the proud papa. It suits you, my friend."

I look Vash dead in the eyes. "But I need Max by my side. Not just because he's so gifted with Yara and Harn, but because he makes me feel things I've only ever read about in books before." I swallow thickly. "I can't stop thinking about him."

Before Vash can respond, our server interrupts our conversation by setting our plates on the table. I've ordered an enormous three-layer club sandwich with a heaping side of fries, a bowl of chili, and toast and butter. Thankfully, Vash has an appetite that could rival my own. Gargoyles and orcs share similar metabolisms and muscular physiques that require higher caloric intake, so his order of a double-decker burger combo with fries and a large side salad is not a surprise.

We fall on our food with ravenous abandon and are silent for several minutes as we eat. Once we've begun to slake our hunger, we resume our conversation. I tell Vash what happened in the lake and then give him a highly censored version of the intimate night I spent with Max.

Just thinking back on our time together sets off something warm and fluttery in my chest and fires up my libido. After we'd achieved our mutual release, I'd taken him into my

enormous shower, and we'd spent an age washing one another's bodies under the steaming spray, kissing and just luxuriating in the feel of one another. Once we were clean, we cuddled for a while on the loveseat in my sitting room, but eventually Max had given a long forlorn sigh and explained that he needed to go back to his room before he fell asleep in mine.

I had yearned for him to do just that. The thought of having him in my bed, my body curled around him all night long, had taken root in my brain and wouldn't let go. But I understood Max's dilemma. Although we'd told the children we were going to date, it is quite another matter to begin sharing a bedroom. Max had explained that, at eight years old, the children were not so innocent as to have no idea what that might mean.

For now, we've agreed on the necessity of sleeping in our own bedrooms at night so the children don't accidentally stumble upon us together in the morning, let alone naked. Bare skinned and spooning Max while we slumber is how I wish I could spend every night. I sigh at the thought and take a bite of my sandwich.

Vash munches on a handful of french fries, a mysterious look on his face.

I frown. "What is it?"

He shakes his head slowly. "I think you may have found your mate, my friend."

I freeze, holding the last piece of my sandwich a few inches away from my mouth. "What?"

Vash's eyes twinkle. "It's not unheard of for Otherkind to find our mates among the humans."

"That's true. But it's not as if all Otherkind have fated mates. That tends to be more common among species from other dimensions, like demons." I should know, I'd written a whole book on the subject.

Vash waves a clawed hand in the air. "I know, but when we decide on a partner we want to woo and keep for the rest of

our lives, we still call them our mate. Humans may tend to prefer terms like ‘husband’ or ‘wife,’ but they effectively mean the same thing.”

Vash is right, although finding a mate connotes a greater degree of permanence for Otherkind than the average human marriage since more than half of them end in divorce these days. Unions between mates, once accepted by all parties, rarely if ever end unless one dies. Many are not fortunate enough to find a mate though.

If only Sharna had found hers before she got involved with Yargef. If only she’d told us the truth and asked for our help sooner, then maybe things would have turned out differently.

I sigh and set my sandwich piece down as I consider Vash’s words. “It’s true. I feel something unique and different with Max, but I think it’s still quite early to know whether or not he’s my mate.”

Vash shrugs and finishes off the last bite of his double-decker burger. “Whatever you say. I just want to point out that I called it first.”

I narrow my eyes. “Are you trying to take bets on us?”

He grins, flashing a fang. “Not exactly, but I know your parents. I know the stories they’ve always told. Heck, the stories even my parents have told me dozens of times over the years. When we find our mates, it’s a different kind of feeling. We experience a particular type of connection that we’ve never had with another before.” He takes another sip of tea and gives me almost a pitying look. “Sounds pretty much like what you’re saying, Targan.”

“I’ve had plenty of lovers,” I remind him.

“So have I, but neither of us has ever wanted to keep any of them.” He looks me dead in the eye. “Do you want to keep Max?”

Yes, a voice rumbles deep inside me, and I’m shocked at the certainty that accompanies the thought.

Vash seems to intuit the truth of the matter and nods to himself knowingly. “I wish you all the very best of luck, my

friend. Courting a human as a mate won't be easy."

He's not wrong. But then again, Max is so different from other humans. Perhaps romancing him will be different as well?

Still a little anxious, I ask, "Do you have any advice or suggestions on how I can court him?"

"From the sounds of it, you're doing a pretty damn good job already if you've gotten into his pants."

I feel my cheeks flush again. "It's only been a little bit of fooling around so far." I swallow nervously. "We haven't attempted actual intercourse yet. I do worry about the differences in our anatomy."

Vash nods slowly. "That's only natural. Was he disturbed when he saw...all that you're working with last night?"

I think back on it. "He was a bit startled by the...end result, since it was quite a bit messier than what he's used to. But he seemed to relish the prospect of trying to make us...fit together."

Vash gives me a hearty smack on the shoulder. "Well, there you go. Like I told you, Max doesn't strike me as any kind of pushover. He's not some delicate flower you need to protect. I wouldn't have hired him if he was. If there's anyone that can handle making love with an orc, I think it's him."

I grin with pleasure, stroking one of my tusks happily. "What about you, my friend?" I ask, turning the tables on Vash. "It's been far too long since you last had a partner."

He stabs his fork into his salad and angrily shovels in a mouthful.

"I'm done with dating for a while," he grumbles around his food. "Besides, I don't have time for it. Work is busy right now. I've only just finished training my latest recruits." His countenance clouds over at the unspoken reminder of why he had to hire them. "I'm still working on tracking down Yargef, but he's gone off the grid, and he's being smart for once and lying low."

“You’ll find him one of these days, I know it. I have complete faith in you. But that doesn’t mean you can’t try to find happiness as well. I worry that you’re becoming too consumed by this quest for revenge.”

He pushes his empty plate away. “It’s not as if I’ve had anyone who’s caught my fancy recently. I’m not turning viable prospects away or anything.”

I perk up. “Max is bringing his best friend to the tea party tomorrow. You never know, maybe you two might hit it off?”

Vash scoffs. “I don’t think so. Humans are certainly quite tempting little morsels but I can’t imagine having a long-term relationship with one.”

I frown. My friend isn’t one of those Otherkind bigoted toward humans. “Why not?”

He shrugs. “I just don’t think the odds are in my favor. It would take a rare human—or any individual, for that matter—to be able to accept the long hours that I work and the threats associated with my job. While I may reside here in Mystic Hollow, much of my work takes me outside of it and into places where I’m not protected by magic. There’s always risk and danger involved when protecting others. It’s long been a bone of contention with everyone I’ve dated.”

I know how perilous some of his jobs can be, and honestly, I worry about him too. But gargoyles are designed to protect others, it’s in their nature. And it’s no surprise that Vash opened up a security firm when he settled here. Indeed, everyone in his family is involved in some form of protection, from the military to the U.S. Secret Service to the more mysterious protectors of the ley lines back in his homeland of Scotland. The gargoyles who remain there on their ancestral lands face even darker and deadlier foes, ones drawn to the potent and mystical power of ley line magic.

We conclude our lunch in thoughtful silence and when we part ways, Vash gives me a hug. “Take your time with Max. I’ve read his file, and I’m sure he’s told you plenty about himself, but the man had a tough upbringing. There are things that you can offer him, and comfort you can give him, that no

one else can. While I know that sexual chemistry can be all-consuming, and it's not unimportant, don't forget you need to woo his heart and his mind, not just his body."

Vash may not want to admit it, but he has a soft heart under his gruff exterior.

"Max gives a lot of himself, taking care of the children and even you in many respects. Make sure you take the time to think about how you can care for him in return." With those sage words of wisdom, my old friend stalks down the sidewalk back to his office, leaving me to think on all that we've discussed.

Because I *do* want to keep Max—and I need to do everything in my power to make that happen.

CHAPTER 13



It's important to be prepared for the unexpected. Life sometimes throws us a curveball when we are least prepared for it. While it is difficult to anticipate and be ready for the unknown, you need to hone your quick-thinking skills so you can react and adapt to whatever situation you may find yourself in. As always, maintaining professionalism in the face of disaster is essential.

—*The All-Species Specialized Employment Services
(A.S.S.E.S.) Handbook*

M ax

WHEN THE DOORBELL chimes at 11:00 a.m., I'm just finishing up in the kitchen so I drop everything and race for the front door with the excitement of a kid going to open presents on Christmas morning.

The twins and both dogs are hot on my trail. After all, it isn't often that I run toward anything! Apart from maybe free wine or my favorite cake in the world—Black Forest if you're wondering. But today I hoof it to the front door, beating out poor Feldrick, who's moving to answer it at a snail's pace.

With a triumphant whoop, I yank it open. On the other side stands my best friend in the whole wide world.

Ryder is my physical opposite in about every way possible. A petite man, he's always looked ethereally young. Even though he's the same age as me, he often gets carded at bars

and clubs because his youthful face makes him seem far younger than he in fact is. If he weren't my BFF, I'd be full-on jealous.

As usual, Ryder's dark auburn hair is a messy riot of uncombed waves desperately in need of a trim. Like many of his redheaded brethren, his skin is a gloriously creamy white, but he burns even more easily than I do—and that's saying something! Fortunately, he spends most of his time inside, hunched over his computer writing or preparing notes for his next romance novel.

But under his bright hazel eyes, I'm surprised to see dark shadows. Even his black, rectangular, hipster glasses can't hide them. I'd been the one to convince him to get the pair, by the way. They looked yummy on him when he tried them on in the shop and I'd used my BFF card to convince him to buy them.

Ryder's appearance is never anything he spends too much time contemplating. Case in point, he's wearing a faded pair of ripped jeans and a T-shirt that I know for a fact he's had since college. He looks about as presentable as Ryder usually gets.

The only exception, of course, is when he has a public appearance or book signing. That's when his publicist gets involved and has her team of people work their magic on his hair and clothing. After all, they consider him a very lucrative investment and want to maintain his image for the masses that buy his books enough to put them on all the bestseller lists. At signings and other publishing events, Ryder, my usual slovenly, unkempt, and disorganized friend, becomes suave author Ryder St. James—mysterious, debonair, and incredibly dashing. The transformation is quite remarkable. Yet, anyone who truly knows Ryder understands just how uncomfortable he generally is the whole time he has to take on that role.

However, it's all about image, at least in the mind of his current publisher. Part of Ryder St. James's success as an author is not just the stories that he writes but the allure that he possesses for the people who read his books. Ryder is blessed with that kind of naturally stunning androgynous appeal that captures everyone's gaze—even when he's being a slob. He

possesses a provocative blend of masculine and feminine that tends to win over all genders.

I immediately wrap him in a tight embrace. His form is much smaller and slimmer than my own, but he squeezes me back with equal strength. Where I'm luscious and curvy, Ryder is almost elfin as it were. Sometimes I've wondered if he might have Otherkind DNA in his family tree, but Ryder probably couldn't even find out even if he wanted to. He knows even less about his biological parents than I do about mine.

Damn, it's been far too long since I last saw him. My previous job had been down in Virginia, too far for us to meet up regularly. I'm so glad to be so close to him now.

"You made it!" I pull back but keep my hands on his shoulders. "How was the drive?"

He gives me a genuine smile. "It was lovely. For as long as I've lived in Syracuse, I can't believe I've never been out here before."

I grin. "You hate to travel, that's why. Apart from going to New York City once a year to meet with your publisher, you spend the rest of the time holed up in your condo in front of your computer." I shake my head. "I worry about you, babydoll. It's good for you to get out of your writing cave every now and again, especially if it means spending time with your fabulous BFF."

He chuckles. "Isn't that the truth! It's been far too long since we last saw each other. But I thoroughly enjoyed myself on the way here. The drive was idyllic and I got about a dozen new ideas for stories while on the road. Thank goodness I had my phone so I could dictate a whole bunch of stuff while I was driving."

I give a chuckle of my own. Ryder's mind is always at work. The man has more ideas for stories than he has hours in the day in which to write them. He once told me that he feels like it's a constant Sisyphean struggle. He pushes each new book up the mountain, only to have about a dozen more book ideas come tumbling down after him every time. Progress

becomes an illusion. Even when he finishes a book, he has dozens more yammering in his mind, demanding to be written.

It sounds like a damn nightmare to me, but he mostly revels in it. Ryder isn't Ryder if he isn't dreaming, scheming, plotting, and writing a story.

“No trouble at the bridge?”

He shakes his head. “The weekend pass that you and Targan were able to arrange for me worked just fine.”

I grin at him. “Did you feel the magic when you crossed over?”

He shivers and his face lights up with excitement. “It was so freaking cool! Of course, I'd researched such things for a number of my books, but I'd never had the opportunity to actually experience it until now. Talk about wild!” He does a little happy dance. “I'm definitely going to be able to write about Sanctuary Havens with greater skill in the future.” He pauses, face scrunching up in thought. “Although it does make me wonder what the magic would feel like if it tried to repel me—”

Ryder's dedication to his craft means my BFF is more than willing to put himself in danger just to experience something he wants to write about. I have to nip this in the bud. “Do not even think about that. The magic is there to assess your intentions and your potential risk to anyone in the town. While you're an intensely curious person—”

Almost to a fault sometimes.

“—you're not evil or violent, so the magic had no qualms about giving you entrance.”

He strokes his tiny, pointed chin, clearly still considering the possibilities.

“I have so many questions, though!” Ryder has that feverish look in his eyes that he gets when he's all keyed up. “I mean, how does the magic determine someone's nature? How does it know if you're good or evil? How does it assess shades of gray? Most people are on a continuum, not some simple binary.”

I shrug. “That’s beyond my pay grade, sweetie.”

“I just wonder if someone could conceal their intentions, get inside, and then turn on the evil switch, so to speak. What would happen? Would they be magically ejected from the town? If so, how?”

I can’t help but chuckle. This is so Ryder. I’d missed this, his endless stream of questions and what-if scenarios, all of which fuel his writer’s brain.

Yara clears her throat meaningfully and I realize we’ve been standing here in the doorway for far too long. I was just so excited to see him that I kind of lost sight of everything else.

Hurriedly stepping aside, I usher him in. “Sorry! Please come in.”

The twins and Waffles stand off to the side, watching Ryder with wary but interested expressions. In contrast, Princess Peach comes trotting over to him, head and tail both held high, ready to be loved on by her wannabe second father.

Ryder gets enormous hearts in his eyes the moment he spots her and collapses to his knees, arms outstretched. “Who’s my baby?” he croons. “Have you missed your papa? Who’s my good girl? Come here, let me give you some love.”

Princess Peach graciously allows him to scoop her up in his arms and Ryder immediately showers her with adoration and nonsensical baby talk.

I sigh. Honestly, I’m not much better. She inspires the very deepest love and adoration. Under Ryder’s effusive praise, she preens with contented delight.

My sweet baby definitely has seen some shit, including some of the worst examples of humanity. As a consequence, I’ve found that she’s a remarkably good judge of character. More impressive still, she has a particular talent for identifying people who have also experienced abuse and trauma. Kindred spirits, essentially.

Ryder was one of the earliest examples of this.

After Princess Peach had been with me for a couple of days, Ryder came over, demanding to meet the newest member of my family. I wasn't sure how she was going to react, as she'd been skittish around new people, particularly men, but the moment she saw Ryder, they were on the same wavelength. She jumped right up and sat contentedly in his lap, letting him pet her and whisper soothing words to her.

While I'm sure that Ryder thought he was comforting her, she was doing the same for him. Thus, it came as no surprise to me that Ryder began visiting regularly so he could see Princess Peach. Sure, he wanted to spend time with me too, but I saw the underlying yearning for the kind of unconditional love that only animals can provide. I loved my sweet fur baby all the more for the fact that she was willing to share that with him just as much as she does with me.

While Ryder gets reacquainted with his surrogate dog daughter, I introduce him to the children and Waffles. The enormous hellhound is thankfully in his Great Dane size at the moment. For the most part, I've come to realize he's a seriously big goofball. A gentle giant. Targan tells me that, in a dangerous situation, Waffles will wholeheartedly protect the children, but he seems like a harmless goober to me most days.

He also takes his cue from Princess Peach on just about everything in the household. Her tacit approval of Ryder is all Waffles needs to wag his three tails and beg for pets too. Much to my surprise, Princess Peach allows Ryder to split his attention between them—to Waffles's delight, if his lolling tongues and happy noises are any indication.

The twins aren't left out either. Ryder, being the intelligent man that he is, quickly wins them over with gifts he's brought for the occasion. The man constantly gets all kinds of ridiculous swag from his publishers and other people he knows within the publishing and entertainment industry. I'd told him about the kids and their interests, and today he's brought each of them something to keep him in their good books for quite some time.

For Harn, he's brought an anticipated video game that hasn't even been released yet but that he's been talking about

for ages. The little boy's eyes sparkle so bright, they look like they could shoot off sparks any moment. Yara gets the hottest new young adult book that's been sold out everywhere we've looked for it lately. It features a detective duo of girls, one an orc and the other a human, who go on adventures and solve complicated mysteries together.

The children both talk animatedly about their gifts, thanking Ryder several times before racing off with Waffles hot on their heels to enjoy their new swag. When my bestie finally gets to his feet again, it's just me, him, and Princess Peach left in the silent hallway.

He shakes his head. "Wow. You weren't joking about the hellhound. I've met one once before as part of my research, but he was a little less...gentle than this one."

"Waffles is a big softie. It's kind of hilarious to watch, but Princess Peach is totally the boss of him. He desperately wants to gain her love, but she's not having any of it. Not yet, anyway." I chuckle. "I'm sure there are as great a variety of hellhounds as there are dogs. Temperament depends a lot on their masters."

"Ain't that the truth." Ryder grins as he stares up at the high ceilings and the crown molding. "Do we have time for a tour? This house is pretty spectacular."

I beam. "Of course, darling. Let me show you around the place." I take him on a tour, first popping in to check on the kids, who are both engrossed in their new gifts.

Ryder loses his mind over my bedroom. "This is fabulous! Like something we dreamed about when we were in foster care. I'm so happy for you."

I know he's being completely genuine and honest, even though my living quarters here are nothing compared to the expensive condo he now owns. Despite becoming a wealthy author, Ryder hasn't let it change who he is. Having grown up in poverty and experienced going hungry many times due to punishment or subpar care from his foster family, Ryder still has a genuine appreciation for the fundamental things that make life livable: good food, a roof over one's head, and basic

safety and security. We often had uncertainty around all three when growing up and both of us refuse to live without any of them now that we're adults.

He sits down on my bed and flops back with a contented sigh. "Isn't this nice? Targan definitely splashed out for a luxury bed. That earns him a gold star in my book."

I lie down beside him. "It's my favorite feature of the room. Although the clawfoot bathtub is a close second." I roll to my side and face him. "Are you sure you want to stay at the bed and breakfast in town? We have plenty of room here, and Targan's cool with you staying."

"I appreciate the offer, but you know I keep odd hours. The place I'm staying looks lovely and it's not far."

His words are honest, but there's a strange, almost haunted shadow in his eyes that I haven't seen before. I reach out and brush some of his wavy hair off his forehead. "Are you okay? You look troubled."

Ryder uncharacteristically averts his gaze and my worry ratchets up. "What is it? What's wrong?"

Sitting up, he rubs a hand wearily over his face. "It's nothing. I'm just having some issues with a stalker."

I bolt upright. "Say *what*?"

He flinches. "Just some creep who's been sending disturbing letters to my publisher. One even got delivered to my condo this week."

I gasp. "This fucker knows where you live?"

He cringes. "So it would seem."

"I thought the publisher worked super diligently to try and conceal that information." Ryder's horde of fans kind of make it a necessity.

He gives a helpless shrug. "We did all that we could, but in this digital age anyone can track me down if they are determined enough. Hell, this creep could have hired a private investigator to find me, for all I know."

This does *not* sound good. “But your building has good security, right?”

He nods. “All non-residents have to sign in and be pre-approved. The security guards in the lobby have been notified that they’re not to let anyone up to my unit apart from you and my agent. But that didn’t stop this guy from sending me something in the mail.”

I cross my arms, not liking the sound of any of this. “What did the letter say?”

“Nothing worth repeating.”

I want to press for more details, but I can tell that he isn’t willing to discuss it right now. I settle for asking, “What are you going to do?”

Ryder gives a nervous laugh. “My plan right now is to ignore it all and hopefully this creep will lose interest and leave me alone.”

That sounds a lot like denial to me but I’m not certain what would be the best kind of approach to take. “What about the police?”

He shakes his head, the tiredness on his face becoming more pronounced. “My agent and I looked into it already, but unless or until whatever this is ‘escalates,’ there’s almost nothing the police can or will do.” He scowls. “Even if this stalker’s behavior escalates, the most I can get is a restraining order. The police won’t do anything until he actually commits an act of violence against me or tries to break into my home.”

“That’s such bullshit!”

“Unfortunately, the human criminal justice system is inherently flawed. What few laws we have when it comes to trying to protect people from stalkers don’t do a whole hell of a lot.” He runs a hand through his messy hair. “I’m more fortunate than some in that I can afford to live in a secure building and pay to hire protection if I need it.”

My alarm mounts. “Protection? Do you think you’re going to need to hire someone to keep you safe? Like a bodyguard or something?”

He shrugs. “Maybe. My agent thinks it might be a good idea for when I go on my next book tour.”

I pale. “Oh my god. You think this creeper might show up at one of your signings?”

“Based on his letters, it’s a high possibility.”

“You’re sure it’s a man?”

“He’s made that *quite* clear in his letters.”

Ryder’s still being vague but I don’t like the sound of this one bit. I frown again. “When does the book tour start?”

“In September.”

“So you have a couple of months. Maybe this weirdo will lose interest by then.”

“Let’s hope so. Anyway, let’s focus on happier things.” He waggles his eyebrows at me. “I want to meet this studly orc of yours.”

I don’t want to end this conversation since I’m really fucking worried about my bestie now, but I can also tell from the tired lines on his face that he’s maxed out for today. Thankfully, he’s staying in town until Monday morning, and I have my day off tomorrow so we’re going to spend it together. This talk is only paused temporarily. I intend to revisit it later.

Instead, I pull him into my arms and hold him. I pet his hair the way he likes and the faint tremble running through his body gradually stops.

“My silver fox orc professor is amazing,” I finally say, then adding in a mock begrudging tone, “I *suppose* I could let you meet him.”

Ryder’s eyes twinkle as he pulls back so he can look me in the eye.

I hold up one hand and count off on my fingers. “Superhot, supersmart, supersweet.”

“Oh, merciful heavens,” Ryder murmurs. “That’s like the holy trifacta of things you love in a man, isn’t it?”

I cackle in response. Ryder knows me just as well as I know him. “Pretty fucking much.”

I cuddle Ryder for a few more minutes before I lead him downstairs to Targan’s study. When I knock on the door, he bids us enter, and the moment Ryder walks in the room he’s transformed back to his usual excited, vivacious self, flitting around the study and admiring its walls packed full of books with wide, awe-filled eyes.

“This is the ultimate library porn fantasy!” he exclaims.

I facepalm. “Nice first impression, Ryder.”

Targan stands up from where he’s seated behind his enormous desk and comes around, hand extended. He grins around his tusks at Ryder, making him look even more adorable. I want to love him up so bad!

“You must be Max’s friend, Ryder. It’s a pleasure to meet you.” His massive green hand engulfs my friend’s much smaller one as he gently shakes it.

Ryder gapes up at him with a look of obvious appreciation. “Wow. I’ve never met an orc in real life before. Your muscles are just as impressive as I’ve read about.” He beams at Targan. “I have so many questions. One day I plan to write another orc romance, so I’ll be coming to you for all kinds of information.”

Targan chuckles. “Max told me you might. I’d be happy to help.” He gives a mischievous wink that makes my cock plump up a little. “I must admit, I’m a fan of your work. I own most of your Otherkind romance novels.”

Ryder blushes a charming shade of pink and flutters a hand to his cheek. “Oh my, thank you! That’s high praise coming from a world-renowned scholar.”

Despite the fame and fortune he has garnered over the years, my best friend is still oddly shy about his work and struggles to handle praise from fans.

Targan steals another piece of my heart when, evidently catching on to Ryder’s discomfort, he quickly changes the subject and gives him a tour of his favorite room in the house.

All four walls are lined with books on all kinds of topics related to the history, folklore, and cultures of different species of Otherkind.

I'm pleased to see Ryder and Targan hit it off, both enthused about their mutual interests. Targan's expertise in all Otherkind beings takes a more scholarly bent, but Ryder bridges the gap between the realms of nonfiction research and fictional romance quite adeptly. Few outside his inner circle understand how much time he spends reading and learning about the many different species and their cultures, knowledge he then incorporates into his books.

Ryder has always been a champion of the marginalized and oppressed. He's passionate about ensuring that there are stories out there that show everyone, including the Otherkind, deserves to find love and happiness. He aims to showcase romances where differences between lovers do not become barriers to their happily ever afters but rather something to be celebrated and revered.

I'm so fucking proud of him.

Ryder's so incredibly smart and talented that he could have done many things with his life. If he'd wanted, he could have become a scholar like Targan, but I love the fact that he decided to use his skills to write stories of hope, happiness, and plenty of hotness that are accessible to almost everyone.

Thinking back on it, I wonder if having read so many of Ryder's books over the years made me more open to the idea of being with Targan from the start. If so, then I am forever in Ryder's debt.

We regroup with the children and enjoy a light lunch together since we're all saving room for the afternoon tea party extravaganza. Afterward, the children head to their rooms to finalize their costumes and rehearse the routine they've been developing. They've been so tight-lipped about it that they've refused to let even me know what they're going to do. I've caught some glimpses here and there though, and I have high expectations for what lies ahead.

Before we know it, midafternoon rolls around and, perfectly punctual as Targan explained he always is, Vash rings the doorbell at 3:00 p.m. exactly.

Upstairs, the kids cheer with excitement while, Ryder, Targan, and I go to welcome our guest of honor.

CHAPTER 14



Contrary to the imaginings of many a human fantasy genre author, orcs are in no way related to elves. Among Otherkind, this very notion has long produced a great deal of amusement. In actual fact, early orcs developed alongside Neanderthals, surviving where Neanderthals eventually went extinct. They evolved faster than Homo sapiens, who rejected most of the orc species' efforts to share knowledge and resources with them. The differences in orc physiology were too frightening to early Homo sapiens, so orcs decided to keep their communities separate for millennia. Ironically, Homo sapiens proved far hardier than their Neanderthal counterparts—and remarkably fertile. Before long, orcs realized they were a minority in a world of beings that still feared them.

—*Green But Not Inherently Mean: A Nuanced History of the Orc* by Dr. Targan Wildethorne

T argan

“WELL FUCK me sideways and call me Sally!” Ryder exclaims.

I gape at Max’s friend, whose gaze is riveted on Vash looming in the open doorway.

“My sentiments exactly,” Max adds, surveying Vash up and down.

My old friend has taken Max’s earlier words to heart and is dressed for the occasion in a starched tunic and his formal

family tartan. He looks very dashing, and it's obvious that Max and his friend are in awe at the sight.

I'm sure my pressed pants and button-down shirt are boring in comparison.

Vash frowns. "Did I miss something? Is everything alright?"

Ryder nearly swoons into Max's arms. "Heavens to Betsy! He's Scottish too? Why didn't you tell me? Warn a boy next time!"

Max laughs. "Sorry. I forgot you had a thing for accents." He glances back at a very confused Vash. "Come on in. This is my best friend since we were in middle school, Ryder Thomas, better known as gay romance author Ryder St. James."

Vash freezes in the middle of extending his hand in greeting, his brows winging upward. He darts a questioning look at me. "The one who writes those novels you like so much?"

I nod my head. "The very one."

Ryder leaps forward and pumps Vash's hand enthusiastically. "Sorry about a moment ago. I was just a little addled by the sight of you in a kilt." He grins. "It's not every day one gets to meet a gargoyle, let alone a Scottish one in a *full-on kilt*. Talk about a new fantasy unleashed!" Ryder looks Vash up and down, taking in every detail in a way that manages to make my normally stoic friend shift uncomfortably. "I have so many questions for you. Max told you I'm working on a gargoyle romance, right? I've never written one before, and I have so much to learn! My readers have been begging me to do it for years and it's finally happening."

He lets go of Vash's hand and pulls out his phone from his pocket, opening an app to start taking notes. He studies Vash intently and lowers his voice. "I have to ask you something very important before the kids come downstairs."

Max facepalms. "Oh dear God. This can't be good."

Vash drops his hand and steps back with a leery expression. “And what might that be?”

Ryder stares at him intensely. “I need you to tell me about your penis.”

Max starts choking on air.

I hurry to his side, rubbing his back as he sputters and coughs. “You... *wheeze*...can’t ask him that...*wheeze*...out of the blue!”

“Why not? Differences in species genitalia are quite fascinating. It features prominently in many of my books, and my readers love it. I think it’s only right that I get it correct. From the horse’s—or gargoyle’s—mouth, so to speak.” He turns back to Vash, who’s now wearing a highly amused look on his face.

Uh-oh. This little human has just flicked one of Vash’s switches.

