

TREASURED

BY THE
Troll



AMI WRIGHT

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BLURB

Would you make a deal with a big, grumpy troll?

Trolls belong lurking under bridges, not in the arms of beautiful human women. That's what Hisondine tells me. He's not fooling me, though. I see the way he looks at me. I know the way he touches me. He's huge and muscled and hard as stone. But that's not the only thing about him that makes me feel safe. He treats me like I'm precious. I've been a companion to plenty of monsters, but I've never met one who makes me feel special the way he does.

Despite our size difference, it's clear he can't stop thinking about me. So I'm going to do everything I can to make him mine, even if it's only fake dating.

I should be smarter than this. I'm only doing this job to pay off my college debt. I know it's just work and I shouldn't be feeling this way, but I can't help counting the hours until I see him again. But at the end of the day, it's not real. He's a billionaire and I'm an escort.

So how do I turn this dream into a reality? Because I want the fairytale, but it's not the prince I want to take home. It's the monster!



ONE

Omeika

Plop.

The first drop of rain splashes on my nose and I stifle the curse words on the tip of my tongue.

Oh no. Not now.

It'll clear in a minute. I'm sure I can see the stars beyond the clouds on the horizon if I squint hard enough.

Another drop falls in my face, and I duck my head.

I have to hurry. I'm already late for the Monstrous Deals cocktail party. I was making good time. I was coming straight from my day job at the library with only a hasty change of clothes and makeup when my car stopped dead in the middle of the road.

The nearest gas station can't be that far. I hope that's the problem. I can't be sure, though. The gas gauge has been on the blink for months, but it could just as easily be the engine or any number of things.

I sigh. It sure feels like a long walk in the tall stilettos I have on for the party. I can't afford an Uber though. Not on top of whatever it will cost to fix my car.

Plop.

Another drop. Then another and another. This is ridiculous. I'm tempted to scurry back to my car despite the danger of being inside it while it's still half in the right hand lane and blocking traffic. The sound of an engine behind me makes me turn.

Thank God!

I can't see much beyond the bright headlights. I wave my arms wildly, my mood already lifting. The car approaches, but instead of slowing, the sleek, black Hummer plows on along the wet road. They don't even change lanes. The car sweeps past and water splashes up from the road, splattering all over

my front. As I stand and stare, cold, muddy rainwater dribbles down the cleavage of the corset top I have on. The tiny skirt that goes with it is plastered to my thighs. I'm pretty sure I just got puddle water in my heeled boot too.

For a moment I'm too astonished to do anything. Here I was expecting help had arrived, but all I get is cold water splashed all over my hopes. Literally.

"Noooooo! No, no no." I brush uselessly at the sodden skirt. "Thanks for nothing!"

I keep trudging down the road because what else can I do?

I try to ignore the water sluicing down my nose and drips off the ends of my red braids. I guess it doesn't matter that I got splashed with puddle water. I'm about to be soaked anyway. On the plus side, the rain will wash the mud off.

In front of me, the car stops.

Then, to my astonishment, it reverses up the road until it's right beside me.

I march on, determined not to let this guy get to me. He's probably come back to admire his handiwork.

One dark tinted rear window rolls down slowly and I get a glimpse of a strong jawline and broad, rugged features in the dim interior of the car.

"Get in." The voice is overly masculine. Heavy. Weighted. Like a boulder scraping on a cliff.

I blink into the car, trying to make out his features, but it's too dark.

"I said, get in. I'll give you a lift."

"Ah... no, that's OK." Straightening my spine, I keep walking down the road.

The car follows, creeping along at a snail's pace to stay beside me. OK, this is getting creepy. I'm just about to pull out my phone and dial 911. Then suddenly, the Hummer stops.

My hand freezes halfway into my purse as I get my first good look at him. The rear door opens and he unfolds himself

to his full height while I stare.

This guy isn't a snack. He's a whole damn meal.

His shoulders stretch for days. He might be as wide across as two of me, and that's saying something cause I'm not small. His features are craggy. His skin is gray with patches of lighter beige and deeper black and something that glints like gold. He's wearing a suit and I swear to God I don't even know how the tailor fitted him. Maybe trolls have specialist troll tailors.

He's a supe, of course. A wealthy, male supe to be specific.

Just the sort I'd usually try to land as a client. Ever since supernaturals came out a few years back and I started working as an escort for Monstrous Deals I've found they pay better and MD makes sure they treat workers better, too.

He reaches back into his car to retrieve an umbrella that he unfolds and holds above me.

OK, cute.

It's possible he's even going to the same party. I'm already calculating if I can turn this into a positive, when his deep, gruff voice cuts through my thoughts and rumbles down my spine in the most delicious way.

"If you won't get in, then you'll force me to walk with you all the way to wherever you're going."

The umbrella doesn't shelter him from the rain. The sight of droplets on his expensive-looking suit makes me mildly uncomfortable. I'm torn. It could be a risk getting into this stranger's car like this. Then again, it could be a risk worth taking.