“So tell me, how is your penis similar or different to a human’s?” Ryder holds his phone at the ready, eyes bright with interest behind his glasses.

Vash’s hooded gaze turns fiery and his lips curve in a sultry leer as he moves to crowd in close to Ryder. “Well, now, my bonnie one. Why dinnae we go somewhere we can be alone and you can take a look at it for yerself.” He leans down, not so subtly scenting the petite man. “Aye, that’s the best way to ken the truth. And dinnae fret, I’ll be a perfect gentleman. Unless you dinnae want me to be.”

Max is nearly hyperventilating in my arms. “Oh my god, is your best friend hitting on my best friend?”

I nuzzle his ear, which sends a shiver through him. “It sure looks that way.” If Vash is reverting to that much Scots dialect, I *know* he’s set his sights on the tiny human.

Ryder stumbles back a few steps, his cheeks turning a bright shade of red. “Oh no, I wouldn’t want to invade your privacy to that extent. You can just tell me the...uh...details.”

Double uh-oh. I recognize that gleam in Vash's eyes. The man loves a challenge when it comes to seduction—and Ryder is flipping *all* his switches. My friend crosses his bulging biceps, the seams of his tunic straining against his muscles.

Bloody hell. He's *posing*. It's like our college days all over again.

Damn if it isn't working too, because Ryder's gaze is drawn to the sight, fixated on Vash's impressive physique.

"My eyes are up here, my wee bonnie one," Vash drawls.

Ryder startles, peering up into his eyes but unable to speak.

"I'm nae talking about my cock unless ye want to get up close and personal with it." He winks at Ryder. "Just let me know if you change your mind. I guarantee you, laddie, one night with me and you'll never forget it."

Ryder's mouth drops open. "Are...are you propositioning me?" He sounds almost scandalized at the thought, which is kind of ironic.

Vash arches a dark eyebrow. "Well, I thought you were giving me the green light since you jumped right into talking about my penis before we've even shared a pint together."

Ryder shuffles on his feet, obviously flustered. "No...that is...I was inquiring for research purposes. For my book. Nothing more."

Vash shakes his head sadly. "Now that's a crying shame, that is. But your loss, little one." He turns to me and Max as if dismissing the smaller man. "I'm hungry. Are we going to stand here all night or are you going to feed me?"

Max finally regains his composure and rushes forward, taking hold of Vash's arm and leading him toward the dining room. He pauses to call upstairs to the children, telling them they have five minutes to get their butts downstairs.

Their high-pitched giggles are his only reply.

Appearing utterly flabbergasted, Ryder stares after Max and Vash as they walk away.

“You okay?” I ask.

He startles. “Oh, yes, I—thank you. I’m quite alright. Is he always like that?”

I chuckle. “More or less. Vash is pretty direct. He doesn’t beat around the bush. That’s definitely something you two have in common.”

Ryder looks down at his feet. “I can get a little carried away sometimes. My enthusiasm gets the better of me.” He glances up. “You know what it’s like. When I’m conducting research for a book, I just get so enmeshed in what I’m exploring that I want to know everything.”

“I can relate but you were a tad bit forthright in asking about something so private.”

He groans and runs a hand through his hair. “My editor is always telling me to work on my tact. I’m terrible at reading certain situations. However, part of this is the genre’s fault,” he declares, crossing his arms. “I’m expected to know about all of the bits and bobs of every species I write about, including where they go, how they work, and how they fit.” He throws his hands in the air. “It is a tragedy of the profession I have chosen that people misunderstand me and my interest in their genitals.”

My lips twitch and I fight to hold back a grin. “Well, perhaps there are better ways to lead up to such delicate questions?”

His shoulders slump. “You’re right. I just jump from A to Z way too fast.”

Ryder looks so forlorn that I reach over and give him a gentle but reassuring pat on the shoulder. “Never fear. Vash is hard to insult. He’s dealt with far more difficult and rude personalities in his line of business. Trust me when I say you probably amused more than offended him.”

Ryder averts his gaze and mumbles, “Uh...was he serious? When he propositioned me, I mean.” His voice is so tentative and uncertain, I don’t know what to make of it.

I think about it and choose my words carefully. “Knowing Vash, yes. He wouldn’t offer if he didn’t plan to deliver. I’ve known him for years and he doesn’t play games. Vash wouldn’t put himself out there with you if he wasn’t fully prepared to give what he’d promised. But I cannot guarantee he is offering anything more than precisely what he suggested.” Vash might be interested in this human but he was pretty adamant about not wanting to date when I spoke with him at the diner.

“Oh,” Ryder says, his voice tiny and almost lost.

I’m not sure how to respond. I decide bringing him back to Max might be best since he knows him better than I do.

“Let’s go and enjoy this party,” I suggest.

He gives me a weak grin. “You’re on. If nothing else, Max’s delicious food will save the day.”

I salivate at the thought. In the last two weeks I’ve become addicted to Max’s cooking. “Very true.”

At the sound of thundering feet from above, we look up in amazement and see the children come barreling down the stairs dressed in pirate costumes. Harn’s sporting a bandana over his head and an eyepatch over his right eye. Yara’s dressed in her Jack Sparrow costume from Halloween, complete with wig and pirate hat. Waffles trails behind them, wearing a colorful bandana wrapped around each of his three heads, and Princess Peach leads the procession, a jeweled necklace replacing her usual collar. I’m not sure what to expect with their performance, but I have a feeling it’s going to be memorable.

“Is Uncle Vash here?” they ask in unison.

I grin at them. “He is.”

They cheer and we all troop into the dining room.

But I halt in my tracks when I get my first look, staring in amazement at what Max has done. Normally, we don’t use this room, as the table can seat twelve and is far too large for our usual meals together as a family. But today, Max has decorated

the room for a sumptuous tea party the likes of which I've never experienced.

Food covers the enormous table from one end to the next. There are freshly made scones with butter, clotted cream, and jam. Little mince pies, shortbread, and finger sandwiches. Rolls, pasties, and an array of colorful petit fours.

A Scottish tartan table runner accents the display and Max has even dug out some of the finer dishware from my dining room hutch.

Feldrick shuffles into the room with a tray loaded with three steaming pots of tea for us to choose from.

My eyes zero in on Max. "This is amazing. Thank you for doing all of this."

His cheeks flush pink and he waves a hand in the air. "Oh, it was nothing. Besides, the children and Feldrick helped me with a lot of it."

I know he's being far too modest, but I have a feeling I can find a way to thank him properly in private later tonight.

Even Vash looks awed by the grand display in his honor. "You didn't have to go to this much trouble for me, Max."

Max smiles sweetly at him. "That's where you're wrong. I owe you a great deal, Vash DarkWing. Not only did you hire me into a position where I've been happier than I've ever been before, but you also helped me when I first arrived by carrying all of my belongings into my room. I know that might have seemed like a small thing to you, but it was huge to me." Max swallows, emotion evident in his voice. "After such a long drive here, I didn't have a scrap of energy left to deal with that. But you took care of it for me. No one had ever done something like that for me before. Not in any of the jobs I've ever had. It made me feel welcome here from that first night." He gestures toward the sumptuous buffet of food. "This is my way of saying thank you."

It's a rare sight to behold my dear friend Vash overcome by emotion and at a loss for words. But Magical Max, as I'm starting to think of him in my head, has managed to do it.

Falling back on the formality of his people and his roots, Vash clasps a hand over his heart in a fist. “I humbly accept this most generous offering with gratitude. I shall heartily slake my hunger and thirst on this day.”

Ryder has his phone out and is furiously typing notes.

Max beams. “I made some of your favorites, according to Targan.”

Vash’s eyes light up as he surveys the table, homing in on the scones. “Fresh scones?”

“From scratch. I made the jam too.”

Vash rubs his hands together with obvious anticipation.

After the adults find places to sit at the table and we begin loading up our plates with a smorgasbord of delectable foods, the children immediately beg for our attention.

“We have a show for you!”

While we sip our tea and scarf down baked goods, the twins proceed to perform some made-up swashbuckling skit that appears to be heavily influenced by the human movies *The Princess Bride* and *Pirates of the Caribbean*. Princess Peach has been kidnapped by Harn, and Pirate Queen Yara has to rescue her. Thankfully, their extensive and rather elaborate sword duel at the climax of the performance involves plastic toys rather than the real thing. And while Yara is the ultimate victor, Harn takes great, almost gleeful delight in being killed and getting to deploy copious quantities of fake blood in his lengthy death scene.

At the end, they each give us a deep stage bow and flash big, bright grins.

We applaud them enthusiastically before Max has Harn go and clean the fake blood off himself before having his tea. When the children finally join us at the table, they decide they want to stay in costume for the rest of the party, including continuing to use their limited pirate speech.

“Arr, matey,” Yara says. “Please pass me a scone.”

I fight back a laugh as I set one on her plate. “Aye, aye, captain.”

She beams at me before slathering a mountain of jam and clotted cream on her scone and shoving it in her mouth with a happy hum of contentment.

“Shiver me timbers! These cakes are good, Max,” Harn says around a full mouthful of petit fours.

Vash is equally enthused about the spread, going into raptures over Max’s baking. “Max, you marvelous man! I’ve not had scones this good since I came to America.” He licks the crumbs off his fingers and grabs several more to stack on his plate. “And your homemade jam! It reminds me of what my gran used to make back in Scotland.”

“The trick is a wee splash of whisky while it’s cooking,” Max says with a wink. The look on his face is so full of joy at having his food praised. Just seeing it makes that warm ache in my chest whenever I look at him become even more pronounced.

Vash chuckles. “Your name is Max MacLeod. I should have noticed earlier that you’ve got some Scots in you as well. No wonder you can make a proper scone!”

Max chortles with glee and conjures up a passable Scottish accent. “I’m Max MacLeod of the clan MacLeod.” He waggles his eyebrows. “There can be only one! Of me, that is.”

Ryder snorts. “You’re such a nerd. Has he even seen *Highlander*?”

Max holds a hand to his chest. “Oh my god. Please tell me you’ve seen *Highlander*!”

Vash laughs. “Of course I have. Some of the TV show too.”

“Phew!” Max says. “I was worried I was going to have to revoke your coolness card, Vash. In any case, anytime you’re in need of some scones, you just let me know. I’m happy to make them for you whenever you want.”

I groan. “Be careful about promising something like that to a gargoyle. He’ll keep you to it.”

Vash gives me a mock scowl. “Don’t interfere with my scone supply chain, friend!”

Ryder giggles and I suspect he’s nipped a bit of whisky in his tea from the mellow look on his face. “This is the best tea party ever.”

Compared to the rest of us, he nibbles at a pitifully small amount of food on his plate while sipping his tea. I notice Max keeping a worried eye on him as he selects several petit fours and a little almond tart that he sets on Ryder’s plate. “Try these. You’ll like them.”

His friend sighs. “Thanks, hon. I guess I just haven’t had much of an appetite lately.”

Max’s frown deepens.

I clear my throat. “Are you unwell, Ryder?”

He darts a glance at Max and then at the twins, making it clear he doesn’t wish to discuss the matter in front of them.

Eventually, the children fill their bellies and, deciding they’re not interested in the boring conversation the adults are having, ask for permission to go and play a video game together. They’re less restricted with their time on their devices on the weekend, so Max gives me a nod and I grant them permission so long as they don’t fight.

They race off with promises that they’ll behave, but I’m not sure how long that will last.

Once they’re gone, I turn my attention back to Max and Ryder. “Care to enlighten us now?”

Ryder hunches his shoulders and picks apart the remnants of his scone on his plate. “It’s nothing.”

Max crosses his arms. “Maybe they can help. After all, Vash runs a security business. He might have some recommendations for you if you need to hire a bodyguard.”

Vash finishes a huge mouthful of scone, washing it down with several gulps of tea before turning his laser focus on Ryder. “Bodyguard? What do you need a bodyguard for?”

Ryder juts out his chin. “I probably won’t need one. Max is blowing this out of proportion.”

Max huffs. “Oh hell no! I don’t think so. You’re not taking it seriously enough. As your BFF, I reserve the right to overrule you when it comes to your safety.” He casts Vash a concerned look. “Ryder has a creepy stalker.”

Vash’s nostrils flare, and he inhales sharply. “Stalkers are serious business. Never something to be taken lightly.”

Ryder rolls his eyes. “It’s just some weirdo who’s been sending sketchy letters to my publisher.”

“And to you,” Max interjects.

“It was just the one,” Ryder mutters.

“Yeah, but he got your actual mailing address. How scary is that?”

“This doesn’t sound good,” Vash chimes in. “If he knows where you live, you could be in immediate danger.”

“My building’s pretty secure.” Ryder crosses his arms protectively over his chest. “I don’t think there’d be any way for him to get past the security check-in.”

Vash frowns. “Perhaps not, but it doesn’t mean that he’s not scoping out the building and lying in wait for any time you’re going to leave so he could better attack.”

Ryder pales. “I...hadn’t thought about that.”

Max pipes up again. “His agent thinks it might be a good idea for him to get a bodyguard to accompany him on his fall book tour in September.”

“Maybe this jerk will have given up by then?” Ryder offers hopefully, but he doesn’t look convinced.

Crossing his arms, Vash stares down Ryder. “Scheduling a bodyguard is a good idea. It’s always better to err on the side of caution when it comes to stalkers. They can be incredibly

tenacious and highly unpredictable. You don't want to end up in the crosshairs of some freak who's obsessed with you."

Max reaches out a hand and takes hold of Ryder's, a pleading look in his warm eyes. "Please. Do it for me, if not for yourself. I'd feel so much better knowing there's someone who's going to be watching out for you." His eyes widen and his jazz hands wave about with barely contained enthusiasm. "Wait! It's a couple of months until your book tour. What if we got permission for you to stay here in Mystic Hollow for a few months? We could request some kind of short-term writer's residency for you, especially given your fame and all that you've done for the Otherkind community with your books. Just think of all the charity fundraising you've done with your annual anthologies. Surely that would count for something." He turns to me, hope written all over his face. "It probably wouldn't be too hard, right?"

I will do *whatever* it takes to make this happen for him. "I think it should be fairly easy to arrange. I'm on good terms with the mayor. I could reach out to her personally and ask."

Max turns downright giddy and my heart thumps with pleasure. "This is the perfect plan! Ryder, you'll stay here for a few months and be completely out of the reach of this freakazoid stalking you. The magic of the town will protect you and keep you safe. Plus, imagine all the inspiration you'll get by staying in a town full of Otherkind residents! So many people to talk to and interview."

For the first time since Max suggested the possibility, a spark of interest and excitement lights up in Ryder's eyes. "That would be a strong point in favor of such a plan," he admits.

Max wriggles in his seat, his eyes sparkling. "Exactly! Plus, you'd get to see me and Princess Peach more often. Your dog daughter misses you! And it's not like Syracuse is all that far away. It's only a little over an hour's drive, so if you needed to go back and pick up anything at the condo, it would be easy to do that. Vash can help us coordinate a bodyguard for you and when it's time for your tour to start, we'll have

everything in place to protect you when you go back out into the rest of the world.”

Ryder gives Max a fond but slightly exasperated smile. “You always were a smooth talker, Max.” He narrows his eyes and gives him a mock glower. “You knew exactly what would work to get me to stay here, dammit. Princess Peach and interviews with town residents.”

Max holds his hands in a prayer pose, vibrating with hopefulness. “So you’ll do it? You’ll spend the summer here?”

Ryder’s lips twitch with amusement. “So long as you all can help arrange the necessary visa for me to stay here.”

Vash clears his throat. “Targan and I will work together to make that happen. It shouldn’t take us more than a week or two to secure the permissions and fast-track your application.” He grins, flashing a fang. “We know all the right people.”

Ryder flushes. “Thank you. I...appreciate your help.”

Max hugs himself, a look of pure relief and happiness on his face. “I’m so glad you’re coming!”

Ryder waggles a finger at him. “Just so you know, I’m only doing this because you asked me as a personal favor... and because I’ll get to meet and talk with so many different Otherkind, which will be a boon to my research.” He rubs his hands together with enthusiasm. “I’ll have to bring all of my research equipment with me so I can have my journals, my tablet, my laptop—ooh!—and my recorder.”

“Why don’t you stay here at the house with us?” Max gives him puppy-dog eyes that make my heart go pitter-patter.

Ryder waves a hand dismissively. “If the visa goes through, I’ll find a short-term rental in town.”

“But why pay when we’d be happy to host you?” He turns to me. “Right?”

As if I could deny Max such a simple request. I’d give him just about anything he wanted. “Of course. We’d be more than happy to have you here, Ryder.”

“I appreciate the offer, but like many writers, I tend to need guaranteed solitude and silence when I’m working.” He gives a wry grin. “Much as I would love to stay here with you all, I suspect a house with Max, two young children, and two dogs is far from quiet most of the time.”

That prompts a sheepish grin from Max. “Okay, you’re probably right about that. But I’ll still get to spend lots of time with you, right?”

Ryder reaches out his hand. “I promise.” They pinky-shake on it and Max beams with pleasure.

“Besides,” Ryder adds, “I can deduct the visit as a tax write-off since I’ll be here for research purposes.”

Vash strokes his chin, brow furrowed. “You only have a weekend pass right now, correct?”

Ryder nods. “I leave first thing Monday morning.”

Vash’s frown deepens. “I don’t like the idea of you leaving here unprotected.”

“Don’t worry about it. If you guys are able to get this visa fast enough, I’ll only be back in Syracuse for a week or two.”

“Promise me you’ll be careful and that you won’t go out alone while you’re there.” Max reaches out and clasps one of Ryder’s hands. “If you need to leave the condo, make sure you call someone who can go with you, okay?”

Ryder uses his free hand to pat Max’s shoulder. “I promise. Besides, I spend most of every day at home writing. It’s not like I have a super active social life. The only time I’m really out and about is for book tours and when I have meetings in the city with my publisher.”

Max slumps in relief. “Good.” Then he sits up straighter, face brightening. “I’ll even come and help you pack up all your stuff to bring here! I know you don’t have a car, so we can use mine.”

It’s my turn to frown. “Ryder doesn’t have a car?” I look at him. “How did you get here?”

He shrugs. “I just hired a car service.”

“Why don’t you have a car?” Wash asks, clearly perturbed by this.

Ryder flushes and crosses his arms defensively. “If you must know, I don’t drive because I have limited visibility in my right eye. Under the DMV criteria, I’m considered legally blind in that eye and can’t have a license. My peripheral vision in that eye is almost nonexistent.” He tilts his chin up. “I can see stuff very well with the left eye but it’s not enough to be considered safe on the road.”

“All the more reason you need protection,” Wash growls. “If you’re unable to have good visuals on your surroundings at all times, then it makes you even more vulnerable to an unexpected attack.”

Ryder scowls. “Look, Mr. Hunky Scottish Gargoyle. I’m not some helpless flower who can’t take care of himself.”

“I don’t think that’s what Wash was trying to say—” I interject, but I’m cut off when Wash lets out an even louder and more frustrated growl.

“I’m not saying you’re helpless. But you’re potentially vulnerable to this stalker, who could be watching your every move. Because your own vision is limited, it makes you more susceptible to an unexpected attack. Feigning ignorance about the danger and the threat this guy poses doesn’t make you weak. It makes you foolish.”

I wince. One of Wash’s flaws is being far too blunt sometimes.

Ryder abruptly jumps to his feet, turning his back on Wash and focusing on Max. “Thank you for a lovely tea party, but I think I need to head to my B and B now. If you’ll excuse me.” He stalks out of the room, an anxious Max fluttering after him and murmuring soft words of apology.

Turning to Wash, I sigh. “You just had to push it, didn’t you?”

He gets to his feet and starts to pace the room, his wings twitching with agitation behind him. “The man is in danger.

Why does he not wish to see it? All I'm suggesting are sound, responsible actions to protect himself."

"I know, my friend. But sometimes your desire to protect comes off a little bit too terse and gruff. Honestly, I think you offended him."

Vash snorts. "He asked me about my cock in the first minute he met me. I doubt he's offended by simple logic and reasoning."

I sigh again. "He's scared, Vash. The signs are all there. His avoidance isn't out of ignorance, it's out of fear."

That halts Vash in his tracks. "What do you mean?"

"Behind his bravado and his reassurances, it's quite evident he's terrified by this situation. Did you see the bags under his eyes? And he barely ate anything. Just picked at the food." I detect a flicker of concern in his eyes, but I continue. "From what little Max has told me about Ryder, he's pretty much on his own in this world. He has no family to speak of. In fact, he and Max met in foster care years ago. It's part of what I think bonds them so closely together. They've experienced a lot of the same hardships." I stand and go to place a hand on Vash's shoulder. "I know your words came from a place of care and concern, but they were too harsh. Ryder seems like a man who needs support and encouragement, not scolding and berating."

The tension in Vash's body dissolves and his shoulders slump, his wings drooping behind him. "Fucking hell. I hate it when you're right." He shakes his head. "I don't know what got into me. There's something about that man that just riles me up. He makes me strangely irritable."

"That's very unlike you," I point out. "What about him rubbed you the wrong way all of a sudden? Earlier, you were trying to seduce him."

He runs a hand through his dark hair. "It's the oddest thing. Hearing he's in danger made me...angry. Not at him, but at the situation. I shouldn't have lashed out the way I did, but I'm

worried. I can't explain it, but I feel like I need to protect him even if he doesn't want me to."

A slow grin spreads across my face. "I think I might be developing powers of prophecy and divination."

Vash stares at me in confusion. "What the hell are you on about?"

I try not to gloat. "Well, I did suggest earlier that perhaps you might hit it off with Max's human friend, and it sounds to me like you're attracted to him. More than simple attraction, in fact, if you want to protect him."

Vash balks. "Of course not. I hardly know the man."

"And yet he inspired such strong feelings in you the moment you learned he was in potential danger."

Vash scowls. "Perhaps I'm just having an off day."

I chuckle. "Whatever you need to tell yourself, my friend, but I have a sneaking suspicion that you and Ryder St. James haven't seen the last of one another just yet."

CHAPTER 15



Maintaining clear and open communication with your employer is crucial to your success and satisfaction in any position. Knowing what is expected of you makes your job all that much easier. Confusion and uncertainty lead to stress and poor performance. If you are unclear about anything, be sure to talk to your employer and request clarification. Broaching such things earlier rather than later will save you a lot of stress and potential misunderstandings. Don't wait until it's too late to talk to your boss about the things that matter!

—*The All-Species Specialized Employment Services
(A.S.S.E.S.) Handbook*

*M*ax

“YOU'RE sure you'll be okay on your own?”

Targan gives me a sweet smile around those adorable tusks of his. “Don't worry. I can handle one day with the twins on my own. Besides, you haven't had a day off yet, and you need it. I'm feeling a lot more confident in my ability to manage things now, thanks to you. Following your wisdom, I've even prepared a schedule of things for us to do together today. We'll have fun.”

I'm so fucking proud of him at this moment. I know how hard of an adjustment it's been for him to become a parent overnight, but Targan has really stepped up to the plate since I arrived. Watching his transformation has been amazing, and super fucking hot. Uncle Targan is one sexy dad! He just

needed a helping hand to show him the way. I'm so grateful, and lucky, I got to be the one to do that for him.

"You have my cell number if you need to call me. I won't mind."

He gives my shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "We'll be fine. But I promise, if anything goes wrong, you'll be the first person I call."

Leaning up on my tiptoes, I plant a kiss on his cheek. "Can't wait to hear all about your day when I get back."

He pulls me in closer, his large hands cupping my ass and making me gasp. "Don't rush," he murmurs in my ear. "Enjoy your time with Ryder. I think he could use a friend right now."

I shiver. "Wait up for me tonight?"

"Of course. I have a special treat planned for you."

Oh, goody!

He leans down and kisses me on the lips, but we're almost immediately interrupted by a chorus of *ewww* from the kids.

We break apart to find they've snuck up on us like tiny ninjas. Harn is making fake puking noises and Yara has her nose scrunched up and an eyebrow arched like she's questioning our sanity.

I grin at them. "You guys be good for your Uncle Targan and I'll see you first thing tomorrow morning. I've left food for you in the fridge. Your uncle just needs to heat it up for you."

"Thank the Light!" Harn says before racing off to who knows where.

"Good work, Max," Yara offers with a thumbs-up before chasing after her brother.

I attach Princess Peach's leash to her harness and head out of the house. It's harder to leave Targan and the kids behind than I thought it would be. But Targan's right, I need a break. I love my work, but even I need some down time occasionally, and Ryder and I still have a lot we need to talk about.

Almost everything Mystic Hollow is walkable, which I love. I know I probably won't love it in the winter, but I can always drive if I need to. For now, I fully intend to enjoy the walkability of the town for as long as the seasons allow. Honestly, this place looks like something out of a Hallmark movie—except with Otherkind walking around everywhere and humans a bit scarce on the ground. The shops are quaint and well maintained and it's clear everyone here takes pride in keeping up the appearance of the town. Main Street is a delight to stroll down, even if you just want to window shop and people watch!

Today I'm wearing an adorable pair of pink linen overalls over a glittery rainbow crop top and feeling fabulous. I've paired the outfit with pink sandals and a wide-brimmed white floppy sun hat to protect my precious skin on this bright summer day. Princess Peach has on a pink mesh shirt and her blingy spiked dog collar that makes her look like one badass bitch. Together, we make a stunning combo as we sashay down Main Street.

I'm meeting Ryder at his bed and breakfast so we can explore downtown together. Turning off Main Street and down a little side street into a more residential part of town again, I quickly find the quaint and provocatively titled Bigfoot's Bed and Breakfast written on a hand-painted sign. Climbing the front steps, I knock on the front door. Moments later, it opens to reveal what I can only assume is the owner of the establishment.

At easily seven feet tall, the hairy sasquatch wearing jeans and an apron over his chest with a bigfoot in silhouette and the words "Sasquatches do it better" smiles down at me. "You must be Ryder's friend, Max."

I grin up at him. "The one and only!" I gesture down to my baby. "And this is Princess Peach."

He steps back and ushers us inside. "Good to meet you both. I'm Hal Atwood. Please come in. Ryder's just finishing his breakfast. Can I get you anything?"

"Oh, I wouldn't want to trouble you."

“It’s no trouble at all. Ryder’s my only guest this weekend.”

“Then I’d love a cup of coffee if you don’t mind.”

He beams at me. “Coming right up!”

The charmingly sweet sasquatch scurries off to the kitchen and I have to marvel at how much my life has changed in such a short amount of time. Before coming to Mystic Hollow, I’d had limited interactions with a handful of Otherkind species over the years, but here I’ve had the opportunity to meet so many different beings. Hal is the first sasquatch I’ve ever met and I have to bite my tongue so I don’t ask him if the nickname “Bigfoot” is a euphemism for something else!

I head into the dining room off the main entrance to find Ryder seated at a table with a half-eaten plate of breakfast, sipping his coffee and scribbling furiously in his notebook. Remembering how many times I’ve witnessed this over the years, I chuckle.

“Good morning,” I say as I take a seat at the table.

He startles, his head snapping up in surprise. Then he grins. “Sorry, I was a bit distracted.”

“I could tell.”

Hal reappears carrying a tray with a coffee pot and mugs, as well as several dog biscuits.

Ryder gestures at a seat. “Please join us, Hal.” He turns to me. “He’s been telling me so many fascinating things about this town. Do you mind?”

I take my coffee with thanks and inhale the intoxicating aroma. “Anyone who brings me the caffeinated nectar of the gods may join us.”

Hal chuckles and takes a seat, the sturdy wooden chair creaking only slightly under his weight. He pours himself a cup of coffee as well and sips at it with obvious enjoyment. “Do you mind if I give your dog a treat?”

“Go right ahead,” I tell him.

Princess Peach graciously receives his offering as if it's her due and daintily crunches on it at my feet.

“Ryder tells me you're staying with Dr. Wildethorne and helping care for the two children who've come to live with him,” Hal says.

“Yes. It's one of the best jobs I've ever had. I'm loving it so far, and although I haven't had much free time to explore all that Mystic Hollow has to offer, I'm finding it utterly charming.”

Hal chuckles. “The town has a special allure, that's for certain.”

“How long have you lived here?” Ryder asks.

“I've only been here about a decade. Most of my family still reside in the Pacific Northwest. They all thought I was bonkers to move east to run a B and B, but it had always been my dream.” He shrugs. “I'm a little unusual among my kind. Most sasquatches are hermits by nature and prefer to live off the land. Perhaps I watched too many Hallmark movies in secret while I was growing up, but I always wanted to live in a small town where everyone knows one another. A Sanctuary Haven like Mystic Hollow was even better. Here, at least, I knew I would be welcome and safe.”

“Aren't there any Sanctuary Havens on the West Coast? I thought I'd heard of one before.” I rack my brain but can't recall details.

Hal fiddles with his coffee cup. “There is one up in Alaska but that's just too cold and remote for me. Then there's the Sanctuary Haven run by dragons in California. They only admit people the magic of the town deems prospective mates to dragons. It's very exclusive.”

I dart an excited glance at Ryder. “Ooh! Dragon romance! You need to write that.”

Ryder nods eagerly and jots something down in his notebook.

I turn back to Hal. “What would you recommend we do today in town? Ryder has to return to Syracuse tomorrow, but

hopefully he'll be back for the rest of the summer when we secure a temporary writer-in-residence visa for him."

Hal breaks into a bright grin. His face is close to that of a human's but much hairier and with some slightly ape-like features, including his more pronounced brow line and his nose. But he's actually a pretty attractive guy and he seems like a big sweetie pie. "Yes, he's told me about it. If everything works out, he's planning to stay here. I must say, it would be my honor to house such a famous writer at the B and B." He glances down shyly. "I've read all of your books, Ryder. They're wonderful."

My bestie once again gets that awkward look on his face when he doesn't know how to react. "Uh, thank you. I appreciate your support."

Hal shifts in his seat and toys with his napkin. "Uh...do you...do you think you'll ever write a sasquatch romance?"

Awww! Who knew Bigfoot could be so adorable?

Ryder considers this. "Hmmm. Come to think of it, I haven't written one yet." He grins. "I'll pump you for information when I come back to stay for the summer. I need to do research on your kind first before I can come up with a story, but I'd be delighted to write one."

Hal's big brown eyes sparkle with excitement. "I'd be happy to help in any way I can." He glances back at me. "Sorry, I got momentarily diverted. It's Sunday, so you could take a tour of the apple orchard at the edge of town. Laurelis offers tours and picking times on the weekend."

I'm immediately interested. "An apple orchard open at this time of year? How's that possible?"

Hal shrugs. "It's a magical orchard. Laurelis is a wood nymph. Her magic and the magic of the land allow the orchard to bear fruit all year round."

Ryder's eyes widen. "Magic apples? Talk about ideas!" He starts scribbling more notes in his notebook.

In contrast, my mind is racing with all kinds of baking ideas. I know Targan doesn't eat many sweets, but he does

seem to like fruit. I wonder how he might feel about a delicious apple pie...

“There’s also a great bookstore down past the diner worth browsing in, and the Mystic Hollow Clothing Emporium is always worth checking out for unusual items.”

Ryder and I grin at one another. Two places that will ensure we’re both happy today.

We thank Hal for his suggestions and decide to be on our way before we lose too much of the day.

Our first stop is the magical apple orchard since it’s the farthest away. It’s still relatively early for a Sunday morning so there aren’t many people about and we seem to have the place to ourselves.

I’m immediately enchanted by the place and am admiring the majestic trees of the orchard when a beautiful wood nymph dances over to us. I can only assume this must be Laurelis.

“Welcome to Mystic Hollow Orchard.” With a serene air, she offers us baskets. “Do you plan to pick some apples today?”

I bite my lip, considering. “I’d really love to, but I don’t think I can carry them around with me all day. We walked here so I don’t have my car either.”

She smiles beatifically at me. “That’s not a problem. For a small fee, we can deliver for you. You’re living at Dr. Wildethorne’s house?”

I blink. “Yeah, how’d you know?”

Her answering smirk is mysterious. “Word gets around the Hollow fast, especially when new humans are in town.”

I don’t doubt it.

“If you deliver, then I’ll definitely get some apples. I have pie-making plans in my immediate future!”

She tosses her mossy green hair back and her eyes glow with pleasure. “Wonderful. Here, let me show you which trees produce the best apples for pies.”

Ryder and I spend a half hour in the morning sunshine, chatting and picking apples. I'm relieved to see he's more himself this morning. He looks well rested, like he's gotten a good night's sleep, and he's talking animatedly about his upcoming book projects. I let him talk to me for a while, content just to be in his presence again and glad that his tiff with Vash last night hasn't left a sour taste in his mouth when it comes to Mystic Hollow. Quite the contrary, Ryder seems even more excited about spending the summer here today. I think I have Hal to thank for that, as the sweet sasquatch has clearly inspired Ryder's desires to learn more about the town and its unusual residents.

Once both our baskets are full of some of the most beautiful apples I've ever seen, we haul them to a small barn that's been converted into a mini storefront for the orchard. I add a few jars of homemade caramel sauce and some apple cider to my purchases as Laurelis rings me up. She promises to deliver the goods by this afternoon, so I text Feldrick to make sure he knows to expect her.

Laurelis walks us back to the orchard entrance. I shield my eyes from the sun and, shivering slightly, look at the dark forest just beyond her orchard.

"That forest looks kind of spooky," I say.

"Gothic, even," Ryder replies.

Laurelis looks out at the darker tree line beyond her orchard. "That's Darkwood Forest. It marks the border of Mystic Hollow, at this end of town, at least. The woods are very powerful. You should never go there alone," she warns.

Spooky! "Good to know. I'm not much for traipsing through the woods. Give me a nice, paved walking trail and a pie shop along the way. That's more my speed, honey!"

"I'm with you on that one," Ryder agrees.

Laurelis chuckles. "Have a wonderful day, my friends."

After we say our goodbyes to Laurelis, and I promise to be back again soon, we head back into the center of town and stroll along the sidewalk together. Ryder is taking in

everything with an eagle eye, his notebook and pen in hand the entire time.

Eventually, I spy the Clothing Emporium Hal had mentioned up ahead. It looks quirky as hell. I'm totally in!

"We have to pop in here," I tell Ryder.

He glances at the window display full of kitschy knitwear and does a double take. "Are you sure?"

I chortle with delight. "One man's trash is another man's treasure. You know I have a talent for finding gold in these kinds of shops." I hold my hands up in a prayer position. "Please?"

He rolls his eyes. "Fine. But I'm setting a time limit. One hour, Max, and I mean it."

I give him my brightest smile. "I accept this mission."

Ryder and I enter the store, and I'm immediately charmed by the cacophony of bright colors and patterns from the massive array of clothing that crowds one end of the store to another. Talk about heaven!

Ryder whistles. "Wow, this is next level."

"Hello," I call out. "Anyone here?"

We're met with silence, so Princess Peach and I saunter over to a round turning-style rack that looks like it might crumple at any moment from the weight of all the clothes hanging off of it. Humming happily, I begin flicking through the garments on hangers, occasionally plucking up a thing here or there that I want to try on later. Methodically, I move from one rack to another, making a quick survey of what's on display. I have a time limit, after all. I need to make the most of this!

Someone eventually emerges from the back. She's a gnome—about the same height as a seven-year-old human child—and has a full, white beard with colorful ribbons woven into it that goes down to her toes, and equally white hair in two long plaits. A knit hat with a crocheted flower on the front perches on her head.

“Welcome to the Clothing Emporium! I’m the owner, Sylvia. Let me know if I can help you with anything,” she says as she climbs a ladder chair behind the counter.

Eyes twinkling with interest, Ryder heads over to her with his notepad at the ready. While he’s engrossed in interviewing yet another resident of the town, I move with speed and purpose as I evaluate my clothing options. After about forty minutes, I have a sizable stack in my arms and I make my way to the changing room to try on my selections. I’m pleased when I end up with four items to keep. One is a rainbow pashmina that I can wear multiple ways: as a scarf, as a shawl, as a skirt, and so much more. It’s vibrant and beautiful, and I can’t wait for cooler fall temperatures when I can wear it around town loudly and proudly.

The second item is a finely crocheted vest done using a delicate lace pattern in a darling coral color that looks gorgeous against my skin and goes past my ass. It’s lightweight enough that I could wear it in spring or summer. Next is a pair of electric-blue spandex leggings that are clearly some kind of throwback to the ’80s or early ’90s, but they’re in good condition and fit me like a glove. Believe me when I say I can make these work and look utterly fabulous in them! In fact, I have a wonderful glittery silver tunic that would look just precious with them.

But the real find, the true gem of my little collection, is a long, silky, kimono-style robe in a vibrant purple color with delicate white flowers patterned all over it. I already have visions of joining Targan in his bedroom one night, wearing it and nothing else.

By the time I’m done, Princess Peach is getting itchy feet and is ready to go. I reach into my pocket and give her a dog cookie since she’s been such a good girl, and we make our way over to the register with my items.

Ryder blinks when he sees me and pushes his glasses further up his nose before closing his notebook. “Are you all done?”

I do a happy twirl. “I am the master at finding fabulous clothes and ended up with a splendid haul.” I hand my items over to Sylvia, who begins ringing them up.

Ryder grins at me. “I was just talking to Sylvia about the store. Did you know that half of the stock is original garments made by different residents in town?”

Sylvia nods, the flower on her hat flapping, as she folds my new vest. “We take commissions from folks. This item, for example, was crocheted by a friend of mine.” She winks. “Excellent choice.”

“I noticed there’s a lot of knitted and crocheted items. Is that popular among the townsfolk?”

Sylvia chuckles. “Well, perhaps among some of us. Gnomes, goblins, brownies, and such tend to prefer knitted fabrics, especially in the winter. Those of us who are of smaller stature need to do what we can to keep warm! We get quite a bit of snow and cold here from December through March.”

A lot of the knitwear looked a little too plain and old-fashioned for me, but perhaps I could commission a bright and colorful sweater or cardigan come fall.

“A friend of mine who owns a fabric store in town has hinted that there might be a new high-end clothing boutique opening before too long,” Silvia says.

I consider the information. “Won’t that affect your business?”

Sylvia shakes her head, braids swishing. “Not at all. I have a core clientele here, and my wife has another business in town. The Clothing Emporium is more of a love project, if you will. I’m happy for folks to have more options if a boutique opens.”

“That’s great.”

She squints at me. “You’re taking care of those orc children, right?”

I laugh. “That’s me.”

She nods. “You should bring the children to the public park some afternoon soon. There’s a playground there and a lot of us bring our kids to play after lunch.”

“Oh my gosh! Thank you for telling me. The kids definitely need to make some friends in town before school starts. We’ll come by soon!”

We thank her and head out, making our way to the bookstore that Hal had recommended. Ryder is like a kid in a candy store once we enter the shop that is stuffed to the brim with books. A bibliophile’s dream! I trail after Ryder, carrying Princess Peach in my arms. Before long, my bestie has filled two baskets full of books and hauled them to the front desk.

“What are you going to do with all those?”

Ryder opens his mouth to respond but then a graceful sphynx appears behind the checkout counter and we both can’t help but gape. With the body of an enormous cat, the wings of a huge bird, and a humanoid head, the sphynx is perhaps the most surprising resident of the town that I’ve met so far. Lines of age mar a still handsome face that was probably stunning in his youth. His hair is completely gray and his warm brown eyes crinkle around the edges as he studies us.

“Have you found everything you were looking for?”

Ryder gives him a sheepish grin. “More than. I can’t be trusted in a bookstore.”

“Isn’t that the truth!” I agree.

The sphynx gives Ryder a mysterious smile. “I understand the feeling. The written word has a power that is hard to match.”

Ryder grins back at him. “If all goes according to plan, I’ll be staying here in town on a writer’s residency this summer. I’m sure I will be in here a lot on the quest for more books to assist in my research.”

The sphinx bows slightly. “I would be most honored to have Ryder St. James frequenting my shop.”

Ryder freezes, mouth dropping open. “You know who I am?”

The sphynx gives a husky laugh. “There are few in the Otherkind community who do not. As the first author to popularize positive romances about Otherkind characters, you are something of a hero to many of us.”

Ryder flushes. “That is...thank you.”

“I’m Avi Hanaan. It’s a pleasure to meet you. Could I talk you into signing some of your books? We have quite a few in the shop.”

Ryder graciously agrees and signs a dozen books while Avi rings him up.

“I’m afraid we didn’t drive here,” I tell Avi. “Could we make arrangements to pick up the books tomorrow?”

Avi flaps a wing dismissively. “Never fear. I can arrange to have these delivered to Hal Atwood’s fine establishment.”

I blink. “How did you know where he’s staying?”

Avi gives me a sly grin. “Word travels fast in a small town, my friend. You are Max, the nanny to Dr. Wildethorne’s children, aren’t you?”

I shake my head. After talking with Laurelis I should have gleaned the truth of things. Evidently, *everyone* in town already knows who I am.

I chuckle. “That’s right.”

Avi winks. “I don’t think there’s anyone who doesn’t know about you. After all, you’re working for one of the most mysterious residents of Mystic Hollow.”

“Targan?” I don’t bother to clarify that it’s actually Vash who’s my boss.

He nods. “He’s quite the recluse. Rarely comes into town even though he’s been living here for a few years now.”

I think back on it, realizing he’s probably right. I can count the number of times Targan has left the house and gone into town on one hand.

New mission: get Targan out of the house more and interacting with the community!

“Well,” I tell Avi, going to bat for my honey, “I know he’s been focused on writing since he took early retirement and is currently writing a book it took him several years to fully research. Now that I’m here though, maybe I’ll be able to get him out and about in town more often.”

He fixes me with a penetrating gaze and then flashes a secretive smirk. “Perhaps you will.”

Once Ryder has paid for his purchases and Avi assures us the books will be delivered to the B and B, we head out.

“How are you going to get those back to Syracuse?”

He shrugs. “I’m going to ask Hal if I can keep them at his place until I return. Since I’m planning to stay there over the summer, it makes more sense to keep the books where I will end up using them most of the time. After my time here is up, I can ship them back or”—he flashes me a cheeky grin—“I can beg my BFF to drive them up in his car when he takes me home.”

Princess Peach yips in agreement, prancing down the sidewalk like she owns it.

“That’s right, baby doll,” Ryder croons to her, “your other papa is going to be spending the summer here and will get to shower you with love every day!”

She wags her tail, tongue hanging out as she pants happily.

The rest of the day flies by. Ryder and I enjoy a delicious meal at a sushi restaurant run by kappas before returning to the bed and breakfast. Hal is nowhere to be seen when we let ourselves in, so we get comfortable in the downstairs living room and crack open a bottle of wine.

“I’m so glad we got to spend the whole day together,” Ryder says, as we clink our wineglasses together. “It felt like the good old days when we were in college.”

I chuckle and take a sip of the very nice Merlot. “Only we’re far less broke now than we were then.”

“No kidding.” His expression turns curious. “So you’re serious about this thing with Targan?”

I lean back into the couch cushions and stroke Princess Peach’s fur as she snoozes in my lap. “I know it probably sounds bonkers because it’s all happening so fast, but I want to be with him. He’s the most fascinating man I’ve ever met. He’s brilliant but not a dick about it, you know? I love when he goes into professor mode and tells me about what he’s working on.” I chuckle. “Or educates me on the finer points of Scottish whisky. But it’s been watching him grow into his new role as parent to the twins that has been the most beautiful to witness.” I fan myself. “Add in the fact that his hotness factor is supernova level and I was sunk before I even realized it.”

Ryder rests one arm along the back of the couch and reaches out with the other to squeeze my hand quickly before letting go. “What if things don’t work out though?”

Good question, and one I’ve thought about too. “I’m willing to take the risk,” I admit. “I don’t want to have regrets about not pursuing a relationship that could have meant a whole new level of happiness. Not gonna lie—the idea of becoming a part of his family permanently fills me with joy.” I shake my head. “If things don’t work out, I’ll be heartbroken but I’ll figure it out.”

Ryder frowns but nods. “All right. I’m just trying to look out for you. You’re the only family I have.”

His words bring tears to my eyes and I sniffle. “Right back atcha! Speaking of, are you ready to talk about what happened with Vash last night?”

Ryder flushes and turns his attention to picking at the fabric of the sofa. “That sexy gargoyle royally ticked me off. That’s all.”

I arch an eyebrow. “Excuse me, but one minute you’re asking him about his penis and he’s propositioning you, and the next, you two are bickering like Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy at the start of *Pride and Prejudice*.”

Ryder gasps. “How dare you slander Ms. Austen’s good name!”

Laughter bubbles out of me, uncontrolled. “Honey, the UST between you two was palpable from the get-go! Come on, you can’t deny the studly Scottish gargoyle may have gotten under your skin but you’d also like for him to get into your pants.”

Ryder scowls and crosses his arms. “He acted like I was an idiot.”

I sip my wine and make a noncommittal noise.

“What the hell was that?” Ryder demands.

I glug back the last of my wine and refill my glass, readying myself to give him a tough reality check. “I agree that the way he addressed the issue with you could have been more tactful, but he had a point. You’re not taking this as seriously as I think you should.” He begins to protest but I continue. “Look, I totally get why you want to hope for the best and just ignore this stalker. It’s seriously scary business. But that mentality could put you in greater danger.” I reach over and squeeze his hand. “As your BFF, I worry about you. It’s my job. And sometimes you need someone like me to tell you when you’re being a dumbass. After all, you’d do the same for me—and have done in the past, in fact.”

Ryder chugs the rest of his wine and heaves a huge sigh, his body slumping like a marionette puppet whose strings are cut. “Fuck. I know you’re right, but the whole situation is giving me so much anxiety that I can’t concentrate on my writing. Trying to ignore it is the only thing that’s given me some brief periods of clarity and productivity.”

“Spending the summer here in town is going to be just what you need. You’ll be safe here and can focus on your writing while Vash looks into the stalker situation and arranges some security protections for you. It’s perfect!”

Ryder refills his glass and gets a stubborn look on his face. “Who says I’m going to hire him?”

I roll my eyes. “You don’t have to hire him, but you have to hire someone. I’m putting my foot down.”

“You trust him? Vash?”

“He’s a good guy. A bit gruff and rough around the edges, but from what I’ve read, that’s pretty common for gargoyles. But I’ve seen him with the kids and he’s a big softie under that scowly exterior. He’s been super welcoming to me from day one. I might be a bit biased since he’s the one who hired me, and technically is my boss as the trustee of the kids’ estate, but I believe he’d be able to keep you safe.”

“I’ll think about it,” Ryder offers grudgingly.

I clink my glass with his. I have a feeling that, if Vash and I present a united front, we’ll be able to sway Ryder once he gets here. Targan needs to get him a temporary visa as soon as possible so we can make that happen.

CHAPTER 16



When orcs decide on who they want as their mate, they become steadfast in their commitment and will work diligently to woo the object of their affection. Unlike some other species that may prefer to court with words of devotion penned in poetic verse or via the giving of lavish gifts, orcs are generally more practical in their overtures but no less romantic.

—*Green But Not Inherently Mean: A Nuanced History of the Orc* by Dr. Targan Wildethorne

*T*argan

I'M STRANGELY nervous as I wait for Max to return from his day off.

Taking Vash's advice, I've tried to arrange a little something special for him, to show him how much I care and how much I appreciate all that he does. But now I'm unsure if he'll like it.

When I hear the front door opening, I emerge from my study where I've been pacing for the last half an hour.

I'm a little stunned to discover a tipsy Max, looking a bit disheveled. When he sees me though, his whole face lights up.

"There's my Hulkalicious silver fox professor!" he slurs.

I have to fight back a laugh. "Your what now?"

He giggles and then hiccups, his eyes going wide. "Did I say that out loud?"

He's clutching Princess Peach in his arms and she seems to be snoring. Evidently she's had quite a day as well. A bag from Mystic Hollow Clothing Emporium hangs from one arm, and I step forward to take it from him.

"Let me get that for you," I offer.

He sways on his feet as he looks up at me with a sappy grin. "Such a gentleman."

I observe him closely. "How much have you had to drink? Do you feel okay?"

He throws his head back and gives a throaty laugh that makes my cock twitch. "I'm fabulous, darling. Ryder and I shared two bottles of wine tonight, so I'm feeling absolutely no pain!"

I fight back a smile. "You might be feeling it tomorrow morning. I'll make sure to get some water and aspirin into you before bed."

He gives me a sultry look. "Ooooh. Bed. And getting things *into* me. That sounds fun." He ruins his seductive act when he hiccups loudly.

"I take it you had a good time today?"

"It was wonderful, darling." He sways unsteadily on his feet again and has to right himself. "Is the floor moving?"

Unable to hold back any longer, I step forward and scoop him—and by extension, Princess Peach—into my arms in a bridal carry.

Max stares up at me with his lips parted and his eyes huge.

"Let's get you upstairs," I tell him, my voice gruff.

His sweet, open face glows as he watches me. It warms something in my heart and I realize just how much I've missed him not being here today.

With purposeful strides, I carry him upstairs.

"My hero," Max drawls dreamily. "You're the first man who's ever been able to carry me like this." He shivers in my

arms and whispers, “Don’t tell anyone but it’s a major turn-on for me.”

I try not to laugh, but file that away in my memory. If Max likes being picked up and carried, then I’m more than happy to do that for him on a regular basis. There are benefits to having the type of physique I was naturally born with. If I can use it to bring Max pleasure, then I will.

“I feel like Scarlett O’Hara when Rhett Butler carries her up those stairs,” Max says in a breathy voice. Then he pats my arm. “Only without a rapey undercurrent.”

I choke. “Uh, I don’t know what to make of that. I would never take advantage of anyone, especially when they’re intoxicated.”

Max yawns. “I know. Sorry. Just a human movie reference. My brain is mostly powered by wine right now, so ignore my random commentary.”

When we get to the top of the stairs, Princess Peach wakes up and indicates she wants to be let down. I temporarily set Max on his feet again and he places her on the floor. She does a full-body shake, then trots off toward Yara’s bedroom.

Max chuckles. “She’s taken to sleeping in Yara’s bed most nights lately.” He shakes his head. “My little baby is a total mother hen when it comes to those kids, but she’s definitely developed a special bond with Yara.”

“She has. And Waffles, in turn, keeps watch over Harn.”

It gives me comfort to know that they’re being protected not just by us. While I know that it’s almost impossible for anything to happen to them here in Mystic Hollow, one day they’ll have to go out into the world and things won’t be as safe for them. But I will cross that bridge when I come to it.

I pick Max up again and he lets out a delighted little shriek. It’s my turn to shush him. “Quiet now. The kids are asleep.”

He covers his mouth with his hand in an adorable fashion. Even drunk, Max retains his unique allure. I can’t help but

want to see all sides of him because he is capturing my heart by leaps and bounds.

I carry him into my bedroom, closing and locking the door behind us. Max flutters his eyelashes. “Whatever are you planning to do with me, sir?”

Much as I would like to ravish him until we both can't think straight, nothing is going to happen while he's inebriated. It changes my plans slightly, but I honestly don't mind. While I do yearn for more physical intimacy with Max, I'm also very content to just spend time with him. After all, at nearly fifty, I am old enough and wise enough to appreciate other kinds of intimacy. Being with Max soothes something inside me and brings me a special kind of peace I've never known with any other partner.

I bring him into the bathroom where I have my little surprise set up. Setting Max down, I light the candles placed around my enormous whirlpool bathtub, then turn on the water to begin filling it. I add in some of the lavender essential oil I purchased for the occasion.

Max inhales deeply. “Mmmm. Smells good.”

“The salesclerk at the store I ordered it from said lavender is relaxing and soothing. I thought we could take a bath together and unwind.”

Max's eyes gleam. “Now you're talking, stud muffin.” He begins pulling at his clothes, struggling to get them off.

“May I help you?” I ask him after he fails to make much progress.

He pouts at me. “Stupid clothes are being stupid.”

I bite back a laugh as I help him undress.

Completely naked, he steps forward into my space and begins clumsily unbuttoning my shirt. “Have I ever told you how hot I find this look you have going on? You're all buttoned-up and formal, but oh so kind, and serious, and responsible. Yet underneath, there's also this delicious, primal side to you that just makes me want to go *rawr*.”

Dear goddess, this man is going to test my will tonight. I concentrate on willing my overeager cock not to respond to his far from sober seduction.

Once I'm out of my clothes as well, I pull Max into my arms again and he gives a delighted little squeal. I step carefully into the steaming hot water of the tub and settle myself down with Max in my lap. He wriggles for a moment or two to get comfortable and I have to bite my lip to focus on not getting an erection, but eventually he settles and I turn the water off.

I lean back and he moves with me as we submerge ourselves further into the water, soaking up the delicious heat.

Max moans. "This is nice. Don't get me wrong. I love the bath in my room, but sadly, it's only made to fit one. This is freaking enormous and perfect for us to enjoy together."

I stroke his arm under the water, relishing the feel of his soft, slick body in my arms.

"I've been wanting to bathe with you in here for some time."

Max tilts his head back and kisses the underside of my chin. "Thank you for preparing this for us. If I'd known, I wouldn't have drunk so much wine."

I hush him gently. "Think nothing of it. I'm glad you had a fun time with your friend. Tell me all about it."

He eagerly regales me with his and Ryder's adventures. In one day, Max has made friends with more people in town than I happen to know—and I've been here for two years.

It's a rather stark realization that I need to make more of an effort in getting to know people in town, especially now that the children are living with me as well as Max. If I'm going to be his boyfriend, I'm going to have to up my social game since Max is far more extroverted than I am. He'll probably always want to do more with others than I will, but I'm also prepared to compromise and make more of an effort because I know it will make him happy.

Eventually, his story starts to wind down and his eyelids droop.

I make quick work of washing his hair for him and use a cloth and soap to clean his body. He makes little noises of pleasure as I pamper him. “You can bathe me anytime you want, honey.”

I chuckle. “I just may take you up on that.”

He’s yawning by the time I start to drain the tub and towel us off. Heart racing, I pull my gift off the hanger on the door and wrap him in the new plush green robe that I bought for him.

He nuzzles the collar and rubs his hands up and down the fabric with a contented sigh. “This is beautiful.”

I swallow hard. “It’s...uh...it’s for you. A present.”

Max stares at me dumbfounded. “You bought this for me?”

I nod, feeling strangely shy all of a sudden. “I wanted to get you a little gift to show my admiration and appreciation for you.”

And I particularly liked the idea of wrapping you in something green, as if I am marking you as mine.

He continues to stare at me.

My nerves ratchet up. “It’s common for humans to give one another gifts when they’re dating, isn’t it? Or have I got it wrong?”

Please tell me I haven’t messed this up!

Max flings himself into my arms and wraps me in a tight embrace. “No, you’re right. We do. It’s just that no one’s ever done something like this for me before.” He snuffles. “The only people who’ve ever gotten me gifts in my life were Sally and Ryder.” He pulls back, his eyes glistening with unshed tears. “Thank you. This means so much to me. I’ll treasure it always.”

My heart aches to know that such a simple gesture like this can move him so greatly. I feel like it isn’t enough. Max

deserves so much more than he's gotten in this life. In that instant, I strengthen my resolve to continue to find ways to let him know how much he matters to me.

"I'd like to cuddle with you in my bed. Would that be okay?" I ask as I pull back and tug on my own lightweight gray robe.

He yawns again. "That sounds great, but I'm dead on my feet. I should probably go to my room. I have a feeling I'm gonna pass out when my head hits the pillow."

"If you don't mind letting me hold you for a little while, I'll bring you to your room and tuck you in after. You don't have to worry."

He gives me a sleepy but radiant smile. "Brilliant, honey. Cuddle away!"

Showing a humbling degree of trust, Max lets me pull him into my arms on my bed and spoon him. There's an overwhelming sensation of rightness that rolls over me as I cradle his soft, warm body against my own. It's accompanied by a kind of effervescent euphoria that makes it hard for me to stop smiling.

Dammit if Vash wasn't right.

Max MacLeod is the man I want for my mate.

We may have only known each other a couple of weeks but, at this moment, the certainty I feel must come from some kind of intuition or divination greater than myself. It rings true and clear in a way that I cannot deny as I hold Max in my arms.

I know I need to do whatever it takes to keep Max forever.

CHAPTER 17



Those we work with, and for, are just as fallible as you or I. There will be times when emergency, poor health, or tragedy can strike and upset the equilibrium between you. Sometimes even small trials and tribulations can have momentous impact. It's how you handle these moments and offer stability and support that matter the most.

—*The All-Species Specialized Employment Services
(A.S.S.E.S.) Handbook*

*M*ax

THE NEXT FEW days pass in a bit of a blur, but I sense something brewing under the surface with the children, and I'm not quite sure what it is. They're unexpectedly moody and bickering more than usual, requiring all my focus to be on them and leaving little time for me to think about my burgeoning relationship with Targan.

On Wednesday night, after they've finally gone to bed, I follow Targan to his study and decide I need to bring this up with him.

I take my usual chair and accept the glass of whisky he hands me with gratitude. Before I met him, I wasn't much of a whisky drinker, but I've learned to appreciate the spirit in small quantities.

"Something has been off this week," I tell him, "with the kids, that is. They've been...grouchy? Moody, even."

A shadow of sadness descends over Targan. “Ah. It’s their mother’s birthday tomorrow.”

“Well, damn,” I whisper.

He runs a hand through his hair. “It’ll be the first one without her. I’m sorry, I should have mentioned it sooner, but to be honest, I’d sort of forgotten.” He sighs. “I’ve never been the best at remembering birthdays, but Yara mentioned something to me about it tonight when she was getting ready for bed.”

I can’t help but wince. “So tomorrow’s going to be pretty rough, huh?”

Targan removes his glasses and rubs his eyes tiredly. “Probably.”

“What has their therapist suggested, if anything?”

“She has encouraged me to let them feel what they need to feel. Providing healthy ways to let them get their emotions out is best, but I’m not sure what I can offer them.”

I think about it for a moment. “Is Sharna buried here in Mystic Hollow?”

“She was cremated, as were her wishes. I bought a small plot for her ashes and had a headstone erected in the local cemetery, so the children could visit her whenever they want.”