Let him chase a little more. He has to feel like he's won this. I give him an appraising look. "I could have done with some help a few moments back when some crazy guy drove past and splashed half an ocean on me."

"I apologize. If it will make you feel better, I'll fire my driver immediately."

My mouth falls open. "You wouldn't!"

His rocky jaw is set and there's no hint of a smile on his lips. "I most certainly would. Shall I prove it?"

I can't judge if he's serious, but I don't want to risk that he is. I don't want that on my conscience. "You don't have to do that. It wasn't their fault."

"Ah, then you admit that it was your fault for walking along the side of the road in the dark and the rain?"

"It's what now!?" I'm so shocked I stumble. I grab hold of the only thing I can to stop myself tripping. Him.

He doesn't even move. He doesn't even grunt when I throw almost my whole weight against him. This guy is strong!

I clear my throat. "Thank you." Oh mercy. It was not a good idea to touch him. This guy's physique fires up my imagination and fills my head with dirty thoughts. Too bad he's such a grump.

"You're welcome. As I was saying, you shouldn't be walking along this road. Certainly not at this time of day dressed like that."

I pull my hand away with a scowl. "What does how I'm dressed have to do with it?"

The troll frowns at me. "Why *are* you dressed like that?"

"For your information, I'm dressed for an event."

He scoffs. "And you thought it was a nice day to walk there along the side of a dark motorway?"

I gesture behind us. "In case you hadn't noticed, my car broke down back there. I didn't start out walking."

The troll is silent for a long moment. "Then there really is no reason not to get in my car, so we can both get out of the rain."

I glance sideways at the troll. "I don't even know your name. How do I know you won't do something crazy?"

His expression is totally serious. "It's been a while since I met anyone who didn't know my name. Forgive me. I'm

Hisondine. I'm the CEO and owner of Monolith Solutions.”
He even reaches into his pocket and hands me a business card.
The type that has embossed gold lettering.

Schmick.

I hesitate. “My car is still in the road back there.”

“Get in.”

When I still don't move, he glares at me.

“Get in and I will move it.”

“You'll move...” My mouth drops open as he hands me the umbrella and strides quickly back down the road toward my car. As I squint, he reaches the car, bends his knees, grips the bumper and drags it off the road onto the shoulder. Then he straightens and returns.

“Satisfied?”

Not even close! The sight of that feat of strength does embarrassing things to my willpower, and dangerous things to my lady parts. Something I'm not prepared to admit to right now.

“Thank you.” Tossing my braids over my shoulder, I get into the car. I feel a little bad when the beautiful soft leather squeaks as I slide into the seat.

Hisondine shuts my door—more softly than I'd expected—and goes around to the roadside to get in. When he's seated beside me, he stretches out a long arm and raps the glass divider. “Thank you, Thrubne.”

Hisondine turns to me. “Where shall I drop you?”



TWO

Hisondine

As soon as I close the door on my side of the car, I realize my mistake. The heady sweet scent of the woman coils through my senses, and my fists clench with the urge to reach out and grab her. It's so much more powerful shut inside the vehicle like this with her.

How in Mother Earth's rich heart am I supposed to make sure she's safe when I can barely keep my ugly mitts off her? I turn aside, muttering my words to the window instead of looking at her beauty for longer.

"Just into the city. I have a party to get to."

"Fine. Good. Just give me the address." Anything to get her out of the car and out of harm's way. Out of my way.

"It's here." She holds out her phone opened to a map where she has a location pinned. One glance at the street name and I recognize a district just outside the city center. Calling to Thrubbne, I give her rough directions. Then I return my gaze to her phone and the big red pin once more. Beneath the pin, the location is named.

Monstrous Deals

Where have I heard that name before? "What is that? Monstrous Deals?"

She looks at me sideways, up through long black slightly smudged lashes that didn't need makeup in the first place. "You don't know?"

I frown. "Should I?"

She laughs softly. "Ah, I see. You're probably a happily mated troll. No need for Monstrous Deals." She waves the phone before tucking it away into her bra.

I try not to look. I can't help glimpsing far too much plump and rounded breast before I turn my face away again.

Shrugging out of my jacket, I shove it in her direction without looking. “You must be cold. Take this.”

I’m relieved she accepts it. When I turn back there’s slightly less of her enticing umber-brown skin on display. It’s not lost on me that her rounded thighs are almost completely bare beneath my jacket. My mind travels there before I can stop it and I find myself picturing the luscious treasure hidden beneath.

Father’s fury!

My frown deepens and I grasp at something to turn my mind from her luscious body. “What exactly is Monstrous Deals?”

“It’s an escort service, silly. For monsters.”

My head snaps back so I can stare at her. “It’s what?”

She’s laughing at me. Her white teeth flash in the dim light of the car. “An escort service.”

“Then what are you going there for?”

She gives me the look that my stupid comment deserves and despite myself, I squirm in place. “But you—you’re not. You’re human!”