I reach over and squeeze his forearm. “That was incredibly kind and thoughtful of you.”

He shrugs helplessly. “It was the least I could do. I wish there was more.”

“You give them a lot every day just by being here for them and learning to be their parent. Don’t sell yourself short.” I pause, thinking back on my own experiences. “When my foster mom died, my therapist recommended writing as an outlet.”

Targan frowns. “What do you mean?”

“First and foremost, providing them both with a private journal where they can write down how they’re feeling, good

or bad, whenever they need to, would be a good start.”

Targan nods slowly. “Perhaps, if they want to, they could also write a letter to their mom and we could then take them to her grave. We haven’t visited it yet.”

I stroke his arm in encouragement. “I think that’s a wonderful plan. It might be helpful if you write a letter too, so they know that you also want to say things to her—and that you miss her. After all, she was one of your closest friends. I know you’re still grieving her loss as well.”

“That’s a brilliant idea. I think they’d like that.”

I rack my brain to think of what I can do to offer my own support.

“What were some of Sharna’s favorite foods? I could make some in her memory tomorrow.”

Targan’s amber eyes fill with a look full of so much warmth it sends tingles all the way to my toes. “Sharna would love that and I know the twins will too.”

We spend a little while longer hatching plans for tomorrow as a day to honor and remember the children’s mother and to reassure them that we’re here to support them through it all.

Early the next morning, I’m busily cooking away in the kitchen when the kids come downstairs. Their usual bright-eyed, smiling faces are subdued today.

Taking a deep, fortifying breath, I active manny mode. “Good morning, loves,” I tell them brightly.

I get mumbled greetings in return as they sit at the table. When I set an enormous plate with Belgian waffles covered in fresh strawberries, maple syrup, and homemade whipped cream in front of each of them, their eyes go huge and their gloom lifts a little.

Putting my hands on my hips, I grin. “Your uncle told me this was your mom’s favorite food for breakfast, so I wanted to make it for you guys today on her birthday. In fact, I’ve decided all of our meals today are going to be in honor of her. I hope that’s alright with you.”

Yara snuffles and Harn wipes at his eyes.

Fuck it. I stride to their side and wrap them up in a big squishy Max hug.

They're startled at first but soon squeeze me back with equal ferocity.

Waffles pads to our side and whines at us in unison from all three heads.

I pull back and wipe at my own tears. "Oh dear, we've made Waffles worried about us."

The hellhound, however, gazes longingly at the actual waffles on the table and licks his lips—all of them.

Harn gives Waffles a mock scowl and moves his food out of reach while Yara giggles and wraps her arms protectively around her plate. In moments, they dig into their food, albeit more quietly than usual. Their boisterous conversation is also missing this morning, but I can tell they enjoyed the meal when they leave both of their plates clean. Tellingly, Waffles stays by their side, resting a head in each of their laps.

We're just finishing cleaning up when Targan returns from his early morning errands. From the bag that he's carrying, he pulls out two professionally wrapped packages and hands one to each of the children, who stare at the gifts in amazement.

"This is something special for each of you that I think is really important today when we're feeling sad and missing your mom."

They eye the packages, faces uncertain.

"Go ahead and open them," Targan says.

Lured by the tantalizing prospect of opening presents, the children rip open the paper to find they each have a beautifully bound journal with their names etched into the front cover. In addition, they both have a small stationery set with fancy paper and some new pens and pencils.

Yara frowns in confusion. "Is this stuff for school?"

Targan moves closer and kneels between the children, taking their hands in his. “Do you remember when Dr. Sumarian told us that sometimes when we’re having lots of feelings and we don’t know what to do with them, it can help us to have an outlet for them? One of those outlets can be writing down our feelings. These journals are now your private places to write anytime you want. You can write about things that make you happy, things that make you laugh, or things that make you angry or sad. Your private journal is only for you and you alone to look at. You can find a place to hide it in your room and there is to be no looking in one another’s journals, okay?”

They nod their heads in agreement.

Targan points to the stationary sets. “I know that today is a special day but it’s also a hard one. I miss your mom a lot and I think about her every day. If it’s all right with both of you, I thought we could go and visit her grave together later. We all must have things we wish to say to her, and I thought it would be nice if we each wrote her a letter for her birthday.”

“What kind of letter?” Harn asks.

“We can tell her whatever we want. But if you need ideas, you can write about some of the things you want her to know about how you’re doing.”

Yara examines her paper carefully before looking up at Targan. “We can tell her that we miss her?”

Targan swallows, his voice hoarse. “Of course.”

The children cluster around Targan, holding on to him for dear life as all of them break down in tears for the first time since I entered this house. As much as it rips at my heart, I think it’s something they all need.

Targan comforts Harn and Yara, rubbing their backs and holding them close like the amazing dad he is. I’m so freaking proud of him right now! I try to fight back my own tears—not very successfully I might add.

After a cathartic cry, the tears dry up and I hurry to pass around tissues to everyone. I think this is a critical

breakthrough moment for Targan and the kids. It's significant that they turned to him the way they did and I'm getting all the wholesome family vibes!

The twins take their gifts and go off to their rooms to spend some time alone. I have to wipe my own eyes and blow my nose because just watching it all turned me into a blubbering mess as well. Targan takes me in his arms and rests his chin on the top of my head.

"Well, that went even better than I expected."

"You did good. Grief is a pretty sucky thing. But it can be really healing to share that loss with others who understand it and share good memories of the person you all miss."

He sighs. "I know I've said this a dozen times already, but I don't know what I would have done if you weren't here with us. The main reason the kids are doing so well today is because of you."

"Like I keep telling you, I'm so proud of how hard you've been working to adapt to your new role as their parent. But you're not alone in this. We're a team, Targan Wildethorne, and we're united in our goal to make sure these kids have a healthy and happy life."

He cradles my face in his two large palms as he slowly leans down to kiss me. "I thank the Light every day that Vash found you and brought you to us."

So do I. So do I.

I check in on the children periodically, but they spend most of the morning alone in their rooms, apart from the dogs who stay close to them as if sensing their sorrow.

After a lunch featuring another one of Sharna's favorite meals, this time macaroni and cheese, Targan announces that it's time for their visit to the cemetery. As the children get their shoes on, Targan eyes me uncertainly.

"Why aren't you getting ready?"

I'm startled by the question. "I wasn't planning on going. This seems like a private family moment and since I didn't

know Sharna, I don't want to intrude.”

Before Targan can respond, Harn puts his little hands on his hips and glowers at me. “You're part of our family now, Max. You have to come or Mama will be mad.”

Yara crosses her arms and nods at me decisively. “He's right. Mama will be looking down on us from beyond the Light, and she'll want to meet you. If she was still here, I know she'd like you. And she sure would have liked your cooking.”

Both kids nod at one another and agree on that point.

I chuckle, feeling overwhelmed by their desire to include me in such a private pilgrimage. Fighting back tears, I nod. “I would be honored to join you. Thanks, everyone.”

The walk to the cemetery only takes us about twenty-five minutes. It's nestled on the edge of a slightly ominous forest, thickly laden with trees that cast deep shadows, that sits on the far edge of town and reminds me of when I was at the apple orchard. When I ask about it, Targan explains this is also part of Darkwood Forest, which follows the northern boundaries of the town for quite a few miles. It definitely gives me the heebie-jeebies, but the sun is high in the bright blue sky with nary a cloud to be seen as we make our way toward Sharna's grave and I soon relax.

We form a semicircle in front of her gravestone and sit on the grass. Targan clears his throat. “I'm going to read my letter aloud so your mom can hear me from beyond the Light.”

Harn searches his face earnestly. “Do you think she can see us right now? Is she watching us?”

“I don't know for sure, but I'd like to believe so. In orc culture, we understand that death is merely another moment in the cycle of life. Although our time may be over on this plane of existence, most believe we continue on in the next. Those who move on beyond the Light still watch over their loved ones here on this plane. Your mother was a very stubborn woman. There's no way she would ever stop watching over you.”

“I wish we could see her too,” Yara says softly, her eyes sad.

I wrap my arms around her and she clutches me tight.

“You can read your letters aloud too, if you want, but you don’t have to. I’ll start,” Targan offers, unfolding a piece of paper:

Dear Sharna,

Happy Birthday, my dear friend. I wish you were here to celebrate it in person but I hope you’re watching over us, nonetheless. Things haven’t always been easy since you departed this world far too soon, but we are doing our best every day. We’ve also welcomed someone new into our family. Someone I know you would love. His name is Max MacLeod, and he’s our new ‘manny.’

We just started dating too. That was a surprise! I know you’d be cheering us on every step of the way though. He’s great with Yara and Harn—and he’s an amazing cook. I’m sorry to say, but he’s even better than you. If you tried his food, I know you’d concede defeat as you wolfed down every bite. The kids are doing

well and their Uncle Vash got them a hellhound named Waffles a few months ago. He helps watch over them too. Life in Mystic Hollow is peaceful and safe. Right now the twins are enjoying summer break before school starts in a few months. We think of you every day and miss you horribly, but we want you to know that we're doing well. Happy Birthday, Sharna.

Love,

Targan

When he finishes I'm weeping openly and Yara is fighting back tears.

Harn, always the twin more open with his feelings, unfolds his letter and starts to read.

Happy Birthday, Mama!

I hope you can hear me. There's lots to tell you. I like it here in Mystic Hollow and Uncle Targan's house is pretty cool. I think you would like it here. I wish you could be with us.

We have a dog now. His name is Waffles. He's my best friend. We also have Max. He makes the best cookies, wears interesting clothes, and he tells us funny stories. He's teaching me to cook and I'm super good at it.

Me and Yara still fight sometimes but we try to be good most of the time. I don't get scared as much anymore. It's nice and safe here in Mystic Hollow. But sometimes I have bad dreams and I worry that Dad will find us. Uncle Targan and Uncle Vash say the magic here will keep us safe. I hope so.

I miss you. Sometimes I cry when I'm sad because you're gone, but Dr. S told me that's okay. We all need to let our feelings out sometimes. Happy Birthday, Mama. I love you.

When he's done, Harn unexpectedly bursts into tears and crawls into Targan's lap.

"That was a beautiful letter," he tells Harn, rubbing a hand down his small back. "I'm sure your mom was so glad you wrote it."

Yara clutches her letter, lip trembling, but doesn't open it. "I don't want to read mine out loud. I want it to just be for me and Mama."

"That's fine," I tell her.

"You can put it underneath the flowers we brought," Targan assures her.

Yara's face creases with worry. "She'll still be able to read it?"

Targan nods. "I'm sure your feelings will reach her beyond the Light."

Yara folds her letter into a tiny square and places it under the flowers before gently resting her fingers on the headstone and whispering, "Happy Birthday, Mama."

Wrung out and tired, we all trudge home in companionable silence. When we arrive, I make some hot cocoa for everyone. It's not exactly the season for it, but the beverage's comforting warmth and sweetness soothes everyone's spirits.

Later, for dinner, we share a big Mexican feast with build-your-own tacos. By then, the children seem to have rallied some, and they tell funny stories about taco nights with their mom.

Afterward, once the twins have had their baths for the night, I invite everyone back to the living room where I've set up sleeping bags, pillows, and snacks for a family slumber party. Yara and Harn want to watch their mom's favorite movie. We all get cozy in our sleeping bags and the dogs come and curl up between the children, who seem to take comfort from their presence.

When the film's over, Harn is out cold and snoring softly and Targan is breathing shallowly, his eyes closed. Yara's still wide awake though.

"You think it's okay I didn't read my letter to Mama out loud?" she asks me, her amber eyes worried.

I reach out and brush her hair with my hand. "Of course. Sometimes the things we need to say are private."

She nods solemnly. “Exactly.” She sighs. “I’m not sure if I totally believe the orc stories about going beyond the Light when we die.”

Okay, wow. Gotta tread lightly here.

“Why’s that?”

She thinks about it. “Hard to believe in something you can’t know for sure until you die.”

“That’s a fair point. But we do know there are other dimensions, right? Not all Otherkind originate from the Terran realm.”

She considers this. “That’s true. Demons come from another dimension. So do dragons.”

“Right. So perhaps there is another dimension we go to when we die?”

“Maybe,” she admits. “It just makes me sad that I can’t go and see Mama if she’s in some other dimension.”

I choose my next words carefully. “No matter where she is, your mom knows you love her, and she loves you. I can promise you that.”

Yara sighs again as if she has the weight of the world on her tiny shoulders.

Taking her hand, I squeeze it. “Some humans believe that we will be reunited with our loved ones when we die. I don’t know if it’s true or not either. There’s no proof either way. But I think it’s a beautiful idea. I hope that when I die, I’ll see my foster mother Sally again. She passed away before I finished college. I still miss her every day.”

Yara studies me thoughtfully. “What about your other mom? Do you want to see her too?”

Whoa. Talk about an intense question from an eight-year-old!

“That’s a hard one to answer,” I admit. “My birth mom had a lot of problems and made some bad decisions in her life. But

I suppose it would be nice to meet her since I don't really remember her much."

Yara squeezes my hand back. "I hope you get to meet her one day. And I hope I'll get to see Mama again when I die." Her expression turns haunted. "But I don't ever want to see my dad again. He's a bad man." She adds in a whisper, "He scares me."

I pull her into my arms and cradle her close. "You're safe here with me and your uncles. We'll protect you always. Your dad can't hurt you."

She shudders. "He hurt my Mama real bad."

"I know, sweetie. I'm so sorry."

She burrows into my embrace, her wet tears soaking my pajamas. But after a time she calms, her breathing evens out, and she falls asleep.

My thoughts are haunted by the knowledge that Yargef is still out there. I can only hope that Mystic Hollow's magic is powerful enough to keep these sweet children safe.

CHAPTER 18



Orcs are fiercely protective of those they love. While most orcs are quite peaceful and civilized, any threat against those they love can unleash a more primitive, protective instinct deep within. It is very unwise to mess with an orc's family unless you are prepared to deal with the consequences.

—*Green But Not Inherently Mean: A Nuanced History of the Orc* by Dr. Targan Wildethorne

Targan

THE DOORBELL CHIMES in the early afternoon on Friday but the house is unexpectedly quiet. I don't hear the children or the dogs racing to see who it is, which is when I recall Max popping his head in shortly after lunch to say he was taking them all to a nearby park.

He'd met someone recently who told him about a park with a playground where a lot of local parents take their kids. Max had come to me bursting with excitement, telling me he wanted to bring Harn and Yara so they could meet some other children and maybe make some friends. The twins' therapist thought it was a good idea as well. Despite the rough patch getting through their mother's birthday for the first time without her, the kids have rallied well and Dr. Sumarian fully supports having them interact with other children again. Max was thrilled and quickly made plans for their first visit today.

The doorbell rings again and I hastily set aside my papers. I exit my study in time to see Feldrick opening the door.

I gape. “Mom? Dad? What are you doing here?”

My parents stand on the other side of the door looking well rested and happy.

“We’re back from our trip. Don’t you remember we were due back last night?” my mother says.

I search my hazy recollection of my earlier conversation with them about their travel itinerary. At the time, I’d been more than a little bit preoccupied with trying not to tear my hair out after suddenly being turned into a father overnight. To say I was a little stressed and high-strung is putting it mildly. I had not processed anything from that conversation apart from the fact they would be gone for a month and I was on my own.

Thank the Light Max had come into my life in the nick of time!

I welcome my mom and dad inside, and they each give Feldrick a warm greeting, my dad handing off a bottle of some kind of spirit to him. Feldrick flashes a tusk-filled smile as he happily accepts the gift before toddling off to the kitchen to prepare some tea for us.

We head to the living room and get comfortable. I take a wingback chair while my parents sit together on a loveseat opposite me.

They do look remarkably well, and I’m pleased to see it. They’ve worked hard all their lives, and I’m glad that they’re taking their retirement seriously and doing the kinds of things they’ve always wanted to do. They didn’t have the time or ability to do a lot of traveling when they were raising me and when they were at the height of their careers. Work and family life kept them home more often than not.

I smile at them. “Retirement suits you well. Tell me all about your travels?”

They share a thorough account of their month-long cruise adventure around half of the world. My mother was particularly enamored with Egypt and the Mediterranean while my father found himself most pleased with their time in the South Pacific.

Feldrick brings us a tray of tea and some of the apple spice cookies Max made yesterday from the apples he had picked at the orchard when Ryder was in town. After Feldrick shuffles his way out of the room, my parents nibble at the cookies with evident surprise.

My dad shoves the rest of his cookie in his mouth, munching happily before sipping his tea. “Where did you get these cookies? They’re delicious.”

“Surely Feldrick didn’t make them,” my mother whispers. “We love the man, but his culinary skills are decidedly lacking.”

I chuckle. “Max made them.”

“Max?” my dad inquires.

I sit up straight, realizing with a shock that I haven’t told them yet about my new nanny—who I also happen to be dating.

Oh dear.

I clear my throat. “Max MacLeod. He’s the children’s new nanny.”

My mom cocks her head. “Manny?”

“It’s a term often used for a male nanny,” I explain.

“I see.” She glances about. “Where is he? And the children, for that matter?”

I explain that Max has taken them to the park but that they should be back before too long. My parents decide they’re going to wait.

I’m not sure if that’s a good thing or not.

My mom eyes me with a shrewd gaze. She always has the ability to see more than I ever want her to.

I shift awkwardly under her scrutiny.

“Tell me more about Max,” she commands with a knowing smirk.

She’s on to me!

I clear my throat. “Well, he was recommended to me by the All-Species Specialized Employment Services that Principal Bogey told me about.”

My dad leans back in his seat, savoring another cookie. “Yes, they have a very good reputation.”

“Vash even took the time to interview him personally, especially since our previous attempts to find a nanny for the children had gone awry. I’ll admit, I was a little uncertain at first because Max is human—”

“Interesting,” my mother murmurs, her gaze never leaving mine. I feel my cheeks flush.

“When Max showed up, he saved my ass. After you both left on vacation, I was floundering. I didn’t have the faintest idea how to care for two orclings,” I admit. “Max has been a miracle worker. He’s got the house back in order and given the children the routine and structure that they desperately needed but that I was failing to provide. He’s also taught me a lot and I’m finally starting to feel like, with continued hard work, I can be a good parent to Harn and Yara. Max’s guidance has been helpful in more ways than I could ever enumerate.” I smile to myself. “The children adore him and his pet Chihuahua, Princess Peach. She has taken charge of the children and Waffles.” I chuckle. “Poor Waffles is completely submissive to her. It’s quite amusing to watch.”

My dad hums thoughtfully around his third cookie. “This is excellent news. I’m glad to hear you are finding your footing as a father. I have every confidence you’ll be a great one.”

His words soothe a small, lingering uncertainty inside me, and just like that, I’m so glad they’re back.

“How did the children do on their mother’s birthday? I’m sure that had to be hard,” Mom asks, her face lined with concern.

I quickly explain what Max and I coordinated to help the children get through that difficult day. When I finish my

account, my parents turn to one another, silently communicating with their eyes.

I can't hold back a frown. "What is it?"

My mom turns her attention back to me, a mischievous sparkle in her eyes. "This Max," she says slowly, "is he *more* than just the nanny?"

Well, damn. I should have known she would figure it out fast. I just don't know how she managed in the short time we've been talking, especially since Max isn't even here with us!

I hedge. "What do you mean?"

My mother gives me a look that I have received since I was a child. A look that says, "Don't bullshit me or you'll regret it." I swallow nervously and lay it all out in the open. "Max and I are dating."

My father strokes his chin and nods thoughtfully to himself. "A human, hmm? Interesting."

Meanwhile, my mother claps her hands together and gasps. "Oh, this is wonderful!"

I stare at her, utterly baffled. "It is?" I thought she might be against it since Max's role as my nanny could complicate things.

She arches an eyebrow at me again. "Targan, love, you positively light up when you talk about him. I've never seen you so animated when speaking about anyone else, not even some of your former partners. It's clear there's something very special about Max. I can't wait to meet him."

I feel my mouth curving into a wide grin and I reach up to touch one of my tusks. Just thinking of Max makes me ridiculously happy. "He's a remarkable man," I tell her. "He's had a tough life. He never knew his father and his birth mother died from a drug overdose when he was a young child."

My mother gasps again, this time in evident concern.

"He spent most of his childhood in foster care." I scowl. "Unfortunately, the human system set up to care for orphaned

children is far inferior to the one that we have. From the little he's shared so far, I gather Max didn't have an easy time of it. Things didn't get better until he was finally placed with his foster mother, Sally, when he was a teenager. He told me she saved him and played a critical role in helping Max find happiness and be his true self. He loved her very much. Unfortunately, she passed away while he was in college."

"So Max doesn't have any family of his own? How sad," my mother says, clearly distraught at the very notion.

I shake my head. "No, but"—I take a deep breath and let it out—"I want him to be part of our family."

For the first time in my recollection, I truly surprise my mother. She leans forward over the coffee table and grabs hold of my hand in an ironclad grip. "Are you saying what I think you're saying?"

I can't hold back my grin or the giddy note in my voice. "I know it's fast and we haven't been together long, but I feel things with him that I've never known with anyone else before. I want him to be my mate." Just saying the words feels liberating and right. "Every fiber of my being is telling me he's the one, but I don't want to rush it," I hasten to add. "He is human and there's still a lot he doesn't know about me or our species. For now, we're dating and monogamous, but it is my intention to court him as my mate."

She beams and squeezes my hand tight. "I'm so grateful that this has finally happened for you. I'd begun to despair that you would choose to remain a bachelor, alone for the rest of your life."

"Now, now, Moina," my father chides. "If Targan chose that path, that would be his right and we would fully support him. It's an equally valid decision and you know it."

My mother flushes, her cheeks becoming a darker shade of green. "You're right, Gregor. I know I shouldn't impose my desires on our child, but"—she turns to me, her eyes full of joy—"I have always wanted you to know the magic and beauty of finding a mate who brings you the kind of contentment and happiness that your father and I have found in one another. Is

that so wrong?” She clucks her tongue. “I would like to think that some of this is Sharna’s doing from beyond the Light. That she helped send Max to you. Not only to help take care of her children, but to help you find the kind of partner who is perfect for you.”

I squeeze her hand back. Honestly, I never knew she felt this way, but I choke up at her words. “There are many things we cannot know in this life, but I am certain Sharna would approve of Max.” I laugh. “No doubt she would have become fast and furious friends with him if she’d met him. She also would have been jealous of his baking skills but would have happily eaten everything he made for her.”

“That sounds like Sharna,” my dad agrees warmly.

Even though I comforted the children with the tales I told them about going beyond the Light when we cease to exist in this realm, I’m not entirely sure I believe them. But I think the idea that our loved ones continue on, just on another plane of existence, is a beautiful one.

“But most of all, Sharna would have loved the fact that Max cares for her children as if they were his own. They already consider him part of our family.” I swallow thickly. “I hope you both will, too.”

My mother gets up and I stand, anticipating the powerful embrace she wraps me in. After all, orc women are just as strong as orc men—and my mother is a master hugger. I will admit, there’s something comforting about her embrace that hasn’t faded over the years, no matter how old I get.

She steps back, grinning from ear to ear. “Well, this decides it,” she declares mysteriously.

I give her a quizzical look. “What do you mean?”

She glances at my dad before turning back to me. “Your father and I came here to offer to take the children for the weekend. We figured you might need a break since we hadn’t been around to help for the last month.” Her grin turns wicked. “But now this will give you and Max the weekend off to enjoy it together.”

“Uh...” I stammer.

“Your mom’s right. It’s a perfect opportunity to work on your courtship, son,” my dad adds, nodding his head decisively. “Humans like to be wooed. We’ve seen enough of their movies to know that.”

My mom gives him a mock scowl. “Almost any species likes to be wooed, Gregor!” She narrows her eyes. “Why, I remember a time when you were attempting to woo me.”

My dad flushes, his cheeks darkening to forest green. He clears his throat. “Ahem. Yes, let’s not bore Targan with tales of our courtship from so many years ago.” My father’s bluster is precisely that—bluster. In fact, I’ve seen him woo my mother many times over the years. She’s done the same with him. They’re an indomitable pair. Both of them were incredible powerhouses in their jobs and equally successful, yet they learned to work together as equal partners in marriage and as parents as well.

I hope I can have a relationship with Max that is as enduring and as beautiful as theirs.

“It’s all settled then,” my mom says, bringing her hands together in a firm clap. “When the children get home, we’re going to pack them each a bag and take them home with us for the weekend.”

“Are you sure? I know you both just returned from your vacation. Surely you must be tired.”

She makes an annoyed shooing motion at me. “Nonsense! I’ve had four weeks of fun and relaxation. Now I need to spend some time with my grandchildren.”

Her words fill me with indescribable pride. She and my father welcomed Harn and Yara into their lives and into their hearts from the very start. Even though they had no direct experience with the children prior to Sharna’s passing, the moment I became their guardian my parents brought them into the fold as their own. I know not all parents would do that, especially for children that aren’t biologically related to them. It’s yet another reason I love and admire them so much.

My heart swells with joy. I can't wait for them to meet Max because I know they're going to welcome him with the same open arms.

As if my thoughts somehow conjure him, I hear the front door open and the sound of excited children talking and Max's laughter drifts my way.

I grin at my parents. "That's what I call perfect timing. They're home."

CHAPTER 19



Taking time for your personal relationships is always something that should be a priority. While work is important, it isn't everything. Don't let yourself get so absorbed in your job that you neglect the important connections in your life with family, friends, and lovers. A healthy and happy employee is one who can balance their time wisely to get their work done and maintain their personal relationships.

—*The All-Species Specialized Employment Services
(A.S.S.E.S.) Handbook*

*M*ax

“YOU MADE IT!” Sylvia, the gnome owner of the Clothing Emporium cries, waving at me and the kids, who are already racing over to the jungle gym with Waffles hot on their heels. He might be a big goofball but he does take watching over them rather seriously.

Princess Peach and I join Sylvia and several other parents.

“Hi, folks! I’m Max and this is Princess Peach.” I gesture toward the twins. “And those hooligans over there are Harn and Yara. The hellhound is Waffles, and he’s perfectly safe, FYI.”

Sylvia laughs and gestures toward a young gnome boy with a tiny white beard. “Mine’s over there. Freddy.”

“Good to meet you, Max. I’m Isaac and that’s my son, Mason,” a handsome puck says, shaking my hand.

“I’m Naima and that’s my granddaughter, Barta,” an elderly goblin woman says as she gestures to a little goblin girl with pigtails who’s already taken Yara under her wing.

“It’s so wonderful to meet you all. The twins are still new to Mystic Hollow and desperately in need of some peers to play with.”

As we all keep a close eye on the children while they scamper all over the jungle gym, we take some time to chat.

“How are you adapting to Mystic Hollow?” Naima asks, her wrinkled face full of curiosity.

“Quite well. Your town is utterly charming and I just love it here.”

Isaac arches an eyebrow at me. “There aren’t many humans who choose to live here. Do you miss being among more of your people?”

I snort. “Hardly, honey. Everyone here is so friendly and kind! Sadly, I haven’t experienced that as often among my own people. My best friend is human though, and I do miss him. But if all goes according to plan, he’ll be staying here on a writer-in-residence visa over the summer.”

Sylvia perks up. “A writer? What does he write?” Her eyes widen. “Hold on a moment, is this the same young man you came into my shop with?”

I nod.

“He’s an actual writer?” She shakes her head. “The lad looked too young to be much past high school.”

My answering scoff is indignant. “Honey, he’s the same age as me.”

Sylvia chuckles. “Well, now I know why he was so interested in my stories at least!”

Isaac frowns. “Wait, who the heck is this guy again?”

My answering grin is sly. “Ever heard of romance writer Ryder St. James?”

Naima cackles. “Of course we have, young one. I guarantee you every resident in this town has read at least one of his books.”

“They’re so spicy,” Isaac says, eyes glittering. “My wife and I love them—in bed.”

I snort with amusement. I’ll just bet they do.

Sylvia raises her hand. “Wait. Are you saying your best friend, the one who came to my store, is *the* Ryder St. James?”

I can’t hold back a shit-eating grin. “The one and only!”

They all begin talking over one another.

“We’ll have to organize a book signing!” Sylvia exclaims, hands fluttering in the air.

“And a welcome party,” Naima adds, with a nod.

“My wife is going to lose her shit,” Isaac adds with a grin, rubbing his hands together.

I wince. “Um, Ryder is a bit shy. He might prefer something a little more low-key, at least to start off. But I do know he’s hoping to interview some of the residents in town to conduct research for future stories.”

This sets them off again and I return my focus to the children.

Yara and Barta appear to be talking nonstop while they play on the swings. Harn is burning up some of his wild energy by racing up and down the slide with the other kids and trying to compete on who can get across the monkey bars the fastest. Waffles sits nearby, all three tails wagging and all three heads watching the twins vigilantly.

I marvel at the sight, the growing love I have for Harn and Yara, and Waffles, unfurling inside me. Seeing the twins having fun and just being kids satisfies some unknown need inside me. After everything they’ve been through, they deserve this bit of normality in their lives again—and I’m determined to give it to them in every way I possibly can.

Naima diverts my attention back to the conversation again when she asks, “So Max, have you started watching *The Young and the Monstrous* yet?”

“What’s that?”

They all gasp as if I’ve committed a major social faux pas.

“You haven’t heard of it?” Sylvia looks scandalized.

I hesitate. “I don’t think so. Is it a TV show?”

Isaac grins. “It’s so much more than that. It’s a soap opera featuring predominantly Otherkind actors. The first of its kind!”

“Everyone in town is obsessed with it,” Sylvia confides.

“How could we not be?” Naima asks, hands on her hips. “It’s the first time most of us have seen ourselves represented on screen, let alone performed by actual Otherkind actors. It’s a huge step forward. A downright historic event!”

I clutch a hand to my heart, feeling equal enthusiasm start to bubble up inside me. “How amazing! I completely understand how important representation is. Honey, when I stumbled upon shows like *Queer as Folk* and the original *Queer Eye* when I was a teen, it was a revelation!”

Naima pats my arm. “You should give *The Young and the Monstrous* a try.” She grins. “While the kids play, we tend to talk about the latest episode together.”

“Ooh! Okay, bring me up to speed.”

They are all too eager to recap what’s been happening on the show, which is still in its first season. By the time they’re done, I’m already so invested that I have to know what’s going to happen next! After all, the new demon doctor in town on the show, Xavier, is clearly scheming something big behind the scenes. And Dyrk, the minotaur, is multi-timing several women who have only recently figured out the truth that he’s a total cad. Talk about intrigue and melodrama galore!

After a solid hour and a half of play, the children are wearing down and that’s our cue to take them home. I

exchange numbers with my new friends and promise to come back with the kids very soon.

All the way home, Harn and Yara chatter with excitement about their new playground friends and I am eternally grateful to Sylvia for inviting me to bring them. Much as I love spending time with the twins, they really need opportunities to play with peers their own age on a regular basis. Playground visits are going to become a new part of our weekly summer schedule for sure.

When I open the front door of the house, I'm met with an unexpected sight as an elderly orc woman comes hurrying toward us, her arms outstretched. "There are my grandbabies!"

She braces herself as Harn and Yara fly into her arms, giggling with glee.

"Grandma Moina, you're back!" Yara cries happily.

"We aren't babies," Harn scolds her, but it's tempered by the huge grin on his chubby-cheeked face.

The elderly orc grins back. "You'll always be my grandbabies!" She then proceeds to tickle the snot out of them and I can't hold back a grin.

This is my first time seeing an orc woman in person. She's quite tall and broad, with an ample bosom and a thick waist. I haven't the faintest clue as to how old she is, but she's wearing a classy sheath sundress in a flattering navy shade and her short gray hair is cut in a sleek, chin-length bob.

When she lets the children go, she surveys me with warm amber eyes that crinkle at the edges. "You must be Max. I'm Moina, Targan's mom."

Meeting the parents already? Oh boy!

"Wow! What a surprise. I didn't know you were coming over."

"Max is the best!" Yara tells her. "Things have been good since he moved in."

Harn crosses his arms and nods sagely. "Max makes the best food ever! He's teaching us how to cook too and I'm

super good at it,” he boasts before adding in a whisper, “Now we don’t have to eat the gross stuff Feldrick and Uncle Targan used to make.”

A ringing endorsement, indeed.

When Princess Peach starts tugging on her leash, I unclip her and she prances over to Moina, who bends down to let her smell her hand.

Princess Peach gives her a thorough sniffing over before politely pawing at her leg to be picked up. Moina chuckles and carefully lifts her up, holding her protectively in her arms. Princess Peach leans up and gives Moina a little kiss on her chin before settling into her arms with a regal air.

I can’t help it. I laugh. “Well, you’ve got Princess Peach’s seal of approval.” Stepping forward, I extend my hand. “It’s good to meet you, Moina. I’m Max MacLeod, the manny.”

She arches a gray eyebrow at me. “And my son’s boyfriend, I hear.”

I blush as we shake hands and give her a sheepish look. “Oh, well, we just started dating. Labels might be a bit premature.”

She gives me a wink. “I had to coax the details out of him, but I could tell from the moment he started talking about you that there was more going on here than meets the eye. It’s a good thing that Vash is technically your employer. It muddies the waters a lot less.”

Preach, honey!

Targan and an older man who could be his spitting image, just aged up a few decades, emerge from the living room to join us. The older orc steps forward, hand extended. “Hi, Max. I’m Gregor, Targan’s dad.”

I shake his hand and grin so hard my jaw hurts, still struck by the uncanny similarity. If this is any preview of what Targan will look like as he ages, I am fully on board. Hello, silver fox orc in final boss mode!

“It’s lovely to meet you. I didn’t know you were coming or I would have made sure I was here to greet you when you arrived.”

Targan winces, a guilty look on his face. “I didn’t know they were stopping over either. I sort of forgot they returned from their month-long globe-trotting cruise yesterday.”

“How exciting. I’ve always wanted to travel and see more of the world but haven’t had the money or opportunity to do so just yet.” I sigh wistfully. “Maybe one day.”

Moina gives me an understanding look. “Gregor and I had to wait to do most of our traveling until we retired. We were quite focused on our careers for several decades, but we’re enjoying a more leisurely pace of life now and taking the opportunity to visit parts of the globe that we’ve always wanted to see.”

“So you live here in Mystic Hollow?” I ask.

“That’s right,” Gregor says. “Didn’t Targan tell you?”

I turn a reproachful eye on my Hulkalicious silver fox professor.

He flushes again. “It sort of slipped my mind,” he mumbles.

I laugh. “Well, there have been some pretty big changes in your life lately. I’ll let you off the hook this time.”

Targan shakes his head. “No, I should have mentioned it. I was planning to introduce you to them once they got back, but for some reason, I didn’t realize a month had passed. My parents retired here a few years ago. That’s partly why I decided that I wanted to move here as well when I took an early retirement to write full time.”

Bored by adult conversation, the children disappear up to their rooms as we make our way into the living room.

“How do you like living in a small town like Mystic Hollow?” I ask them all curiously. “Obviously you’ve lived in some other places. Was it a difficult adjustment to move somewhere like this?”

Gregor laughs. “It was a little surreal at first, but Moina and I were already craving a slower pace of life when we stumbled across Mystic Hollow. We actually came here for a holiday to celebrate our fiftieth wedding anniversary and fell in love with the town.”

“We’d never lived in a Sanctuary Haven before,” Moina adds. “And we found a surprising peace and comfort here that we haven’t known elsewhere.” Her wrinkled face turns sad. “It is an unfortunate fact that humans still find our species quite frightening, and ignorance persists in the minds of some. It can make things more volatile and dangerous, depending on where we go. It helps now that we are older. Age gives us a certain armor of invisibility since the elderly are rarely associated with being dangerous threats.”

“I hear that,” I say. “I’m a full-figured, femme man. A lot of people don’t think I’m someone they need to worry about. But let me tell you, I know how to take care of myself. Looks can be deceiving.”

“Very true,” Gregor says. “One should never assume based on appearances.”

Moina leans into Gregor. “Our travels were wonderful, but I’m glad to be back. I feel like I can truly relax again now that we’re home.”

I turn to Targan, curious now. “And what about you? Was moving here a big adjustment?”

Targan becomes surprisingly serious. “I moved here to rebuild connections with my family and with Vash. I’m ashamed to say I had let my career overtake too much of my life and hadn’t maintained the relationships that mattered most to me as well as I ought to have. Making the transition from academia to becoming a full-time nonfiction writer, I also craved the peace and solitude of a small town so I could concentrate on my work. Mystic Hollow was the ideal location. I admit I have been a bit of a recluse since I moved here, rarely going out in public. Feldrick runs most of my errands for me and I spend the majority of my time in the house working on my books. The only time I go out is when

I'm visiting with Vash or my parents." His features soften. "Or when you're creating fun activities for us to do with the kids. That gets me out of the house and for that I'm very grateful. I've decided I need to invest more time in getting to know people in the place I call home now. You've made me realize this. Thank you."

My heart fills to bursting. Targan continues to amaze me every day. The fact that he can admit his shortcomings and strive to overcome them and change is sexy as fuck. I've known too many men over the years who don't want to do the work to improve themselves or to acknowledge and try to change what they can even if those things can undermine or sabotage their relationships with people they profess to care about. But Targan is taking this so seriously and making meaningful efforts to better himself to honor and value the people he loves and his relationships with them.

If that isn't hot, I don't know what is.

Moina gives a far from ladylike snort and I start out of my starry-eyed moment of gazing at her son, but I can tell I haven't fooled her because she smirks knowingly.

"Well, Max," she says, "it's your lucky day because Gregor and I have kindly offered to take the children and the dogs—"

Gregor chokes at this.

"—home with us for the weekend."

My mouth drops open. "Oh, you don't have to do that."

She tsk-tsks at me and wags her finger back and forth before petting Princess Peach who is demanding fuss. "Now, now. None of that. Gregor and I have missed our grandbabies and we want to spend some time with them. Besides, we figured Targan might need a little break. This is the perfect opportunity for you to spend a weekend together without having to worry about the children." Her eyes soften. "And never fear, I promise to take excellent care of your precious fur baby if you'll let me."

I don't usually let strangers take care of Peaches, but I trust Targan and I'm sure he'd say something if this wasn't a good idea. Plus, I feel better knowing the kids will have both dogs there for support if they need it. And let's not forget, I need to start earning brownie points with his parents!

I step to Moina's side and give my baby a thorough ear rub. "You want to stay with Grandma Moina for a few days? I'm sure she'll spoil you rotten."

Gregor gives a husky chuckle. "And then some."

Peaches gives me a reassuring couple of licks and settles back in Moina's arms, basking in her attention.

Once we've agreed on things and I've explained Princess Peach's daily routine, Moina cups one hand around her mouth and yells. "Hey, kids! You guys want to come and spend a weekend with Grandma and Grandpa? I'll make you a cake with lots of frosting!"

From upstairs we hear the children immediately vocalize their enthusiastic support of this plan, and Moina heads off with Peaches cradled in her arms to help them start packing for the weekend.

Gregor watches his wife disappear with a fond but slightly exasperated look on his face.

I wince. "I take it the dogs were a last-minute addition to this plan?"

He laughs. "You can say that, but I don't mind. Your Chihuahua has clearly bonded with my wife and we're on good terms with Waffles."

As if sensing the import of these words, Waffles appears and nuzzles his three heads against Gregor's hand for attention. He pets him with an indulgent smile.

"This is wonderfully generous of you both," I tell him. "Thank you. Targan and I haven't had the opportunity to spend a lot of one-on-one time together lately. I'm sure you know what it's like. Sometimes taking care of kids can eat up all of your spare energy."

“Well, now that we’re back you can rely on us as a babysitter anytime you and Targan need a night out together. I’m sure we’ll have the children over for some more weekend visits during the summer as well. Truly, we love spending time with them.” His eyes twinkle. “Moina has always wanted grandchildren. She was heartbroken by Sharna’s death, just like the rest of us, but she believes it was a true blessing that Sharna put her children in our son’s care—and by extension, ours.”

Okay, I officially like Targan’s parents. I begin to see where he gets much of his wonderful character from.

I beam at my Hulkalicious beau. “You know what this means, right?”

His eyes widen like a big green deer in the headlights. “Do I even dare ask what?”

I grin. “It means you can finally take me on a proper date. You and I are going to have a night out on the town!”

CHAPTER 20



Like most Otherkind species, orcs tend to celebrate seasonal holidays commonly associated with old pagan traditions among humans. It was, in fact, Otherkind beings who taught humans about tying times of celebration to the cycles of the season and venerating the bounty of this magnificent Earth. Orcs are often lovers of beer and hard spirits created by humans—and seasonal celebrations are occasions in which they indulge quite heartily. As a rule, orcs metabolize alcohol far faster than humans so if they become inebriated, it doesn't last for long. Consequently, most other species should never try to drink an orc under the table!

—*Green But Not Inherently Mean: A Nuanced History of the Orc* by Dr. Targan Wildethorne

Targan

WHEN MAX GOES UPSTAIRS to help my mom with the kids, I turn to my dad in a panic. “Help!”

“What’s the matter?” He appears almost amused by my predicament.

“I don’t know the first thing about planning a romantic date, let alone a weekend. I’m a scholar, for goodness’ sake! Most of my life has been spent with my nose in a book, or I’ve been writing one. Romancing a partner has never been a priority.”

“Until now,” my dad offers gently.

I slump. “Right.”

The look he gives me is full of fatherly support and understanding. “The most important thing is to think about Max. What does he like and enjoy? How could you ensure he’s going to have a good time? It doesn’t have to be something grandiose or elaborate. If you’ve taken the time to get to know him, you should have some ideas.”

I nod my head slowly as thoughts come to me.

Before I know it, the kids come running down the stairs with their bags, chattering with excitement. Max and Mom trail them, faces bright with mirth.

I kneel down to the twins’ height. “Let’s remember to be on our best behavior at Grandma and Grandpa’s house, okay? Have fun but don’t eat too much cake.”

Harn chortles maniacally, rubbing his belly. “No way. I’m gonna eat the whole thing! Grandma’s chocolate frosting is the best.”

“I’ll have to get your recipe,” Max tells my mom.

“Of course,” she agrees, a twinkle in her eye. “You and I are going to be sharing all kinds of cooking, and other... secrets.”

On the one hand, I’m thrilled that Max and Mom have hit it off so fast. On the other hand, the two of them together could spell trouble. Or world domination.

Yara rolls her eyes at her brother and turns to me. “We’ll be good, Uncle Targan.”

I give her a hug and I’m surprised when she holds on tight and whispers in my ear, “You and Max will be here when we get back, right?”

“Of course. We’ll be right here waiting to welcome you home.”

Yara pulls back, evidently reassured, and grins. “Okay. Bye!”

Then she and Harn head for the front door, my parents and the dogs following in their wake. In moments, they're gone and the house is almost deafeningly silent.

Max turns to me mischief written all over his face. "How about we give Feldrick the weekend off too? Then we can have the house to ourselves." He flutters his eyelashes. "Just in case we get especially loud."

My cock throbs. It's been far too long since I stroked us both to completion last week.

I fight back the lust raging inside me. Our sexual chemistry has been strong since the very first day we met, but I want to romance Max, not just seduce him—or let him seduce me.

"Sweetheart, I like how you think," I tell him. "Let's give Feldrick the weekend off and then have a night out on the town together too. Dinner and drinks somewhere. Perhaps maybe some live music or a movie? Whatever you like."

Max's eyes sparkle. "I'm up for pretty much anything. Spending time with you is the only frosting I need on my cake, *honey*."

"Why don't I figure out a nice place for dinner and make us a reservation?"

Max's hands flutter to his cheeks. "Oh my stars! You sure know how to sweet-talk a boy. Just give me some time to get ready. I want to doll myself up for you, sugar."

Before I can respond, he races up the stairs with a bubbly giggle of excitement.

Plan settled, I go to find Feldrick, who is once again napping in the laundry room while waiting for the dryer to finish. Thankfully, he's cozily tucked under a knit blanket in the comfy recliner chair I moved into the room for him after I found him nodding off on a stool far too often. Being as old as he is, Feldrick needs a few naps a day and I am happy to oblige him. The sweet man has been staying seven days a week to help me out since Harn and Yara arrived. He's long overdue for a break.

Gently, I rouse him and explain things. He doesn't question my decision to give him the weekend off and simply makes a hasty escape to no doubt enjoy the time on his own. Most of Feldrick's family is scattered around the world, but I know he has several grandchildren in New York state, all grown up, that he visits when he can.

With Feldrick taken care of, I do some searching online and discover a romantic Italian bistro in town that I've never been to. It has rave reviews and the online pictures are gorgeous. I call them and heave a sigh of relief when they're able to take a reservation for two.

Once that's arranged, I head to my room and decide to freshen up as well. After all, if Max is taking time to look good for our date then so should I—and more to the point, I have high hopes that we may spend some time naked together later tonight. I take the time to thoroughly clean myself and even spritz on a bit of the cologne I only wear on special occasions.

With a frown, I search through my wardrobe to find I don't have any casual attire. I make a mental note to arrange that for future dates. For now, however, the Italian place appears to be more upscale, so a pair of ironed black slacks and a rust-colored button-down shirt with long sleeves—sans tie or suit jacket—should be fine.

For my feet, I reach for the black wingtips that Feldrick has polished to a shine. Once the ensemble is finished, I stand in front of my full-length mirror and comb my short salt-and-pepper hair as well as check that everything looks satisfactory.

At nearly fifty, which is not exactly old in orc years—we tend to live about 20-30 years longer than the average human—my hair is still more pepper than salt, just probably not for much longer. Thankfully, my gray is coming in a nice silvery color much like my mother's. The shirt I've chosen is one my mother bought for me, swearing it complements my amber eyes. It's a richer color than I normally wear, but I'm going to take her word for it because I want to impress Max tonight.

Taking the time to buff my tusks, I make sure they look as clean and smooth as possible. An orc who doesn't care for his tusks regularly can injure a partner unexpectedly. I want to make sure locking lips with Max later will be a safe endeavor.

As I finish up, I also take the time to clean my gold-rimmed glasses before perching them back on my nose and assessing my reflection with a critical gaze one final time.

I look as put together as I'm going to get without getting overly formal. Not bad. Nodding decisively to myself, I find my mind already shifting to the ways I can make tonight enjoyable for both Max and myself.

It's sad to realize it now but I haven't been on a date in several years. Yet another sign that I have shifted toward a level of reclusiveness that perhaps isn't healthy.

The fact that I find myself looking forward to actually going downtown and exploring more of Mystic Hollow is a pleasant surprise. Having Max be by my side makes going out for a night on the town an enjoyable prospect.

I grin. The man has a mysterious ability to change my perspective on so many things—and always for the better.

Ready for the evening, I head down to my study and leave the door open while I pour myself a small glass of whisky to steady my nerves. I shouldn't be nervous, but I want to make this date memorable for Max.

While liquid courage isn't the best approach, the small drink goes a long way toward calming me down a bit without leaving me inebriated. I thank the Light for an orc's fast metabolism.

As the last gulp of fiery, smooth liquid goes down the hatch, I hear a throat clear at the door of my study and look up to behold Max. With a dramatic pose, he drapes himself, languid as can be, in the doorway and licks his lips as he stares at me.

He's utterly breathtaking.

Clad in a silky red caftan decorated with butterflies embroidered in a shiny gold thread, he looks like some exotic

prince from a fantasy novel. I almost want to kneel at his feet. The opulent fabric clings to his body in all the right places, falling away from the arm he's braced himself with in the doorway. On his fingers, he's alternated his nail polish with vibrant red and gold and the sparkling gold-dust eyeshadow over his lids matches flawlessly. His purple hair is styled in a sexy faux hawk and he's wearing sparkly little stud earrings that glimmer in the light while a tempting, red-tinted lip gloss makes his lips look oh so kissable.

I swallow and fight to curb my burgeoning erection.

"How do I look?" he asks in a sultry voice.

"You look stunning," I tell him sincerely.

He trails his fingers lightly over his caftan. "Oh, this old thing?" He flutters his eyelashes. "I reserve this outfit for special occasions—and I think our very first date together warrants that, don't you?"

I most certainly do.

Crossing the few feet between us, I pull him into my arms, hearing his catch of breath as he looks up into my eyes, slightly dazed.

"You are incredibly tempting, Max MacLeod, and I have many plans for us later tonight. But for now, I want to take you out and show you off to the people of Mystic Hollow, so that they know you and I are together." *That'll show that merman...*

"Ooh, I like that," Max says with a flirty wink. "I'm looking forward to showing *you* off too."

I grin and give him my arm. After all, I may be a scholar but I'm also a gentleman. "Shall we go then? Our dinner reservations are soon."

Max takes my arm and leans into my side, inhaling dreamily. "You smell good enough to eat," he murmurs.

I return the favor and inhale. His scent is more intoxicating for me than the finest, most potent whisky, always slightly sweet but also warm and masculine. "So do you." I lean in

closer and nuzzle his ear. He shivers and gasps, a bit of information I file away for later.

We decide to walk to the bistro. By the time we depart, the sun is setting, leaving the evening mild and pleasant, a light breeze keeping the temperature comfortable.

Arm in arm, we stroll downtown, passing a number of people that Max greets enthusiastically. He takes the time to introduce me to everyone, which does slow us down, but I don't mind. I'm not surprised that Max has already made so many acquaintances in Mystic Hollow in such a short amount of time, but it does put me to shame since I know next to no one. However, I find everyone we meet to be quite pleasant and keen to be introduced to me, so I take the time to be sociable. In all honesty, if Max wasn't at my side, I probably wouldn't make the effort. I've never been keen on socializing except when necessary, but I can tell how much it means to Max and I find I want to try for him.

By the time we turn down a little side street toward the bistro, the last lingering streaks of purple and red on the horizon are disappearing and the sky is darkening. Max has been grinning the entire way, clearly pleased with how the evening is going so far.

The aromas of garlic, tomato, and spices wafting from the Bella Casa Bistro greet us first, and Max's eyes widen appreciatively. "Oh! I've been wanting to try this place. Several people in town have recommended it."

"I took a chance, figuring you probably like Italian given how much you enjoy cheese and pasta."

Max laughs and gives me a playful tickle. "Of course I love Italian food. I may have a Scottish last name, and quite a bit of heritage from there, but I'm convinced I have some Italian somewhere in my DNA. I couldn't make fresh bread and pasta so well if I didn't!"

I chuckle and we make our way to the restaurant's entrance, where an enthusiastic kobold greets us. Like most of his kind, he is fairly humanoid in appearance but the size of a

small human child. He's dressed in black slacks, a white button-down shirt, and a black vest.

He introduces himself as Gustavo and shows us to a patio table in the quaint little courtyard behind the bistro. A small fountain gurgles in the back and several intimate tables for dining sit under a canopy of trees strewn with fairy lights. This is even more romantic than I could have hoped for.

As beautiful as it is, I can't keep my eyes off Max, who takes it all in with wide-eyed wonder. "This is amazing, Gustavo."

The kobold smiles with genuine pleasure. "Thank you, sir. Bella Casa has been run by my family for years, but when we added this outdoor space a few years ago we wanted it to have a romantic but comfortable feel. The patio is only open for part of the year, but it is a favorite with many of our guests during the summer months."

"I can see why," Max says, looking around him in awe.

We're seated and Gustavo hands us leather-bound menus, then disappears.

I barely look at mine, still entranced by the sight of Max exclaiming over the variety of dishes available. Under the glow of the fairy lights, he looks almost otherworldly in his bewitching beauty. My lovely, luscious prince of many colors who glitters brighter than any precious gemstone. He leaves me breathless.

Naturally, I default to academic mode since I apparently have no smooth moves whatsoever. "Did you know that kobolds are house spirits in human legends?"

Max sets aside his menu and his eyes sparkle with amusement. "No, I didn't. Tell me more, please." He leans forward, chin in hand, and licks his lips. "You know I love it when you talk sexy professor to me."

Heat pools in my lower abdomen and my cock throbs.

Only Max does this to me. Only Max finds my pedantic nature sexy.

I shift in my seat and push my glasses up my nose, basking in his unadulterated attention. “Kobolds are a species that tends to excel at all things domestic—cleaning, cooking, and so on. But they are not magical spirits or protectors of human dwellings. They just like to create homey environments wherever they are.”

Max looks around. “Well, Gustavo has certainly done that here. This place is so warm and inviting. If the food is even half as good as the ambiance, I will definitely be coming back.”

“I’ve been to a number of restaurants run by kobolds over the years. They’ve all been excellent. I know you’ll appreciate their cuisine as well since they aim for dishes that are homey but delicious. They aren’t really interested in haute cuisines or gastronomical experimentation, just good comfort food that showcases the freshness of the ingredients.”

Max rubs his hands together. “I can’t wait!”

When our waiter arrives, a kobold named Maurizio, we order an antipasto starter with a medley of cured meats, olives, cheese, and bread with dipping oil. For my entree, I select the Florentine steak while Max opts for the night’s special of fresh gnocchi primavera for his.

“Shall we order some wine as well?” I ask.

“Absolutely.”

We consult the waiter for recommendations and choose a nice house red.

As we sip our wine, I tell him more about kobolds and he asks engaging questions that stimulate me, as always.

“I finished reading your history on orcs,” Max says.

I stroke one of my tusks, eager to hear more. “What did you think?”

“It was wonderful! I’ve found it quite useful in helping me understand you and the kids.”

I grin. “How so?”

His eyes practically devour me like I'm this evening's special. "Oh, it's given me *all* sorts of insights."

My cock responds far too enthusiastically and I'm grateful for the napkin in my lap.

Max slips back into professional mode and taps his lips thoughtfully. "It taught me about the competitive drive most orcs have. I try to find ways to allow Yara and Harn to indulge that need while not turning them against each other." He chuckles. "They're an unstoppable duo when they work together to defeat an opponent."

I can't hold back a laugh. "Tell me about it. Ever since I started playing an old boardgame from my childhood with them, they've begun beating me on a regular basis. Quite gleefully too, I might add."

"I can believe it. Harn is determined to make better cookies than me one day. He's like a sponge soaking up whatever I teach him in the kitchen." Max shakes his head. "I wouldn't be the least bit surprised if he surpasses my culinary talents one day."

"Well, I have a feeling Yara's love of reading could take her down an academic path one day. Or possibly even a fiction writer. No doubt she'll sell even more books than me some day."

Max's features soften. "I'm so proud of you and the progress you've made with them. They're lucky to have you as their parent now."

My chest tightens at his words and I have to stop myself from blurting out all the ridiculous things I want to say to him. "Thank you," I manage to say.

Our food arrives and we enjoy a leisurely and truly excellent meal together. As if sensing my momentary discombobulation, Max steps in and takes over the conversation, telling me all about his latest adventures with Yara and Harn. After our dishes are taken away and we've paid, Max and I thank the staff and give our compliments to the head chef, the grandmother of the kobold family.

“Thank you for dining with us,” Maurizio says on our way out.

“It was wonderful!” Max gushes. “Would you have any recommendations for a nice place we can get an after-dinner drink? Somewhere with some good ambiance?”

The kobold eyes Max up and down appraisingly and then snaps his fingers. “I know the perfect spot.” He writes down the details on a cocktail napkin and hands it over. “I think you’ll love it.”

As we step back onto the street, we decide to go ahead and check out the bar Maurizio recommended.

Max takes hold of my hand and I relish the sensation as we stroll together down Main Street. He points out various establishments along the way that he’s already visited and tells me about the people he’s met at each of them. I can’t stop myself from smiling as I marvel at his speedy integration into life in Mystic Hollow.

There are more places open at this hour than one might ordinarily expect in such a small town but given the fact that some of our residents are of the more nocturnal variety, it makes a lot of sense. I’m already mentally cataloguing places to take Max on future dates.

Akram’s Oasis is housed in a fairly nondescript brick building on the outside but inside it’s decorated in striking Middle Eastern decor that is vibrant and colorful. The walls are painted a deep gold and adorned with finely woven tapestries and ornate mirrors. Mosaic lanterns are strung from the ceiling, and the bar has benches along the walls adorned with jewel-toned pillows and cushions instead of booths. Not surprisingly, Max is in raptures from the moment we enter.

“This is gorgeous! I love it!”

Nice work, Maurizio. I will remember to give him an even bigger tip next time.

A djinn bartender working behind the counter greets us with a suave smirk. Tall and brawny with deep rust-red skin

and black hair, he strokes his dark goatee and grins at us. “Good evening, gentlemen.”

Max hurries over to the counter, bright-eyed and hands clutched to his chest. “Is this your bar? It’s the most beautiful place I’ve ever seen!”

The djinn looks Max up and down, making my hackles rise. “It is indeed. I am Akram Fayed. And you are...?”

Max extends his hand. “Max MacLeod. It’s lovely to meet you, Akram.”

Akram brings Max’s hand to his lips and kisses his knuckles. “The pleasure is all mine, Max. I appreciate a man who proudly wears such gorgeous colors. Your caftan is as exquisite as you are.” His voice is deep and sultry, with an alluring accent.

“Oh, my,” Max whispers breathily.

Growling, I step forward and pull him into my arms, forcing Akram to let his hand go.

The djinn arches a dark eyebrow. “And you must be Dr. Wildethorne.”

My lip curls and I fight back an irritated snarl.

Akram holds up his hands in a placating gesture. “My apologies. I didn’t realize this charming human was taken. Fear not. I have no interest in tangling with a possessive orc.”

Max looks between us in confusion. “Uh...what?”

“Nothing,” I growl.

Akram laughs. “What can I get you to drink?”

I take my time perusing his top-shelf liquor before selecting a Lagavulin single malt scotch whisky. Max orders a strawberry daiquiri and begins asking Akram all about his establishment.

The amused djinn grins at Max. “We have live music on Thursday and Saturday nights. But Friday night is always karaoke night. It’s quite popular here.”

Max lets out a loud gasp. “I freaking love karaoke!”

The djinn points a red finger behind us and Max whirls around while I look over his shoulder. A DJ is setting up at a table at the back of the bar.

“We’ll start in about fifteen minutes.”

Max grabs my hand. “We’ve *got* to do karaoke.”

I blink at him. “We have to?”

He nods his head enthusiastically. “Of course. It’s so much fun. Have you ever tried it before?”

I shudder. “I can’t say that I have.”

Max does a little dance. “This is the perfect opportunity then!”

I clear my throat. “I’m...not much of a singer.”

He pats me on the shoulder, his hand lingering in a way that makes my skin vibrate with pleasure. “Neither am I, but I love getting up on stage and just belting one out, you know? It can be deeply therapeutic.”

My lips twitch and I fight back a grin. “I’ll take your word for it. How about I be your cheerleader on the sidelines?”

Max pouts, but Akram sets down our drinks and he’s temporarily diverted by his daiquiri. I heave a covert sigh of relief before taking a sip of my whisky.

In contrast, Max slurps back his daiquiri in record time and smacks his lips. “Nice and fruity, just how I like it.” He winks and strokes my arm. “I’ll be right back, lover boy.”

My eyes follow as he skips off to talk to the karaoke DJ, a cyclops sporting single-eye sunglasses and large kitty-ear headphones. Max begins to gesticulate broadly with his hands as they chat and the DJ nods as if in time to a beat only he can hear.

Akram leans against the counter across from me. “Your boyfriend has made quite the impression in town. We don’t have many humans, but he has befriended almost everyone he’s met so far.” He studies Max. “He is a most unusual

human. From what I've heard, he does not appear fazed by any of our residents."

I watch Max with what I'm sure is an utterly besotted look on my face and stroke one of my tusks. "Max is one of a kind."

And all mine.

Akram chuckles. "Indeed. He is a most welcome addition to Mystic Hollow. I'm only sorry you nabbed him up so fast, but then again, I don't blame you." He flips his bar towel over his shoulder and heads down to the other end of the counter to serve other patrons.

When I glance back at Max, I find he now has a microphone in his hand and is standing on a small portable stage.

The DJ's microphone crackles to life and he greets the crowd. "Good evening, everyone! It's Friday night and I'm DJ Bandit, your karaoke spin master of the evening."

There are some enthusiastic claps from the crowd, but most people turn back to their drinks and conversations while they wait for the show to get going.

"We're gonna get things started off with our first karaoke diva of the night. Please give it up for Max!"

I clap loudly and Max beams at me.

Under the light, he is more stunning than ever. Like the butterfly tattoo on his chest, he looks newly emerged from his chrysalis and bright wings on full display. I can't look away.

And just like that, I'm desperate to get him home where I can have him all to myself. Preferably naked.

The music starts and Max launches into an impressive rendition of Cher's "Believe." He fibbed when he told me he couldn't sing. He's really damn good.

All the more reason he is never going to hear me try to warble like a dying walrus.

I'm not at all surprised that Max, in addition to his vocal talent, has a presence on stage that soon captivates the rest of the bar. The patrons are an eager and animated crowd as he shimmies across the stage, singing all the while.

I marvel at yet another remarkable and unique ability that Max possesses.

Eventually, the song ends and Max does a saucy bow to many whistles and cheers. Other folks line up for their turn at karaoke as Max sashays his way back over to me, his cheeks flushed and his eyes sparkling.

My beautiful butterfly prince.

Unable to control myself, I pull him into my arms and kiss him deeply. Everything and everyone else fades away as I make love to his mouth, kissing and licking every inch of him. I taste the hint of strawberry still lingering on his tongue and swallow his eager moans with relish.

When I finally pull back, we're both breathless and panting as we stare at one another.

"Screw this," Max says. "Let's go home."

Definitely on board with this plan, I quickly deposit cash on the counter and steer us out of the bar.

"Let me order us a ride," Max offers, tapping away on his phone before sticking it back in his caftan pocket. "Our driver will be here in two minutes." He gives me a bright grin. "This way we can get home all that much faster. I don't want to waste energy on walking when I'd much rather use it for fucking."

I growl as I pull him back into my arms and kiss him like there's no tomorrow, right there on the sidewalk.

In no time at all, a car pulls up at the curb and Max pulls away from me with a breathy little sigh of pleasure. He smacks me lightly on the ass. "Get your fine ass in that vehicle so we can get home and get it on."

I don't need to be told twice.

We hop in and the driver takes off. I don't pay a lot of attention to him since I am contending with a very eager Max, who has deposited himself into my lap and is squirming like a sexy snake, wriggling about and undulating his body in a manner that makes me rock-hard for him.

When the car comes to a stop in front of our house, we jump out with hurried thanks and race one another to the front door.

It takes me a minute to get the key into the lock, fumbling in my eagerness to get Max naked and under me.

Once we're inside, he races to my bedroom and I chase after him, unbuttoning my shirt along the way and tossing it on the floor in the hallway outside my room. I hurry inside, quickly slipping out of my pants and boxers. Taking my cock in hand, I stroke myself and watch Max shimmy out of his caftan until he's clad in nothing but that lacy pink pair of underwear he told me about. I inhale sharply at the tantalizing sight.

I lick my lips and stalk toward him. Picking him up, I gently toss him on the bed.

He giggles with carefree abandon and pats the mattress. "Come join me, big guy."

I climb onto the bed and loom over him. He looks up at me with his big, beautiful eyes. "What do you want tonight?"

"You," I tell him honestly.

He grins. "Sounds good to me."

I search his eyes. "You're not intoxicated, right?"

Max laughs. "No, honey. I'm completely sober. I had one glass of wine at dinner and a daiquiri that was a hell of a lot more fruit than alcohol at the bar." He winks. "I'm A-okay, how about you?"

"I'm fine. It takes a considerable amount of alcohol to inebriate an orc."

"Good to know."

In the soft light of my bedside table, I take my time letting my eyes devour Max's naked body, admiring his chest and gently rounded stomach and those beautiful, thick thighs I want wrapped around me.

His cock strains against the lacy fabric he's wearing, and the erect tip peeks up over the top band.

"I want to savor you," I tell him.

Max looks confused for a moment. "What do you mean?"

"If it's quite alright with you, I intend to eat your ass and then finger you while I suck your cock until you come in my mouth." It's been my fantasy for quite some time.

Max's hips give an eager thrust at my words. "Oh fuck yes. Let's do that," he agrees.

He moves as if to take off the pink undies but I hold him still. "Leave them on for now. Please. Trust me, I'll take good care of you."

Humoring me, Max lies back and spreads his legs open for me, making himself visible to my hungry gaze.

With both hands, I lift his hips and drape his legs over my shoulders as I kneel between his thighs.

He squeaks but grins. Oh yes, he's fully on board with this.

I shift the angle of his hips until my hands can pull aside the lacy pink undergarments and gently spread his glorious ass cheeks, exposing his tight, furled hole to me.

Leaning forward, I nuzzle my nose between his cheeks and take in his scent, memorizing it before I lick a stripe from the base of his crack all the way to his balls.

"Gah!" Max cries out and squeezes his thighs around my shoulders just the way I like.

"Tell me if you don't like this or if you want me to stop," I command before I dive forward and begin to torment his sweet, delectable hole.

Many body parts of an orc are bigger than they are on a human and that includes our tongues. I fully intend to teach

Max what I can do with mine.

I start by licking and exploring as I swirl my tongue around his entrance, softening the sensitive flesh there until Max is moaning with need. Once he's nice and wet from my ministrations, I carefully begin to press the tip of my tongue inside him, darting in and out, getting him used to the feel of me.

“Oh fuck yes! Don't stop!”

I chuckle and stiffen my tongue to go deeper, slowly and carefully filling him with the powerful muscle.

“Oh sweet fucking hell. If that's how big your tongue feels, I can't wait to have your cock inside me,” Max says with panting breaths.

Neither can I.

My cock is rock-hard and throbbing with aching need. But right now, this is about Max and his pleasure.

Shifting my hands on his ass, I pull back so that my thumbs can hold him open wider for me. The sight of his glistening hole, eager and open to me, is hotter than I could have imagined. With a satisfied grunt, I shove my tongue further inside him, swirling it around his passage until Max arches his back, babbling complete nonsense at this point.

I could pleasure him like this all night, but all too soon I can tell that Max is close to the edge. Carefully, I remove my tongue and sit back.

“No!” Max cries. “I'm so close!”

“Patience, sweetheart,” I tell him, my voice a deep guttural growl. Reaching over, I hastily grab the lube from my bedside table and squirt a healthy amount on my fingers.

With my other hand, I pull the lacy pink fabric down so the band rests underneath Max's pretty balls. His cock is far smaller than mine but quite respectable for a human. It's also an angry red and leaking pre-come at the tip.

Once again I reposition us. Lying between his legs, I can swallow his cock whole while I slowly start to insert one of

my thick fingers in his eager hole. The lube and my saliva from earlier ease the way, but he's tight, so I take my time, my head bobbing as I suck his cock with unabashed enthusiasm.

"Oh sweet, merciful heavens," he moans just as my finger slips past his outer ring of muscle and deeper into his passage.

I carefully move the digit inside him, questing for his prostate. When I finally nudge against it, he arches his back again and convulses. "Ohfuckohfuckohfuck," he chants. "So close."

I continue to stroke his prostate and suck him for all I'm worth. Within moments, Max stiffens, his thighs clenching around my shoulders as he cries out his release. Swallowing it down, I savor the salty taste of his come, relishing Max's full flavor and essence.

When he goes limp in my arms, I gently extract my finger and let his softening cock slip from between my lips. He collapses on the bed in a sweaty heap.

My own erection is in desperate need of satisfaction and I can't wait any longer. I kneel over Max and stroke myself frantically. Awareness breaks through the haze in his blue eyes and he watches me with a sultry intensity.

"That's right," he purrs, licking his lips. "Jack your massive fucking cock while I watch. Then I want you to come all over my chest." He rubs his pecs and tweaks his nipples for emphasis, driving me wild.

I grunt with need and continue to jerk my erection, my movements growing uncontrolled and desperate.

Max's eyes get hooded and he continues to goad me. "Cover me with all your fucking come," he orders, and it pushes me over the edge.

I shout in triumph as my cock erupts, showering Max in a cascade of come. My cock spasms several times as my balls pull up tight.

Covering Max in my release and marking him as mine makes me rumble with pleasure when I collapse on the bed next to him. With a contented sigh, I shift to my side and reach

out, running my fingers through the mess I've made all over his chest and abdomen, painting my thick white release into his skin.

He gives me an amused chuckle. "Quite proud of yourself for that one, huh?"

I nod. "Most certainly."

Max laughs and indulges me as I stroke his chest.

Eventually, he stirs. "As fun, and hot, as this was, cleanup is a little bit more involved when it comes to having an orc partner. I think I'm gonna need a hose-down in your shower. Care to join me, my lean, green, spunk-filled machine?"

He doesn't need to ask me twice.

CHAPTER 21



Do you have a special talent? Always think of ways you can showcase your unique abilities and stand out on the job. We pride ourselves on having some of the most impressive job candidates on the market, and we encourage you to proudly display your one-of-a-kind capabilities whenever and wherever appropriate. Don't be shy about sharing your gifts!

—*The All-Species Specialized Employment Services
(A.S.S.E.S.) Handbook*

*M*ax

WAKING up in Targan's big, beautiful arms for the first time is all kinds of magical.

And his impressive morning wood pressed up against my backside has me fantasizing about my Hulkalicious orc professor fucking me at long last. I'll be honest, I've been using ever larger dildos in my collection on a nightly basis to take the edge off my need for Targan, but also to prepare for the real deal. Honey, I had *no* doubt this day would finally come! Today I'll take that prep to the next level. Butt Plug Saturday for the win!

Targan stirs and nuzzles into my neck. "Mmmm," he mumbles. "Good morning."

I turn in his arms so I can trace his facial features with my fingers. Everything about him is becoming dear to me, and I am falling for him hard and fast. The experience is glorious

but also a little terrifying. Yet I somehow know I can trust him with my heart, so I plan on embracing this plunge into the unknown without a parachute.

“Last night was wonderful,” I tell him. “But tonight, I want you to fuck me.”

Targan’s grip on me tightens. “Are you sure?”

I arch an eyebrow. “Honey, I have never been more certain of anything in my life.”

He swallows thickly. “We will have to be careful.”

I pat his yummy forearm. “I know. Today is going to be a butt plug extravaganza.”

Targan’s lips twitch. “What?”

With a smirk, I tap his nose with my finger. “I’m going to have to wear my plugs around the house all day to make this work. I’ll start off small and work my way up, swapping out a bigger plug every few hours. By this evening, I’ll be plenty ready to take that monster—no pun intended—of a cock of yours.”

Targan’s amber eyes turn fiery with passion. “I will help you with your plugs.”

“Oh, that’s not neces—”

“It would be my pleasure,” he purrs.

Okay, my silver fox orc professor has a bit of a kinky side to him. *Hell yeah!*

“Why don’t we hop in the shower together and you can help me with the first one of the day?”

I shriek with delight when he hauls me into his arms and hops off the bed, then strides to the bathroom.

We spend an enjoyable half an hour in his shower, getting clean and pleasuring one another. Targan strokes our cocks together while fingering my hole and then fucking me with my first butt plug of the day. When we’re both clean and have taken the edge off our lust, we towel off and get dressed.

I opt for some boxer briefs to keep *things* where I want them, paired with a lightweight azure caftan that brings out my eyes. One can still look fabulous when wearing a butt plug, thank you very much!

Targan puts on a short-sleeve button-up shirt and some linen pants in anticipation of the temperatures outside rising. Hot *damn*. He's going to tempt me with those delectable forearms all day.

Wearing a butt plug is an odd experience. It's like your body knows something shouldn't be in there for hours but you get used to it after a while, even forgetting about it for short periods of time until something jostles you or you move the wrong way, and it reminds you it's there.

At thirty years old, however, I'm a bit of an old hand at this. I actually enjoy them and knowing they're helping me get ready for Targan's cock is an added bonus.

While it's still comfortable outside, we decide to take a morning stroll to try out a little coffee shop I've heard good things about. Targan hovers at my side, checking in every couple of minutes to see how I'm feeling. What a sweetheart.

To be honest, I'm feeling really fucking horny. My body is highly attuned to the plug inside me with every step I take, and my mind can't stop contemplating what's going to happen tonight.

I am so ready to take things to the next level in our sexual relationship. I've always been an unrepentantly enthusiastic bottom. There are few things I enjoy more than a delicious ass pounding from a well-endowed man who knows what he's doing—and Targan has already shown me he checks both of those boxes.

Sure, having penetrative sex with him involves a little bit more preparation than it would with another man, but I don't mind. I've always been willing to work for what I want. The reward is usually well worth the effort.

As we amble hand in hand, I soak up the simple pleasure of being with Targan on a beautiful day. The sun is high in the

sky and shines against the backdrop of a cloudless blue horizon. Things are quiet, calm, and peaceful. Life is good.

And I have a butt plug in my ass and a good fucking in my future. What more could a boy want?

When we step inside Cumar's Coffee, I'm grateful for the blast of cool air that greets us. Sweating while wearing a caftan and a butt plug is not something I recommend! High summer's nearly upon us and the temperatures have been rising earlier and faster every day.

The charming coffee shop has a number of cozy booths along the walls, a lounge area at the back with several couches and comfy chairs, and a smattering of small tables on the floor. Since it's Saturday morning, the place is full of locals and we have to wait in line to place our orders.

Targan and I get a fair number of curious looks, and I wave at a few people I know while we wait. My sweet cinnamon-roll orc offers to treat me and I'm more than happy to accept. I order a caramel frappe with extra whipped cream and Targan orders a double shot of espresso.

After he pays the cashier, we move to the end of the counter where the barista is working at an impressive pace. I do a double take when I realize he is a satyr. I've never seen one in real life before and try not to stare.

The satyr's upper body is seemingly human, but the shorts he's wearing reveal powerful goat-like legs and a tail reminiscent of a horse's. The hair on his head is intricately styled in long dreadlocks pulled up into a high ponytail and wrapped with a colorful red scarf.

He grins as he sets down our drinks.

I smile back. "Hi, I'm Max! I'm new to town but I've heard great things about this coffee shop, so I've been dying to try it out." I take a sip of my frappe and lick my lips with pleasure. "Clearly the praise was not unwarranted."

He chuckles. "It's good to meet you, Max. I am Cumar Yussuf."

"You're the owner of the shop?"

He nods his head gracefully. “The one and only.”

Targan takes his espresso and doctors it with a slice of lemon and single cube of sugar before taking a sip. He sighs with pleasure. “This is excellent.”

“Thank you, Dr. Wildethorne,” Cumar says. “It’s nice to see you in town on such a lovely day.”

“You know him?” I ask.

Cumar shrugs. “It’s a small town. This is my first time meeting Dr. Wildethorne but I know of him. Everyone here does.” He shifts his gaze back to Targan. “Your work is quite famous among Otherkind.”

I use this perfect opportunity to stroke one of Targan’s sinfully hot forearms. “He is pretty darn awesome, isn’t he?”

The chuckle and knowing look Cumar gives us both pleases me. I have a feeling it won’t be long before everyone in Mystic Hollow knows I’ve nabbed the sexy professor all for myself.

Targan clears his throat, uncomfortable with the praise, and redirects the conversation. “It’s a pleasure to meet you too, Cumar. I haven’t met a satyr who prefers coffee to wine before.”

Cumar throws his head back and laughs, flashing bright white teeth at us. “It is a rarity to be sure, but our small group of Somali satyrs has always favored the coffee bean over the grape.” He shrugs. “It is the beverage of my people. Our Mediterranean kin can keep their wine if you ask me.”

I nod in understanding. “While I could give up wine, I could never give up coffee. The bean juice sustains me every day!”

“Exactly,” Cumar says.

Targan strokes his chin thoughtfully. “This is quite fascinating. If you wouldn’t be opposed, I’d love to talk more with you one day. I have a feeling a book on Somali satyrs could be quite fascinating. So much attention has been given to your Mediterranean brethren in comparison.”

Cumar shrugs. “History is often written by those in power. Not all voices get heard, but I would be happy to speak with you anytime, Dr. Wildethorne. I respect your work. Indeed, your book on the history of the minotaur was a fascinating read.”

Targan flushes and shuffles his feet at the praise. “Thank you so much. I’m sorry we’ve not had the chance to meet until now. I’ve been rather isolated in my work until recently.” He turns to me with, dare I say, a loving expression. “That is, until Max came into my life. He’s opened up my eyes to a lot of things, and I intend to become more active in Mystic Hollow and our community moving forward.”

My heart swells with pride.

“That is wonderful news,” Cumar says. “Our town can greatly benefit from the intellect and insight of a scholar like yourself. There are many opportunities to get involved in different committees and organizations too.”

While I slurp on my frappe, I do a little dance. “Ooh! I’d love to volunteer with some local groups once the children are in school again full time. I want to give back to the community that has welcomed me with open arms!”

“I have heard much about you already, Max.” Cumar grins. “It seems like you’ve been building many local friendships in the short time that you have been here. We are happy to have you become a full-fledged member of Mystic Hollow.”

Cumar has to get back to his work, so Targan and I take our drinks and sit at a table by the window. I wrinkle my nose as he sips at his espresso with obvious relish. “I don’t know how you can drink it like that.” I shudder. “It’s so bitter.”

Targan’s eyes shine behind his gold-rimmed glasses. “I’ve never been overly fond of sweet things, but I enjoy the bitter flavor and potent punch of espresso. Probably why I like whisky as well.”

I slurp on my frappe and shake my head with a rueful grin. “I’m sure it comes as no surprise that I tend to like the sweet and creamy stuff.”

Targan's eyelids lower and he gives me a sultry look. "Those two words describe you well," he rumbles, licking his lips. "Sweet and creamy."

I involuntarily clench around the butt plug in my ass and have to stifle a moan. "Fuck, that's hot." I clear my throat. "So, I know we just got here, but I think we might need to go home. It's about time to level up my plug anyway."

Targan tosses back the last of his espresso and jumps to his feet. "Shall we?"

I chuckle but get up a little bit more gingerly since the plug in my ass does make things awfully sensitive down there. Thankfully, I got my frappe in a to-go cup, so we wave goodbye to Cumar and head back to the house.

The rest of our day is spent in a mutually horny state of delayed gratification.

Every couple of hours, Targan insists on helping switch out my plug for the next size up. When dinnertime rolls around, I'm not at all interested in food and have had my biggest butt plug in my ass for a good hour.

I'm ready to get this sexy show on the road. I've watched the hottest orc porn I could find over the last few days and I am so freaking ready to get my freak on with Targan.

As if sensing my heightened arousal, Targan doesn't even mention setting the table for dinner and instead pounces on me. He picks me up like I weigh nothing—*swoon*—and carries me up the stairs two steps at a time.

I drape my arms around his neck. "I want you to know this is never going to get old for me, honey. You can whisk me upstairs to your bedroom anytime."

He chuckles softly, a sound that warms me deep inside. "I'll take that under advisement."

When we get to his bedroom, he undresses me slowly, cherishing every inch of my body. With an eager sigh, I lie back and enjoy the show as he divests himself of his own clothes.

Once again, I marvel at his impressive physique. He's so big and muscular all over. I can't wait to feel him inside me.

"Hurry up and fuck me before I lose my mind," I blurt out, my tone a little bit bitchy and a whole lot demanding.

Getting a rather wonderfully naughty look on his face, Targan strokes one of his tusks and busts out his full-on professor voice. "Now, now, darling. Let's take our time to enjoy one another to the fullest."

I gasp. "How dare you use that superhot professor voice of yours on me at a time like this? You know I can't resist."

He lets out a deep rumble of satisfaction and climbs onto the bed, dwarfing my much smaller frame as he hovers over me. "Exactly."

I narrow my eyes. "I'm on to you, Dr. Torture."

He smirks. "Don't you mean, *Dr. Temptation?*"

"Consider me tempted. Fallen. Seduced. Corrupted. Whatever. Just *get on with the actual fucking!*"

Damn the man, but he responds with a downright sinful, throaty laugh before he settles his impressive body on top of mine, propping himself up on his forearms so that he doesn't crush me.

Fucking hell, it feels divine.

"Don't you enjoy some foreplay first?" my irritating professor inquires as if taking a student poll in class.

Two can play at this game. I bust out a Max sass attack. "Targan, honey, what do you think we've been doing All. Fucking. Day? This has been nothing but hours of foreplay without any sexual release. I'm horny as a hamster in heat. I've had my asshole stretched by half a dozen different butt plugs just to get ready for this main event, and all I've been able to fucking think about all fucking day is having you fuck me!"

Targan's lips twitch and he fights back another laugh. "Fair enough. I see your point."

I huff. “You should. You’re not the one who’s been wearing a butt plug all day.”

His amber eyes turn a liquid gold, his intense gaze amping up the heat in the room instantaneously.

“I’ve been aroused by you from the moment we first met. But today, knowing you have been preparing your body in this way to let me in, has been the most tantalizing yet.”

I moan at his words and once again clench around the butt plug inside me. “Look at my cock.” I gesture vaguely toward my erection. “I need you so fucking bad.”

He lifts up to a kneeling position to study my dick.

“Come back!” I cry, beyond frustrated.

“I just want a little taste,” he murmurs. “An appetizer before the main course.”

Of *course* he’d use a food metaphor.

And of course I’d like it.

Before I can say anything, his enormous hands are lifting my legs up and over his shoulders—I’m totally on to him and his fondness for this position—and he’s somehow managed to swallow my entire cock in one go. My hips thrust involuntarily and he grunts, his throat tightening around me until my eyes cross.

“Ahhhhh!”

Then he removes a hand from my hip and taps the plug in my ass, nearly making me shoot my wad far too soon.

I revise my earlier title.

He shall hereafter be known as Dr. Talented Torture.

Okay, I can get on board with this detour though. Yes, I want his massive orc dick in my ass pronto, but I’m also not one to say no to a blow job, especially from someone with Targan’s skills.

“Yeah, baby. I’ll be your *amuse-bouche* any day!”

Ever had a man laugh while your dick was presently down his throat? Now I can say I have—although, I suspect I enjoyed the sensation more than Targan.

He coughs after releasing my cock and gives me a mock glare that can't hide his amusement.

I bat my eyelashes at him. “Did I earn some extra credit for that?”

“I don't give extra credit.”

I grin. “Ah, well. I'm an A+ student anyway. I don't need it.”

His eyes narrow. “You still have quite a bit to learn. I shall have to teach you.”

Yes, please, sir.

Targan lowers my legs back down and turns me sideways to the edge of the bed before hopping off.

“Where the *hell* are you going?” I don't bother to hide my exasperation.

He grabs the lube from the bedside table and coats his hand in it before slicking himself up. Now that's more like it! The lewd noises he makes while doing it amp up my desire and I can't stop myself from staring at his gigantic green cock. It's thick and meaty, all rigid and ready for me. I watch in fascination as Targan pulls back his foreskin to expose the wide head pearling with pre-come at its tip.

I thrust my hips again and lick my lips at the sight. One day I'm going to do my best to deep-throat that sucker.

Targan pulls my legs toward him until my ass is nearly hanging off the edge of the bed. “Listen carefully. Here's how we're going to do this.”

The confidence and control in his voice has me biting my lip to hold back a slutty moan.

“Will this be on the exam later?” I quip.

Targan's eyes flash fire. “Behave. I'm going to stand here while I fuck you. Although you may not be a small man, I'm

still a lot heavier and I don't want to hurt you. This way I won't be putting too much of my weight on you while I'm inside you. I think it will be a lot safer, at least to start."

My heart clenches. Even at the height of passion, Targan is always the epitome of kindness and care. I've never had a partner take my safety and pleasure so seriously.

For the first time in my life, I'm starting to understand what the characters in Ryder's romance novels feel.

"Does that sound good to you?" he asks, as he lines himself up between my thighs.

I stare up at him, my heart full and the words I want to say stuck in my throat. All I can do is nod enthusiastically.

"Let me take care of you, sweetheart," he murmurs, the earnest need to please me written all over his handsome face.

My heart doesn't explode. No, it freaking melts like a chocolate ganache in a pan!

Targan uses his massive hands to spread my legs. The sight of his thick green fingers against my pale inner thighs burns itself in my brain. Just the memory will probably get me off whenever I think of it.

He takes firm hold of the base of my butt plug and even that faint movement makes me cry out. "Ahhhh!"

I'm so hypersensitized at this point I feel like I might lose my mind.

"Breathe out," Targan says, his gentle voice husky and commanding.

Fuck me, he's sweeter than my world-famous butterscotch pudding!

I follow his instruction and he pulls the plug from me with an audible pop. I feel gaping and empty without it, yearning to be filled again, only this time with Targan's cock.

It's like I've been waiting for this moment my whole life, and I can't wait even a second more.

Thankfully, Targan doesn't make me.

Taking firm hold of my ass and splaying me wide, he settles himself between my hips and nudges against my entrance, then begins to press inside me.

Even with the preparation I've done, Targan feels huge as he slowly and inexorably penetrates me. I clench and he stills, reaching out a hand to rub down my side and then over the curve of my ass cheek.

"Breathe, my love," he whispers. "We'll take it slow. I won't hurt you. You can trust me."

I didn't know I needed to hear those words, but having him call me his love frees something inside me and my body finally relaxes that final necessary bit to let Targan gain entrance. He's able to push past the outer ring of muscle and into my tight, hot passage.

But he doesn't slam the rest of the way inside. Far too much of a gentleman, Targan takes his time pressing into me, watching me every step of the way with those gorgeous amber eyes, and checking in to verify that I'm okay. His tenderness is my undoing.

When his big balls come to rest against my backside and he's fully seated inside me at last, we both moan. He stops and strokes my side, whispering words of encouragement and soft, beautiful endearments that nearly bring me to tears.

I should have known Targan would be as gentle and caring in this act as he is in everything he does. Reaching my arms up around his neck, I pull him down for a lingering kiss, trying to convey all that I'm feeling but cannot put into words.

When he finally draws back, I moan. "You feel so huge inside me. I've never felt so full before. It's almost too much and also not enough. I want more. Fuck, I want all of you."

Targan groans. "You feel so amazing, Max. So tight and hot and perfect. Like you were meant for me, meant to have me inside you, filling you, giving you what you need."

"Yes!" I cry.

"I'm going to move now," he tells me. "Let me know if it's too much or if you need me to stop."

“Don’t fucking stop,” I growl.

He flashes me that adorable grin around his tusks that has become so very dear to me.

With sure but careful movements, he begins to thrust into me, shallowly at first, but soon he goes deeper and harder as I encourage him with my words and my moans.

I’ve never experienced anything like this. It feels like he could be splitting me apart, yet it’s also the most divine sensation of fullness that I never want to end. Good golly, Miss Molly, *the girth!* Every nerve ending in my body, but especially my ass, is electrified, and when he thrusts his massive cock and makes contact with my prostate, I nearly levitate off the bed.

“Oh sweet merciful heavens!”

Targan tightens his grip on my hips and his dick hits my prostate again.

“Oh god, I’m close,” I warn him.

He shifts his position, tossing my legs over his shoulders again as he fucks into me in a way that leaves me breathless.

“Stroke yourself,” he orders in a far too fucking sexy growl for my sanity.

Yes, sir! Make me stay after class for a good talking to!

I reach down and take hold of my aching erection, then begin to furiously pump into my fist as Targan slams into me with wild abandon.

It doesn’t take long before I feel the telltale tingle at the base of my spine. My balls tighten and my cock erupts as I come with a half-sobbing and half-euphoric shout. Pleasure washes over me in waves and my channel clenches down hard on Targan’s cock still thrusting inside me when I give a final weak spurt.

He grunts and I’m not sure if it’s in pain or pleasure, but his movements become frantic and within moments I feel an unfamiliar heat inside. I’ve never gone bare before. There never was anyone I dated long enough or who I trusted that

much to take that risk with. The sensation of Targan coming inside me is intensely intimate, and if I must admit it, exhilarating. I had no idea I'd enjoy this as much as I do. My channel throbs and I moan from aftershocks of pleasure as Targan's enormous balls continue to empty inside me. There's so much come that I feel it spilling out of me and dripping onto the bed, and he still spurts inside me, all the while letting out little growls of satisfaction.

"Fuck, that's hot," I whisper.

"Mine," he rumbles.

When I look right into his possessive, sated eyes, time stops and all I can see and feel is him.

Holy fuck.

Forget about falling.

It's already happened.

I'm in love with Targan Wildethorne.

Oh, and I may just happen to be a huge fucking come slut for him too.

CHAPTER 22



Orc folklore is centered around the belief in a benevolent Goddess of the Light, who is a fecund figure associated with the natural world and the cycles of life and death. Much like many human religions, orc folklore emphasizes that death is not the end of our existence but rather the transition to another plane of existence, a process referred to as passing beyond the Light. Similar to the human notion of the spirit or soul, this concept posits that orcs transcend to another plane of existence after their life ends in this one. While orcs do not know exactly what existence is like in this other plane, they do tend to believe their loved ones watch over them and that they will be reunited with each other one day.

—*Green But Not Inherently Mean: A Nuanced History of the Orc* by Dr. Targan Wildethorne

Targan

I SPEND most of the night watching Max as he sleeps, still overwhelmed by the magic of our union. Being inside him and moving together as one was more intense than I ever imagined. Something shifted in our dynamic when we made love—there’s no other way to describe it—and I think we both felt it but were both too scared to speak it aloud.

Deep down, I suspected I was falling headfirst for Max from the beginning. There’s no way I would have considered him as my mate if I hadn’t been, but now I know it irrefutably.

I am hopelessly in love with Max MacLeod.

At my age, I had rather reconciled myself to the solitary life as a bachelor. After all, I have plenty of interests to keep me occupied and content. Plus, since moving back to Mystic Hollow, I had revived my personal connections with my family and my friendship with Vash. My life, for all intents and purposes, had been quite full and enjoyable.

Needless to say, I never expected to become a parent and a partner.

After so many years, I'd assumed that my romantic window of opportunity had passed me by, or that perhaps I was just not destined to find a life partner.

But then Max burst into my world, in all his colorful splendor, and I couldn't look away.

My mother once told me that finding a life partner for an orc can be rather challenging. We are overachievers and strive to excel in all of our professional and personal pursuits. Bringing a partner into the equation is not always desirable, especially if they're someone we feel a need to compete with, which is highly common among our kind. However, she also said that finding someone with whom we don't feel a need to compete, one who enriches and adds to our already full lives in meaningful and desirable ways, is a rare and special thing. She said if I ever found that I should never let it go.

I finally understand what she meant.

Max is as necessary to me as oxygen. The very thought of life without him is unthinkable. I love him with fervor and passion I've never known.

I only hope he feels the same about me.

My mind is a jumble of excitement and uncertainty, so I only sleep a few hours before I'm up at dawn. I want to tell Max how I feel but am also terrified of doing so. We've been dating for barely the blink of an eye. My rational mind tells me to wait, to give our relationship more time before I bear all that's in my heart to him. Hopefully I will be more certain he is receptive to my confession by then.

While Max continues to slumber, I call the little French bakery in town and order us several croissants, a variety of their mini quiches, and a fresh fruit salad. I pay extra to have it delivered, then hang up and get dressed before going downstairs to wait for the delivery driver.

Once again, I'm struck by how odd it is for the house to be so quiet. Without Harn and Yara running around and making noise, Waffles and Princess Peach adding to the cacophony in the background, and even dear old Feldrick puttering through his duties, my home seems almost lonely.

At one time, I would have reveled in the complete silence, but in the last few weeks I've grown accustomed to the presence of the twins. I'm startled to realize that I miss them. While it's been a wonderful weekend alone with Max, I'm also ready for Yara and Harn to return later today.

When I hear a car pulling up outside, I rush to open the front door so the driver doesn't ring the bell and wake up Max.

The young goblin driver hands off the bag and grins happily when I pass him a twenty-dollar tip. He salutes me in thanks, then hurries back to his car and drives off. I head inside and close the door behind me quietly. In the kitchen, I pull out the biggest breakfast tray I own and begin setting out our goodies while making a pot of French press coffee. When I have everything assembled and the tray is piled high with treats, I make my way upstairs to my bedroom.

By now, it's closer to our usual morning wake-up time and Max generally does not like to oversleep too much on the weekend, lest it disrupt his sleep schedule for the rest of the work week. I can't hold back a sappy grin. We share that in common.

I carefully set the enormous tray down on the end of the bed and gently rouse Max. He yawns and stretches contentedly before sniffing the air with appreciation. "Oh, you perfect, perfect man. Do I smell coffee?"

I chuckle. "I've brought you breakfast in bed, including coffee. Well, actually, it's for both of us, but breakfast in bed nonetheless."

Max slowly sits up and rubs his eyes. He is so adorable first thing in the morning. His purple hair is a messy jumble going in several directions and his smile is groggy.

He's never looked more perfect to me.

I pour him a cup of coffee, adding cream and sugar as he likes, and pass it to him.

"Bless you," he says with a groan. He takes the cup between his hands and sips at it, then sighs happily. "This is what I'm talking about." Focusing his gaze on the tray of goodies, his eyes widen. "You did all this for me?"

I fidget. "You know I'm not much of a cook, but I wanted to serve you breakfast in bed, so I ordered from the French bakery downtown."

Max perks up. "Ooh! I've seen that place but haven't had the opportunity to go in yet."

"My mastery of the art of takeout is handy at times like this." I wink. "Their pastries are quite good. I think you'll enjoy them."

Max fluffs some pillows behind his back and settles himself into a comfortable seated position. I join him on the bed and we each pile our plates high with fruit salad, croissants, and freshly made quiche, then eat and sip our coffee as we talk. Although we both conspicuously avoid discussing the previous evening, our conversation is nonetheless easy and familiar.

"When do the kids get back today?" Max asks around a mouthful of croissant.

"Mom and Dad said they'd bring them back around dinnertime."

"Good. I'll make sure to cook something special to welcome them home."

I gaze at him fondly. "I'm sure they'll appreciate that."

Max grins. "It really was so lovely of your parents to offer to babysit over the weekend. I've enjoyed spending this time with you and I hope we get to do it again." He gives me a

sheepish look. “Is it weird that I’m excited for the kids to come back though? I know it’s only been two days, but I miss them—and the dogs. Even sweet old Feldrick.”

I laugh. “Strangely enough, I was thinking the same thing myself earlier.”

“Yara and Harn are really good kids. They’ve had a hard time and a great loss, but they’re continuing to grow and thrive and become their own amazing selves.” He reaches out and pats my hand. “I think their mother would be proud.”

I feel tears threaten and fight them back. I have no desire to be maudlin today. Instead, I want to enjoy this time with the man I love.

“What do you want to do today?” I ask him.

Max considers this. “What’s the weather like outside?”

As if to answer his question, there’s a sudden rumble of thunder and I go over to the window to look outside. To my surprise, summer storm clouds have rolled in and the sky is darkening once again. Rain looks imminent.

“I think we’re going to have a thunderstorm any moment now, and I’m not sure how long it will last. During the summer, they sometimes roll in quickly and roll out just as fast.”

Max licks crumbs off his fingers. “I think I’d really enjoy spending a lazy Sunday with you here at the house. If the weather picks up later and we feel inclined to go out, we can, but I’m kind of in the mood to lounge around here with you. Maybe watch a movie or—” His eyes widen. “No, wait! Someone in town was telling me about this show we need to watch.”

“A television show?”

“Well, technically, it’s a soap opera. But it’s called *The Young and the Monstrous* and most of the actors are actual Otherkind performers. Apparently, it’s the hottest show among folks in town right now, and one of the first of its kind.” Max waggles his eyebrows at me. “Surely it must have some historic significance and interest to you for that reason alone.”

I can't hold back a laugh. "Is that your not-so-subtle way of asking me to watch this soap opera with you?" I pause, thinking back. "Isn't that the show Feldrick's always hurrying off to watch?"

He nods and gives me innocent puppy-dog eyes, and I know I'm going to say yes, so that's what we do.

We have a lazy Sunday together and while the storm rages outside, we stay cozy indoors, curled up together on the couch and getting sucked into the surprisingly good and ultracampy soap opera.

By the time we break for lunch, we're both eagerly hypothesizing what's going to happen next with the characters.

"Personally, I think Xavier has some seriously devious plan he's working on that involves multiple people in town—but I haven't figured out what or why." Max strokes his chin in thought. "I'm afraid I don't know much about demons other than that most human stories about them are fantastical imaginings rather far from fact."

Naturally, I fall back into my professor mode. "Demons are a rather fascinating species. Did you know that only a fated mate can summon a demon to their realm?"

Max's eyes go huge. "Really? Oh my god! How romantic is that?"

I can't hold back a grin. Of course that's what his first thought would be.

"Indeed. Although, it can come as something of a surprise to the summoner. Often when they do the summoning, they aren't aware they're the demon's mate."

"Whoa. Okay, that could end badly."

"In most cases, things do work out, but it can be a rocky courtship period for some. I once wrote a paper on fated-mate experiences among demons mated to orcs. My interview subjects were quite fascinating to talk to."

Max laughs. "I bet they were. Tell me more." He bats his eyelashes. "Be sure to use your sexy professor voice, too."

So I tell Max more about my research on demons and he listens avidly, the way he always does. Already, I'm finding it hard not to give voice to all the mushy feelings I have for him that are bubbling up inside me and threatening to break loose.

Thankfully, Max has to get dinner started before long since he has something special planned. I offer to help but he just kisses me until I'm a little dazed and smacks my ass before telling me to go write until the kids get home.

I grin all the way to my study. To my surprise, I manage to get quite a bit of work done on my next chapter before I hear the front door bang open and a mini stampede rush into my house. With haste, I leave my study and enter the long front hallway leading to the foyer.

"Uncle Targan!" Yara and Harn shout together and come racing toward me.

I kneel down and open my arms to receive them. The rush of warmth in my chest is full of joy and relief now that my kids are home. Lifting them up, one on each arm, I fling them each over my shoulders and whirl around with a mock roar.

They let out happy screams and peals of laughter as we twirl, and I feel myself grinning from ear to ear.

When I finally set them down, I turn to see Max and my parents watching me with strange expressions on their faces.

"What?" I ask, feeling self-conscious.

"Nothing," my mother says before turning to the twins. "How about we bring your stuff upstairs and put it away?"

To my amazement, they both agree and my mom follows them upstairs.

My father puts a hand on my shoulder. "You're becoming an excellent father. I'm so proud of you."

I'm stunned.

Max gives me a tear-filled grin. "It's a wonderful thing to see you being playful and spontaneous with Harn and Yara." He gives me a thumbs-up. "Keep up the good work, Uncle Targan."

Once my mom and the kids come back downstairs, my parents say their goodbyes with promises to visit again soon. After they're gone, Max, who's wearing a frilly blue apron, ushers us all into the kitchen to eat, and the dogs head to their now full dishes to have their dinner as well.

The kids do little happy dances when they see that Max has made their favorite extra cheesy and beefy lasagna for dinner and apple pie for dessert. Harn and Yara are full of smiles and have hearty appetites, something that makes Max laugh out loud to see. We sit together over our meal as a family, and I bask in the simple beauty of this moment. Harn and Yara chatter excitedly while they share tales of their weekend adventures with Grandma and Grandpa and the dogs sit by, expectant for crumbs.

When Max dishes up dessert, he gives me his most powerful puppy-dog eyes again. "Please try a small piece of pie. I think you might like it."

I will choke it down even if I don't because I can't say no to him when he's being so damn adorable. "Just a small piece," I agree.

Max hugs himself happily and cuts me a thin slice. "Do you want ice cream on yours?"

The kids had naturally said yes to that, but I shake my head. "Plain is fine, thanks."

I will admit, the pie smells quite nice. I've always been rather partial to cinnamon, and there's faint hints of nutmeg and allspice as well.

Max watches me intently as I take my first bite. I chew slowly, surprised to find the pie isn't overly sweet. The apples have a faint hint of tartness that is tempered by the spices and sugar, while the crust is crispy and flaky, melting on my tongue.

"This is delicious," I say truthfully.

"Duh," Harn says with a roll of his eyes.

"All of Max's food is delicious," Yara explains slowly, as if I'm a small child.

I laugh and, with a grunt of satisfaction, shove more pie into my mouth.

Max is fairly glowing at me and I make a vow to always try anything he makes for me—even if it's the sweetest dessert in the Terran realm—from now on.

CHAPTER 23



If you ever find yourself in danger while on the job, be sure to keep your wits about you. Sometimes, we have to react quickly in an emergency situation. Don't let fear cause you to make foolish choices. If and when you are able, be sure to call for help. In the meantime, do whatever it takes to stay alive and safe.

—*The All-Species Specialized Employment Services
(A.S.S.E.S.) Handbook*

*M*ax

“HOW MANY GIGANTIC suitcases are you planning to bring? I know you only own a handful of jeans and T-shirts.”

Ryder eyes me like I'm a couple of Twinkies short of a whole box. “I have a lot I need for my research. Books, notes, electronics, and so forth—especially if I'm going to be staying in Mystic Hollow for the rest of the summer.”

I roll my eyes and shake my head. “We can always come back if you forgot something.”

For an instant, a haunted look flashes over Ryder's face but then he looks away, shoving more papers into his final suitcase.

I frown. “What?”

He shakes his head and still won't look at me. “Nothing. I just don't really want to come back here for a while.”

I'm immediately on alert. "Why not?"

He continues packing and doesn't answer.

I move to his side and take hold of his shoulders, turning him to face me whether he likes it or not. "Talk to me. Please."

His bottom lip trembles. "Fine. That creepy guy..." He visibly swallows. "The stalker has started sending me more letters and...gifts. It's freaking me out."

My grip tightens. "Why didn't you tell me?"

He gives a jerky shrug. "I didn't want to worry you. Besides, we'd already gotten the visa coordinated and I knew I'd be leaving here soon. I figured I could bear it for a little while longer." He shudders. "I've barely left the condo. Every time I go out, I have this horrible feeling that I'm being watched. I don't know if it's just the paranoia getting out of control or what. There's no doubt the guy is escalating his...overtures. Even though I know the building is secure, I don't feel safe anywhere else in town. After what Vash told me, and this recent uptick in harassment, I'm jumping at shadows every time I go outside." He slumps down on the edge of the bed where he's been packing his suitcase. "Honestly, it's going to be a huge relief to get to Mystic Hollow and know I'm protected there for the next few months. Just being able to walk down the street or go to a coffee shop and not constantly be looking over my shoulder will be a wonderful reprieve."

My heart twists at his words. I had no idea things had gotten so much worse in the short time since I saw him last.

I lift his chin up so he finally looks me in the eyes. "Please promise me you will talk to Vash and take his advice about security, even if you want to hire someone else. I'm sure he won't mind and he can recommend reliable people to you. I just don't want you alone and unprotected once you leave for your book tour. We need to have things lined up by the end of the summer so that you are safe beyond Mystic Hollow. After your tour, we'll have to see where things are at."

Ryder hesitates. "After? What do you mean?"

I let go of him and fiddle with the frilly sleeve of my pink kimono cover-up. “Well, I was just thinking about the possibility of you coming to love Mystic Hollow as much as I do. If that happens, you may decide you want to relocate permanently.”

“I...hadn't even thought of that.” He bites his lip. “Do you really think it would be that easy for me to move there?”

“I don't know for sure, but it's certainly something we can look into if you're interested. My understanding is that the town accepts anyone who wishes to be there as long as they have no evil or ill intent and can contribute to the community. I don't fully know how it all works, but the magic usually decides.”

“It's an intriguing idea, but it's too early to tell how I'll feel about living there yet.” He crosses his arms, his brow furrowed in concentration. “But it might not be a bad idea on the whole.”

My chest swells with excitement. “It's an ideal place for you! Somewhere you'd be safe from overzealous or creepy fans. Plus, it would lend even more credibility to your stories if people knew you lived in a Sanctuary Haven among Otherkind!”

He strokes his chin in contemplation. “It wouldn't be all that hard to sell my place and buy a beautiful old home there. I'd really love a place with more character than my condo. The atmosphere of the town would probably be great for my writing too.”

I hold up my hands. “We shouldn't get too carried away too fast. Also, I don't want to pressure you. I just want you to remain open to the possibility. After all, it's not like there's anything specific tying you to Syracuse. I know we both went to college here, but most of our friends moved away after we graduated, and I know you. You spend far too much time alone and probably haven't made any new ones. I think it would be good, healthy even, for you to be closer to me and to make new friends in a welcoming community like Mystic Hollow. The residents are amazing.”

Ryder's mouth drops open. "Oh my god. You're planning to stay there for good, aren't you?"

My cheeks flush. "I'd like to if I can. I feel more at home now, even more than when I was with Sally, than I ever have. And you know how much that means when you're a former foster kid."

His eyes widen. "Oh shit. And you're in love with your hot silver fox orc professor, aren't you?"

Fuck, Ryder can read me like a book.

"Head over fucking heels and then some," I admit.

"Holy fucking hell. Congratulations," Ryder exclaims before sweeping me into a powerful hug. "That's amazing. I'm so happy for you both."

I wince. "Maybe hold back on the congratulations for just a little while yet."

His shrewd gaze sharpens. "What do you mean? Why?"

I stare at my feet and mumble, "I haven't exactly told him how I feel."

Ryder is aghast. "My bold, brash BFF hasn't told his man he loves him? Why ever not?"

"I don't know!" I cry plaintively and flop back on the bed. "We had the most amazing time together last weekend. We even finally went *all the way* if you know what I mean."

Ryder curls up beside me, eyes sparkling. "Oooh! Do tell!"

I sigh dreamily. "It was so romantic and so much more than I expected." I feel my cheeks flush and I cover them with my hands like I'm a teenager again. "Ryder, we actually made love. I thought that was only a fictional thing, but I am a total believer now. We connected on a level I don't think I ever have with anyone before." I grin like a big shmoo just thinking about it. "When we came together, it was like we joined on some metaphysical level too. It was like something out of one of your novels. The experience was so powerful and intense. I knew without a shred of doubt that I was in love with him."

If I was honest with myself, I'd been falling for him from the very first moment we met.

Ryder pulls a leg up until his knee rests under his chin. "So what happened?"

"Afterward, I guess I got kind of self-conscious. I didn't know what to say. It was like what I was feeling was too big to even put into words. But then Targan didn't say anything either, so I started to doubt myself." I wince. "That got me thinking. Maybe I was the only one who felt so overwhelmed by it all? What if it wasn't the same for him? I'm well aware we've been dating for only a hot frickin' minute, and I don't want to come across as some desperate, clingy guy who thinks he's in love after one night in bed together." I wrinkle my nose. "It sounds cringey even saying it out loud. Besides, that's *so* not me. I've never been that way with anyone else, you know that."

Ryder gives me a shit-eating grin. "Welcome to being in love for the first time, my friend." He wipes at a fake tear. "I worried I'd never see the day!"

I scoff. "I've been in love before."

He shakes his head. "Nuh-uh. You've had intense lust for people before. You've had crushes. You've had sex friends and one-night stands. But you have *never* been in love with anyone. Until now."

Fucking hell. He's right.

I'm fairly certain my face looks as horrified as I feel. "Is it always like this? A horrible roller coaster of excitement and euphoria mixed with fear and terror?"

Ryder throws his head back and laughs. "I suppose it depends on the person, but in many cases your first true love is very much like that. When we fall in love, it can be the greatest feeling in the world. But it can also spawn a whole lot of doubt, uncertainty, and fear because those kinds of intense feelings make us vulnerable."

I sigh. "Yeah, not so sure I love that part of it all." I can't hold back a mushy grin. "But it's worth it. Targan is the most

amazing man I've ever known. I want to be with him for the rest of our lives."

Ryder's expression turns serious. "He's it for you then, hmm?"

"Pretty much," I concede. "I just don't know if he feels the same way."

And isn't that a gut-wrenching, freak-me-the-fuck-out thought.

Ryder hums thoughtfully. "I'd be shocked if he doesn't share your feelings. From what I saw at the tea party, he could barely take his eyes off you the whole time. The man looked downright smitten to me."

His words give me a boost of confidence. "I do plan to tell him. I just figure I should maybe wait until we've been together a bit longer."

"It's your call to make but keep in mind, if he feels the same way and hasn't said anything, then he's also not entirely certain of your sentiments. The longer both of you delay in telling one another how much you care, the more you could start to doubt one another. It could destabilize the foundation of your relationship and make things rocky."

Damn the man for being so insightful and honest.

The idea of Targan being anxious and uncertain about where I stand sends a twinge of pain through my chest. "You're right, as usual. I need to take that leap and tell him how I feel." I give a decisive nod. "I'm gonna do it when we get back."

Ryder holds up his hands. "Hey, I'm not trying to pressure you into anything here. If you're not ready, you shouldn't force yourself."

"Honestly, I've been dying to tell him ever since last weekend, but I held back because of my own fears and insecurities—and that's just dumb." I puff out my chest. "After all, I'm Max MacLeod. I'm an amazing catch and one of a fucking kind."

“Damn right.” Ryder gives me a hug.

We get back to work and finish stuffing the last of his books and papers in his third suitcase before locking up his condo and hauling the bags to the elevator.

Hallelujah for that saving grace!

When we get down to the lobby, I have Ryder stay with the security guard while I get my car, a plan we’d strategized earlier with Vash’s input.

I hurry outside and pull my car around in front of the main lobby entrance. The security guard is kind enough to come and help us stack Ryder’s three enormous suitcases in my trunk and get his smaller items situated in my back seat. Once my little car’s stuffed full, we get in and wave goodbye to the guard as we head out of town.

When we finally pass the Syracuse city limits, Ryder breathes a long, loud sigh of relief.

I dart a glance at him. “What was that about?”

He shakes his head and laughs. “I’ve just been on edge the last few days, what with all the weird shit my stalker’s been sending me. I guess I was starting to feel a little paranoid that he might interfere with me coming to Mystic Hollow.”

I shiver at the thought and glance in my rearview mirror, but as far as I can tell, we’re just part of the regular flow of traffic heading west toward the Finger Lakes.

I reach over and pat his knee. “Everything’s gonna be okay. Trust me.”

Our journey proves to be a pleasant one. The day is bright and clear, and we chat happily about all our summer plans to spend time together.

As we get closer to Mystic Hollow, we encounter an unexpected roadblock on the main road leading to the bridge that goes into town.

I frown, getting an odd niggling sensation in my gut. “This wasn’t here when I left this morning.”

Ryder points out the window. “Let’s just follow the detour signs then.”

The detour takes us on a longer back route that I’ve never traveled before, and the farther we go, the more worried I become. The fact that we aren’t seeing any other traffic is also concerning.

“Is it just me or is this kind of weird?” I ask nervously as we follow a detour sign that leads us down a remote dirt road surrounded by forest.

“Maybe it’s some kind of alternate back route in times of emergency? You know, like those hurricane evacuation routes in Florida.”

My bad feeling intensifies. “Yeah, but we don’t have anything like that around here.”

Up ahead, I see two large SUVs blocking the road, and my paranoia ratchets up.

“Maybe there’s some kind of accident or something?” Ryder peers out the window in confusion.

The hair on the back of my neck rises. “This isn’t right.”

I slow down in the hopes of pulling a U-turn and getting the hell out of here, but it’s too late. My car goes over something bumpy on the road and I hear tires pop. I slam on the brakes.

“This isn’t good.” Verbalizing it does not help me feel any better.

“Oh god,” Ryder whispers, his face going unnaturally pale. “Could it be the stalker?”

When I see a large orc in a suit get out of the back of one of the SUVs, I have a sinking sense of certainty about what is going on.

“I don’t think so. Not unless he’s an orc.”

Ryder pales as three more orcs get out of the vehicles. “I don’t think so.”

My heart is racing wildly and I try to concentrate on keeping my breathing even as I reach into my bag and hand Ryder my phone. “I need you to listen to me and do exactly what I say.”

“What’s going on? You’re freaking me out.”

“There’s no time. Take my phone and call Targan. He’ll know what to do. Tell him I think Yargef is here.”

“Who?” Ryder looks so bewildered and scared.

I don’t have time to explain though. “You’re going to need to run back in the direction we came from. Run as fast and as far as you can. And call Targan.”

His nostrils flare. “I’m not going to fucking leave you!”

I grab hold of his arm, my grip painfully tight. “Trust me. This guy is bad news. He murdered Harn and Yara’s mother, and he’s been in hiding. I don’t know why he’s here, but he must have found out I work for Targan.”

“Come with me!” Ryder urges.

I shake my head. “I’m not going to be able to outrun them, but you can. If you can get away and summon help, we both might have a chance of making it out of this in one piece. Trust me and do what I say. I’m pulling the BFF card of a lifetime right now.”

Ryder’s mouth sets in a grim line. “Okay, but you have to promise not to get yourself killed.”

My laugh comes out jagged. “I’ll do my best.”

He gives me a fierce hug before we break apart and fly out of opposite sides of the car at the same time.

The orcs, looking scary as fuck, start approaching. They might as well be moving green mountains in suits.

“Now!” I yell and Ryder turns and starts to run back the way we came.

Most people don’t understand just how fast a little fucker Ryder is. He was a state champion in track and field and one of the fastest people I’ve ever seen in the hundred-meter dash.

He may be short and slim, but he can run like the wind, and these big hulking orcs with all their muscle and weight don't stand a chance against his speed and the head start I'm making sure he has.

I deflect their attention by pulling things out of my manny purse o' many things and throwing them at their heads. I'm quite impressed with myself when I manage to nail one right between the eyes with a full water bottle and another with a chunky fantasy novel.

Deciding my best move is to try to lure them away from Ryder for as long as I can, I scamper off the road and race down the embankment, heading into the forest.

It isn't long before I lose my delightful kimono to the very annoying lower branches of the trees. I'm forced to continue running with only my tunic and leggings, which offer me little protection. Thankfully, I wore comfortable shoes for the day because I knew I'd be helping Ryder with his luggage, but they serve me well as I race through the dense foliage. I do my best to ignore tree branches that slap me in the face and slice at my arms and keep pressing onward. All too soon, I hear the thunderous footsteps of my followers when they plunge after me into the woods.

Alas, I'm not much of a runner and I never have been, which is one of many reasons I put my faith in Ryder. If I'm going to have a real chance against Yargef and his goons, Ryder's going to have to call in the cavalry.

Gasping for air and far too tired already, I spot an overturned log up ahead. I take a gamble, diving under it quickly and covering myself in leaves and debris, hoping they camouflage me from the sight of my pursuers.

I lie still, trying to even my ragged breathing, as I hear them moving in my direction. Keeping my eyes closed, I cross my fingers and toes.

"Where did he go?" one of them demands.

"I don't know. He can't have gotten far."

I listen as three of them debate best options before they decide to take different directions and head off deeper into the forest. I don't know where the fourth is, but I wait in the surrounding silence for what feels like an eternity. When I'm reasonably confident my pursuers have put enough distance between me and them, I carefully crawl out from under the tree and start to brush myself off.

That's when I hear the snap of a twig and whirl around to face an enormous orc who grins evilly like a supervillain in a comic book.

"Look what I found," he says.

Well, fuck. My luck's run out.

CHAPTER 24



The Orc Uprising of 1666, although not well-known among humans, lives on in the memories of generations of orc families. The whole debacle started, as many ancient feuds did, over food. One should never steal anything that belongs to an orc, but especially not their food! When Hogug the Ugly stole Dubok the Mighty's prize pig, cooked it, and ate it until only the bones were left, it started a feud between their two houses that lasted for over a year. One could say, the whole thing started when an orc made a pig of himself—no pun intended.

—*Green But Not Inherently Mean: A Nuanced History of the Orc* by Dr. Targan Wildethorne

Targan

MY CELL PHONE rings and I see Max's name flash across the screen.

I grin as I answer it. "How far away are you?"

"Targan! It's me, Ryder."

Ryder's voice is ragged, his breath coming out in gasps, and I'm instantly on alert.

"What's going on? What's wrong?"

"We were ambushed. On the way back. There was some kind of weird detour on the road. We ended up on a dirt road in the middle of nowhere. There was something on the road

and it blew out our tires.” He gasps in a breath. “Some sketchy orcs in SUVs were waiting for us.”

My blood runs cold. “Orcs?”

“Yes. Max said he thinks it’s the person who killed the twins’ mother. Some guy called Yargef?”

I race down the hallway, grabbing my car keys.

Ryder’s sudden sobs are loud through the phone. “Max made me run away with his phone so I could call you. He needs help.”

“Where are you?”

“I don’t know!” he cries. “We had to bypass the main road to the bridge and follow detour signs. I think it made us loop around the river to the north.” He quickly rattles off several landmarks that he recalls seeing along the way, and I have a good idea where he’s at.

The children are upstairs and occupied with their video games, so I quickly grab Feldrick and explain what’s going on, telling him to call my parents and have them come over so they can help watch Yara and Harn but to not utter a peep to the kids about what’s happening.

The minute I’m out the door, I fly to my car, start the engine, and check in with Ryder again, who’s still on the line.

“Are you being followed?” I demand.

“No, I think they decided to go after Max instead.”

“Damn it!”

Ryder’s voice gets small. “Is Max going to be okay?”

“I’m on my way,” I say as I speed toward the bridge and out of town. “When you get to the main intersection near the turnoff, stay there if you can. I’m going to be there ASAP. For now, stay on the line with me. I’ll patch in Vash real quick to see if he can come too.”

“Okay,” Ryder agrees with a sniffle.

“You’re incredibly brave and resourceful,” I assure him.

“I didn’t want to leave Max behind, Targan, but he wouldn’t let me stay. He told me I had to get away and call you.”

“It was the right call. Hang on.”

I quickly call Vash and nearly sob with relief when he answers on the second ring.

“Targan, what’s—”

“Yargef is here. He’s cornered Max on a back road on the outskirts of town.”

Vash curses loudly. “What about Ryder? Wasn’t he with Max?”

“I’m here,” Ryder chimes in. “I’m fine. Max helped me get away, but he needs your help.”

I quickly relay what Ryder told me and where Vash can meet us.

“I’m leaving right now,” Vash assures us. “But do *not* do anything until I get there. You don’t want to go up against Yargef and his hired muscle alone.”

I stay silent, refusing to promise anything.

Vash snarls in frustration, knowing me all too well. “I’ll be there soon.”

He hangs up, but I keep Ryder on the line.

“Are you okay? Are you hurt?” I ask.

“No, I’m fine. It’s Max I’m worried about. Those guys looked dangerous.”

I grit my teeth, trying to fight back the rising fury inside me. How *dare* Yargef come after me through Max. He will regret it.

I slam my hand against the steering wheel. Damn it. How did Yargef even learn about Max?

When I cross over the bridge, I see the temporary detour and press my gas pedal to the floor, racing toward Ryder’s location.

“It’s going to be okay,” I tell him. “We’re going to get Max back safely.”

I will accept no other outcome.

Ryder snuffles. “Here I was all worried it was the stalker who’s been following me around. How stupid was I?”

“It’s not your fault,” I tell him.

It’s mine. I should have realized Max could be in danger if he left town. But I just never imagined Yargef’s sources would have intel on my life here in Mystic Hollow. That’s something Vash and I are going to need to talk about. How on earth did Yargef get the information?

When I finally reach the intersection before the turnoff, I spot a shivering and disheveled Ryder crouching in the ditch and immediately pull up beside him. I open the door.

“Get in.”

He quickly complies.

While he’s doing that, I hear a car behind me and glance in the rearview mirror to see Vash’s familiar black SUV with his company logo on it. I sigh in relief.

Ryder directs me the rest of the way.

We turn down the lonely dirt road near Darkwood Forest, and my blood runs cold when I see Max’s car up ahead, tires flat, and beyond that the two abandoned SUVs.

My racing heart lurches with fear.

There doesn’t appear to be anyone around as I pull up to a stop just shy of Max’s car and get out. I order Ryder to stay behind but he doesn’t listen to me.

“Where is he?” He sounds as anxious as I feel.

Vash’s SUV pulls to a screeching halt behind us and he flies out of the vehicle, a stormy look on his face.

“Where could they have gone?” I ask him.

Vash immediately starts surveying the scene and before long finds a trail. “It looks like they went through the woods.”

His expression is grim.

“Oh, Max, what did you do?” I whisper.

Ryder must sense something from the expression on my face because his own tenses. “What is it? What aren’t you telling me?”

“These woods are treacherous,” Vash explains, his voice a growl. “There’s a reason they border Mystic Hollow.”

Ryder swallows audibly. “Is there something evil in there? Something that might hurt Max?”

“I don’t know,” Vash replies.

I try to convince Ryder to lock himself in my car. “Call the Mystic Hollow police and explain what’s happening. Vash and I are going to follow them into the forest. It’s too risky for you to come with us, and you’ll only slow us down.”

He tries to protest, but I take hold of his shoulder and squeeze it. “This is the best way you can help us and Max. Please.”

Reluctantly, he finally nods and gets in the car, putting the cell phone to his ear.

Vash and I head down the embankment and into the trees, pursuing what turns out to be five sets of tracks.

“We’re outnumbered here,” Vash admits with a scowl.

“I know, but I can’t wait for more backup. Every minute could count. You know what Yargef is like. He won’t hesitate to kill Max if he becomes more trouble than he’s worth.”

Vash snarls, fangs flashing in anger. “I can’t even fathom how he learned about Max in the first place.”

“Could there be someone in town somehow getting information to him?”

Vash shakes his head. “I doubt it. I don’t think the magic would allow something like that. Most likely he threatened or bribed someone. I’ll have to make sure my agency and the one we hired Max through weren’t hacked either.”

“There’s a lot we’re going to have to review after all of this is over, but right now I need to find Max.”

We haven’t gone far when I discover his pink kimono, torn and on the ground. I clutch it to my heart, trying not to fall apart when Max needs me most.

“Come on,” Vash urges. “They went this way.”

We press onward. It’s darker here in the forest, the dense trees blocking out the sun in places. Our progress is slower than I’d like so Vash can survey the landscape, identifying subtle signs that mark the trail of those we’re following.

When we get to an overturned log deeper in the forest, Vash comes to a halt and examines the ground intently. “It looks like three sets of tracks go in different directions here.” He circles around the log carefully before dropping down on one knee.

“What is it?” I ask.

He looks up, his expression shadowed. “Blood.”

I fight back a roar of anger and fear.

“Calm yourself, my friend. It’s not enough blood to worry me, but it looks like there was some kind of a scuffle here before two more sets of tracks went in that direction.” He points and I pull out my phone to explore the map.

“That leads in the direction of the apple orchard on the north end of town.”

Vash nods. “Laurelis’s orchard abuts the forest line. There is strong ley line magic there that protects the border of the town.”

I lean down and inhale deeply, my nostrils flaring as I try to search for a hint of Max’s familiar scent. At long last I catch a discernible whiff of him, and my gut tells me this is the way we need to go.

“It was him and someone else. We need to go this way.”

Vash hesitates. “Should I fly after them? I might be able to find them faster from above.”

I consider it for a moment, then shake my head. “I don’t want to tip Yargef off that we’re on his trail. He might do something reckless. I think continuing on foot is our best option.”

Vash nods. “Okay. I’ll do my best to track them as quickly as possible.”

We head off, moving fast and only stopping periodically so Vash can study the underbrush. My anxiety rises at the sound of police sirens in the distance.

“What if—” I say, choking on the words.

Vash growls. “No, don’t even go down that line of thought.”

“But—”

“No buts. I’m not going to let Yargef hurt anyone else. I swear it,” he says, his eyes flashing red.

But I know how cruel and brutal Yargef is. Perhaps he’s learned that Max is not just my nanny but also someone I care deeply about. Maybe he wants to hurt me for having custody of his children.

I don’t know. I can’t fathom what could be driving him at this moment. And that’s what terrifies me.

All I can do is worry and feel like a failure. I should have better protected Max. I should have taken more precautions when it came to him. I knew the threat Yargef posed, but I never imagined he’d ever even know who Max is. I’ve gotten too used to the security of Mystic Hollow.

My only comforting thought is the knowledge that Yargef can’t actually cross the magical boundary into the town. Here we are at the outlying border and Harn and Yara are still safe from any nefarious plans their father might have toward them.

Right now, I have to concentrate on saving Max from this disaster of my own making. He has to be okay. Neither the children nor I could bear to lose him after all that we’ve lost already. I *won’t* let Yargef take Max away from us.

Like a fool, I'd let my fears and insecurities hold me back from telling him how much I love him. We only just found one another. We have so much more to do and be together.

"I'm an idiot," I whisper.

Vash looks up from where he's been studying the underbrush. "What?"

"I never imagined Yargef would come after Max. I didn't prepare him for possible danger. I should have known better how underhanded and evil Yargef is."

"It's not your fault. Even I never imagined Yargef would find out about Max. I took every precaution to keep his hire private." Vash clenches his hands into fists.

"I didn't tell Max—" I fight back a sob. "I didn't tell him I love him."

Vash's face becomes stony with resolve. "You're going to get your chance. I will do everything in my power to make sure that happens."

I swallow back tears. "We'll do it together."

We clasp hands.

"Let's just hurry. We need to find them fast."

Before it's too late.

CHAPTER 25



Disclaimer: All-Species Specialized Employment Services does not guarantee employment for job candidates who apply for positions through us, nor is this handbook a contract of any kind. We reserve the right to change, modify, or revoke any policies or procedures outlined in the handbook at any time, with or without notice.

—*The All-Species Specialized Employment Services
(A.S.S.E.S.) Handbook*

M ax

I EYE the huge and dangerous orc before me. One of his tusks is chipped and he has a nasty scar running down his jaw. His eyes are a pale shade of amber and lack the warmth and kindness of Targan’s. Everything about him has my internal warning bells going off.

“You must be that asshole, Yargef, I presume.”

He sneers and cracks his thick, hairy, green knuckles. “And you must be the pathetic human that Targan hired to take care of my children.” His eyes narrow. “Rumor has it you’ve become his lover as well. How disgusting.”

I hike my heavy bag higher on my shoulder while subtly reaching inside it, desperately searching for the object I need to help me stand down a murderer.

“Fuck you very much. What the hell do you want with me?” I demand.

Yargef steps closer and I stumble back, trying to stay out of arm's reach.

“You’re a useful bargaining chip. Targan’s a weak, soft-hearted fool. If he cares for you, he’ll make sure that Vash DarkWing surrenders to me what I am owed.”

My questing fingers connect with the item I’ve been feeling around for and I nearly sob with relief. I tighten my grip on it and square off against Yargef.

“I assume you’re talking about the trust that Sharna set up for her children?”

His threatening growl makes the hairs on my arms stand on end.

“Little did I know she was a scheming bitch who wanted to deprive me of what is rightfully mine.”

I scoff. “Narcissist much? It was her money to begin with. Just because you married her doesn’t mean you’re entitled to any of it. Sharna was smart enough to ensure you’ll never get your greedy hands on one single cent.”

His eyes go icy with anger. “Her fortune belongs to me and I will get it, whatever it takes. Even if that means torturing and maiming a pathetic human in the process.”

I brazen past my fear and sneer back. “Evidently, you don’t understand the law very well. Sharna may have been fooled into marrying you, but she saw through you soon enough to protect the interests of her children by putting all her money in that trust. It’s locked down nice and tight. You’re never going to get your hands on that money, or your children, ever again!”

Yargef’s face twists into a mask of rage as he roars and comes at me.

But I’m ready for him. I yank the bottle of pepper gel out of my bag and press the plunger, spraying him from ear to ear like I was taught. I manage to get him right in both eyes and inside his open mouth.

He claws at his face with a scream of agony and stumbles, losing his footing.

I take my opportunity. Winding up my arm, I swing my heavy bag in the air—I have a lot of stuff in there, all right?—a few times, then aim it at Yargef’s head. It makes direct contact and I hear a satisfying crunch as something heavy in the bag smashes into his nose, sending blood flying.

“That’s for Sharna, you piece of shit!”

Yargef howls with outrage and clutches his bleeding nose.

The coup de grace comes when I kick him square in his big old orc balls. Learning a thing or two about orc anatomy from Targan proves majorly helpful right now.

Yargef falls to the ground like a tree that’s just been felled, and I kind of want to yell, “Timber!”

Instead, I spit on him and say, “That’s for Yara and Harn, fuckwad.”

Yep. The bigger the orc balls, the harder they fall.

I reposition my bag on my shoulder and give him another good kick in his side as he lies prone. “That’ll teach you to mess with me. Bitch, I’m from Chicago!”

I’ve always wanted to say that after watching that infamous episode of RuPaul’s *Untucked*. Funny that I should have the chance now.

My window of escape being limited, I sure as shit don’t linger. I’m no fool! For now, I’ve played the few cards I had up my sleeve. I got lucky because Yargef underestimated me, but I don’t have the power to take him on in a fair fight.

So I do the only thing I can do.

I run.

Crashing through the trees, I can only hope that Targan and the Mystic Hollow cavalry are on their way to rescue my fine ass because my running ability sure as shit won’t.

I stumble through the dense forest as quickly as I can, panting the entire way. My energy is waning and I have no idea where I’m going. Pushing through some of this underbrush feels like I’m wading through quicksand.

Just when I'm about to give up and collapse in a sweaty heap, I swear a breeze rustles against my neck and a soft voice whispers on the wind, telling me to keep going. It's like the air current gently propels me toward...*safety*.

I don't understand but I don't question. If this is some kind of magical intervention, I'm not going to complain! I need whatever help I can get right now.

It feels like I've been running for ages, but it's probably only been a few minutes before I start to hear the sounds of pursuit.

Hoo boy, Yargef does *not* sound happy.

I attempt to quicken my pace in the direction I'm being guided. I don't dare look behind me and instead pay attention to what's ahead so I don't trip and fall.

My legs are wobbly Jell-O by the time I notice the trees starting to thin out some, and I can see glimpses of something that looks awfully familiar ahead.

Far too close for comfort, I hear Yargef's angry bellow hot on my trail. "I'm going to make you wish you were dead, human!"

I do *not* like the sound of that.

Heart pounding and wheezing for air, I whisper to myself, "Never give up. Never surrender!"

The edge of the tree line is getting closer, and the familiar sight of the Mystic Hollow apple orchard materializes just beyond the trees like a beacon of salvation. If I can make it there, I might be safe. I should be back within the magically protected boundaries of the town, right?

I make a last-ditch Hail Mary sprint for it.

Out of the corner of my right eye, I see one of Yargef's goons from earlier has circled back and found me as well. The enormous orc comes at me like a linebacker ready to take out the quarterback.

I can't hold back a scream, and my adrenaline spikes, giving me a final boost of energy. Pumping my arms and legs

like my life depends on it, which I sadly think it does, I go for gold.

“Get back here, you vile human scum!”

Yargef sounds like he’s mere feet away from me. I don’t dare to look around. I’ve seen enough horror movies to know better than that!

I burst into the apple orchard like I’m crossing the finish line of a race for my motherfucking life. Almost immediately, I stumble, tumbling down a shallow hill and collapsing in the grass at the bottom, the last of my energy gone.

I stare up at the edge of the forest in time to witness Yargef, face contorted with rage, coming toward me through the last stand of trees.

What happens next will probably haunt me for the rest of my days.

The moment Yargef and his hired muscle reach the edge of the line, a shimmering power washes over the forest with the force of a tidal wave. It flattens me to the ground. Then, like something out of a dark fairy-tale nightmare, the trees come to life, their branches swooping down to wrap themselves around Yargef and his minion. Their cries of outrage soon morph into ones of sheer terror as the tree limbs tighten, rending the air with the sounds of crushing bones when they begin to rip the two orcs apart.

I have to look away and close my eyes, but I hear their gut-wrenching screams until there’s nothing but wet, meaty noises and then an eerie silence.

The magic dissipates as quickly as it appeared and the trees return to their former stillness.

I don’t know how long I lie there, trembling and barely able to process what happened. On the one hand, I’m incredibly grateful the magic protected me and the town when its borders were threatened. But on the other, I’m still freaked out and kind of traumatized by what I witnessed. Everybody has always told me the magic was powerful, but I had no idea it could do something like that.

Closing my eyes, I take a moment to block out the world. I concentrate on my own heartbeat and the feel of the grass against my scraped and bruised skin. It reassures me that I'm still alive.

I don't hear the sound of more bodies running through the forest toward me, so I'm startled when Targan falls to his knees at my side and pulls me into his arms.

"Max, love, are you alright? Talk to me."

I open my eyes, tears streaming down my face, and stare up into his familiar amber eyes, now clouded with worry. I'm shaking and unable to speak for some reason.

His large, warm hands roam over my body gently. "Are you injured?"

"Targan?" I manage to whisper, my voice hoarse and raspy.

He bites back a sob of relief and holds me tighter. "Max, please tell me you're okay."

Am I? I don't know.

I reach up a trembling hand and cup his cheek. "You came."

Tears tumble down his cheeks. His glasses are slightly askew and he looks almost as disheveled as I suspect I do. "You were so brave." Pride and awe shine in his eyes as he gazes down at me.

"Is Ryder okay?"

He buries his face in my neck. "He's fine."

I sigh with relief.

It takes me a moment to realize Vash stands a few feet away, a grim look on his stoic gray face.

"Did you...did you see what happened?" I ask.

Targan hesitates. "We heard the screams, but when we reached the edge of the forest, they were gone."

I swallow back bile rising in my throat. “I’ve never seen anything like it before. The magic activated and—” I pause, inhaling a deep breath to calm my rising gorge. “The trees attacked Yargef and one of his men. They...crushed them and tore them apart.”

Vash turns stormy eyes on me. “Yargef had an easier death than he deserved. The forest killed him far too fast if you ask me. That man deserved to suffer for what he did.”

I shudder. “It may have been fast, but from what I saw and heard, it was a painful and horrifying death.”

“That’s something, I suppose,” Vash growls.

Targan cradles my head against his chest. “Don’t think about it, my love.”

I have a feeling that’s going to be easier said than done. No doubt this will haunt my nightmares for weeks to come.

But I’m alive and the people I care about are safe. For that, I will forever be indebted to the magic of Mystic Hollow.

Laurelis walks toward us, passing beneath several trees in the orchard. Her usually peaceful countenance is somber and almost sad for once. “The police are coming,” she says softly.

“I’ll go look for the other men Yargef had with him. They may be heading back to their SUVs, and we left Ryder alone back there,” Vash says, his brow furrowing.

“There were two more,” I tell him.

He nods and I watch in amazement as the wings normally folded against his back snap out behind him. Vash takes a running leap and his powerful wings lift him into the air and sail him over the forest.

“Don’t worry,” Targan murmurs. “Vash won’t let anything happen to your friend.”

I slump with relief.

“All will be well,” Laurelis offers, her words soft and soothing.

“I still don’t fully understand what happened,” I say, shaking my head. “When I was running for my life, I was lost in those woods. But then it felt like some kind of presence there started to guide me here, to safety.” I shudder. “Then the very same forest that saved me destroyed Yargef and his minion.”

Laurelis turns her gaze toward the line of trees. “Darkwood Forest is home to more than one kind of magic.” She glances at me, her eyes kind. “If you were guided here, it was undoubtedly an old magic that lies deep within the heart of the woods. It recognized you as part of Mystic Hollow and someone to be protected. That’s why it tried to guide you to the orchard.”

I swallow. “What about that wave of magic I felt at the end? It was different.”

She nods. “That was part of the ley line magic that shields the town from danger. You were able to pass back into Mystic Hollow because the magic of the town, and the forest that surrounds it, has accepted you as one of our own.” Her eyes become hazy and for an instant she looks older and wiser than I can even fathom. “Yargef, of the Ironclaw bloodline, let anger and greed rule his mind. Just as he killed his wife, he intended to kill you and many others in pursuit of the riches he desired.”

I gasp. “How do you know that?”

She smiles, her ageless appearance once more in place. “The forest speaks to me. Yargef didn’t realize he had reached the boundary that protects the town. The magic deemed him unworthy to enter.” She closes her eyes again, as if listening to something the rest of us can’t hear. “Darkwood Forest judged him too dangerous to continue to exist on this plane. His and his companion’s bodies are now scattered into tiny bits and buried deep underground, providing nourishment to the roots of the trees. In this way, they can give something back to the world in death to make up for their evil actions in life.”

Targan kisses my forehead tenderly. “You’re safe now and Yargef can’t hurt anyone ever again.”

His words open the floodgates and I start to sob uncontrollably. The fear and the horror come rushing out.

“I was so scared,” I tell him.

He clutches me tight, making a pained noise. “I should have protected you better. I should have known Yargef might try something. But I never imagined he’d come after me through you. I don’t know how he learned about you in the first place.”

“He knew we’re dating and that I’m caring for the twins. He told me.”

“Believe me, Vash and I intend to find out how he got ahold of that information.” He strokes my back in soothing circular motions. “I’m just thankful that the magic kept you safe.”

I pull back, sniffing as I wipe away the last of my tears. “I’ll have you know it wasn’t all the magic. Yargef underestimated me and I gave him what for. He learned you shouldn’t mess with former foster kids because we know how to fight dirty!”

Targan gapes as I relate the ass whooping I gave Yargef on behalf of Sharna and her kids. When I’m done, he beams at me, his eyes glowing with something so warm and bright it sends my heart racing again for a very different reason.

Targan swallows. “I could have lost you today and I realized I’ve been an idiot for not telling you how I feel.”

My heart almost explodes out of my chest when Targan’s expression becomes fierce.

“I love you, Max MacLeod, more than all the books in the world and with every fiber of my being.”

Fireworks go off inside of me.

Targan loves me!

“I love you too, you big green goof! I didn’t want to tell you since we’ve only been dating for a hot freaking minute. I didn’t want to come off as some kind of pathetic, clingy fool

who falls in love at the drop of a hat.” I snort. “Okay, I guess I was an idiot too.”

Targan chuckles, his eyes brimming with happy tears. “We were both fools. Fools in love.”

He leans down and kisses me breathless.

The world around us melts away and I revel in the bone-deep knowledge that I’m going to spend the rest of my life with Targan Wildethorne—and I couldn’t imagine anything I want more in this world.

EPILOGUE



Two months later...

*M*ax

YARA AND HARN each hold one of my hands as they lead me blindfolded into the kitchen.

“What’s going on, you guys?” I ask for the umpteenth time.

“It’s a surprise,” Harn explains, his tone more than a little exasperated.

He’s had to tell me this a few times.

“Trust us. You’re going to like our surprise,” Yara says, skipping at my side, her grip on my hand surprisingly strong.

They’d ambushed me a little while ago when I got back from visiting Ryder at the B and B. I can’t believe how fast this summer has gone by. It’s late August already, and school is about to start for the twins next week.

Everything hasn’t been sunshine and roses, of course. After all that went down with Yargef, both Ryder and I were pretty traumatized. I had nightmares for weeks. But Targan convinced me to start doing therapy with Dr. Sumarian, and things have been a lot better in the month that I’ve been seeing her. In contrast, Ryder appears to be dealing with his feelings by immersing himself in his work, as usual.

The twins took the highly censored news of their father's death with mixed sentiments. On the one hand, they both felt a sense of relief knowing the man who haunted their dreams could no longer hurt them or anyone they cared about. At the same time, however, they also had complicated and conflicting emotions. Losing a parent, even a terrible one, is rarely easy. Targan, Vash, and I all agreed to have the kids work with a grief counselor again until they'd had time to process this most recent loss. It's been going well and both Harn and Yara often make use of the private journals Targan gave them when they need to write down their feelings.

We didn't tell them much about what happened and kept my part in it out entirely. Although we plan to tell them the truth when they are older, for now, we've agreed to protect them from the horror of it all as much as possible.

I've been spending a lot of time with Ryder since he's been living in Mystic Hollow. He's thriving here. The locals all love him, and Sylvia must have spread the word because they haven't tried to overwhelm him with their enthusiasm for his work. He's even taken to doing Friday night readings of his latest work in progress at the public library. We've coordinated a donation box for folks who attend. They can give a few dollars or a used book to get entrance to the event and all proceeds go to the library.

The one thing Ryder has been surprisingly tight-lipped about is Vash DarkWing. Something happened when he flew back to check on Ryder and track down the rest of Yargef's men. He did catch them, and turned them over to the local authorities, but Ryder has kept his lips sealed about what exactly took place. I just know that he kept my best friend safe.

I'm confident Ryder will tell me the truth eventually.

In the meantime, you could power a small nuclear plant with the UST energy rolling off Ryder and Vash every time they're in a room together! My bestie is working with him on figuring out a security plan for his upcoming book tour, much to my relief. However, I suspect it's only a matter of time

before those two end up falling in love—or murdering one another. Either is possible, but I’m banking on love.

Then again, I suppose I have love on the brain.

I can’t help but grin. Why, just last night, Targan—

“We’re here!” Harn proclaims.

“You can take the blindfold off, but keep your eyes closed,” Yara orders me sternly and I fight back a smile.

I remove the blindfold and stand with my eyes closed.

“What now?”

That’s when I’m bombarded with a chorus of *Surprise!*

My eyes pop open and I find myself in the dining room, which is filled with all of our family and friends. Targan’s parents, Vash—even Ryder, who I just left, is leaning against the wall in the corner. My friends from the playground, Sylvia, Naima, and Isaac are here. Laurelis too.

I blink in amazement. “Wow. This is so cool, but it isn’t my birthday.”

That’s when Targan steps into the room carrying an enormous cake on a tray. He’s dressed in a dapper, three-piece navy suit paired with a white dress shirt and the fabulous red tie I bought him a few weeks ago.

“What’s all this?” My heart begins to pound in my chest.

He carefully sets the cake on the table in front of me and I stare at it gobsmacked. Written in wobbly cursive frosting across the cake is: “Please be our husband and Uncle Max forever.”

“We made the cake,” Yara announces proudly.

“Grandma helped us with the frosting, but we did all the rest,” Harn says. “Uncle Targan carried it for us since he’s hopeless when it comes to cooking.”

Everyone laughs and tears fill my eyes as I stare at the wavering image of the cake.

Targan takes my hands and turns me to face him before getting down on one knee. “Max MacLeod, you are the man who was meant to be my mate. From the moment you set foot in this house and put Waffles in his place, I couldn’t look away. Your brightness and warmth filled every inch of this house and stole every inch of my heart. I love you with all that I am, and I want to spend the rest of my life with you.”

“And we want you to be our uncle, just like Uncle Targan and Uncle Vash,” Yara adds with a soft smile. “Forever.”

“Yeah. ’Cuz we love you too, Uncle Max,” Harn chimes in, giving me a cheeky grin around his little tusks.

I choke back a sob of joy.

“Will you marry me, Max?” Targan asks, his amber eyes bright with love and hope.

I throw myself into his arms, tears of happiness streaming down my face and totally ruining my eyeshadow. But I don’t care.

“Yes! A thousand times yes. I love you too. You’re stuck with me for life, my Hulkalicious husband-to-be.”

He kisses me and all the adults cheer while the kids make gagging noises.

Laughing, I pull back and hold an open arm out to them both. “Come here, you two.” They rush forward and join our family group hug. “You’re never getting rid of me either. I’d be proud to be your Uncle Max. I’m part of the Wildethorne family now and forever.”

Before we realize it, Princess Peach and Waffles decide to get in on the group hug action and we’re showered with kisses from four dog heads, which sends us all into gales of happy laughter.

All our friends and family shout their congratulations, and I can hear Targan’s mom and Ryder excitedly talking about plans for our wedding.

But I just hug my family close, because I’ve found it at last, and it just doesn’t get any better than this.

“Uncle Max,” I say. “I like the sound of that.”

“Me too,” Targan murmurs. “I also like the sound of Husband Max.”

I grin. “Heck yeah.”

* * *

Get ready for Vash and Ryder’s story in *The Gargoyle and the Romance Writer: A Cozy M/M Monster Romance* (Monsters Hollow #2) **coming August 2024!**

Still haven’t read the Monsters Hollow prequel novellas? Be sure to check out *The Bogeyman and the Schoolteacher* and *The Demon and the Librarian (in the Fated Mates charity anthology)*.

* * *

If you like Chloe’s funny-sexy style, don’t forget to try out her zany sci-fi rom-com series, *Tentacular Tales*. It’s *Men in Black* meets *The Princess Bride*—but hella gay and with tentacles!

* * *

If you’d like to keep up to date with all of Chloe’s latest news, cover reveals, free short stories, and more please be sure to sign up for her newsletter.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chloe Archer writes M/M sci-fi and paranormal rom coms with laugh out loud humor because she's all about bringing the funny-sexy back. Oh, yeah!

She currently calls Minnesota home, but has lived abroad in places like Montreal, Edinburgh, and Tokyo. She's hoping to relocate to Scotland permanently in the next few years if the stars align.

Chloe is a fur mama to two adorable Yorkies, Jasper and Teddy, and she loves them in a crazy dog mama kind of way. When she isn't busy writing, she enjoys visiting friends and family, traveling, reading, binge watching movies and TV shows, and practicing her karaoke skills. She does a mean cover of Pat Benatar and Cher, or so she's been told.

For more books and updates visit:

www.chloearcher.com

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