She laughs again. “Well spotted! Yes, I’m human. I think all the escorts are. Monsters pay well. And they tend to have features which make them highly attractive clients.”

I fold my arms across my chest with a huff. “It’s not right.”

The laughter falls from her face. “I hope you’re not about to tell me you have some moral objection to sex work.”

“Nothing of the sort. I just don’t like it. For you.” I let out another huff, aware that my argument makes no logical sense whatsoever. Only right now the thought of someone else looking at her luscious curves and ending the night with that red lipstick staining unmentionable places of his body makes me want to grind my teeth to dust.

“Well that’s too bad, honey. I’ve got bills to pay. So unless you’re going to pay them for me, I need to work.”

I smile. “That’s an excellent idea. Give me your account details and I’ll make the payment right now. Then I’ll take you home, so you can have a hot shower.”

She laughs. Perhaps she doesn’t think I mean it. I retrieve my tablet—a phone is too small for my fingers—and open my banking app.

“You’re not serious.”

I lift one brow. “I most certainly am. Now, will a thousand dollars cover it?”

She waggles a finger in my face. “What’s that for, then? Tonight? Am I worth one thousand dollars a night? And wouldn’t you like to get some value for your money?”

My mouth goes dry. Would I like to?

Right now with that devious smile and those tempting red lips so near to mine, I can’t think of anything I want more. But that’s too dangerous. I’m too big, too cumbersome. What’s more, my passion would burn her without the ritual. All good reasons why I can’t have her. Shouldn’t even be thinking it.

Doesn’t stop me, though.

I growl. “No.”

The woman shakes her head. “Knew it. Listen, I’m sorry, but I’m going to this party to find a long-term client, not a one night job anyway. I can’t accept your money.”

I’m about to reply, when the car comes to a stop and Thrubne lowers the privacy screen. “This is the street, sir.”

I curse. Where did the time go?

Before I have time to stop her, the woman opens the door and slips out of my car. “Hey! Wait!”

She turns back and I hope for a moment she’s changed her mind. Then she thrusts my jacket through the open door. “Ooops. Nearly forgot. Thanks.”

“Tell me your name!” My voice comes out too gruff. Too hostile.

She throws me the briefest of glances over her shoulder, her red braids flicking against her back. “Omeika.”

I repeat the name under my breath and forge it into my memory. I have to hope she’s given me a name I can find her with. And that she won’t give it out to every bastard who wants to ogle the swell of her curves.

Earth Mother, a few minutes alone in the back of my car with this woman and she has my brain scrambled like a damn ogre. I’ve always taken great pride in proving trolls are not as dumb as most people believe we are. Only a few more moments with Omeika and I’m sure all my molten blood has rushed south to swell the cock that should be under my control.

“Where to now, boss? You still headed home?”

I stare through the dark at the brightly painted semi-detached building Omeika made a dash for. It looks innocent enough. I still hate knowing she’s gone there to throw herself at any monster who will pay enough to have her.

In my experience money means nothing. It’s no guarantee she’s safe. Some of the worst misogynistic self-centered pricks I know are rich bastards. It would be just their style to hire a pretty human female to have their way with and leave her used and bruised and battered, rather than worshipped as I’d like to do.

I clench my fist in my lap.

Not a human. I can’t think of any troll who ever bedded a human.

Ogre, succubus, giantess. Trolls need to choose a strong female who won’t be in danger from us. A human taken by a troll would surely not survive. They’re so small. So delightfully soft.

I swallow. I need to do something other than picture how I’d like to sit her in my lap and pull down her corset top to expose those pretty breasts for my roving hands and hungry mouth.

With a groan, I drag my mind back to Thrubbne's question. "Yes. Home. No reason to hang around here."

I'd like nothing more than to wait outside, just so I can watch who Omeika leaves with, so I can make their life a fucking misery. That would be a very bad idea, though.

I take a deep breath in and let it out as slowly as I can. "Home."

As the car pulls away from the curb, I can't help straining my neck to look back through the window at the colorful building as we drive away.

Damn it.

Damn her for being so fucking irresistible.

There's a reason when I saw her on the side of the road my first instinct was to tell my driver to keep going. If only my bloody conscience hadn't gotten the better of me. I wouldn't have been in hell tonight, already aching for her, though we barely even touched.

All night at home, I'm distracted. My fingers stray to my tablet every time I try to relax.

It only takes a few hours before I give in to it. Flicking the screen on, I bring up a search engine and type in Monstrous Deals. It's the first result I find. Whoever set up their app did a good job. It's easy to browse through their escorts and find Omeika. It gives me great satisfaction that she gave me her real name. Her working name anyway. I half thought she might have lied about that.

I spend far too long gazing wistfully at images of her in a sexy black thong and suspenders, studying the dip of her small waist and the flare of generous hips and a juicy behind that my hands flex to squeeze.

Earth Father's fiery fury, she is utter perfection. And I am a fool for allowing myself to salivate over something I can never have.



THREE

Omeika

I rush in through the door of Monstrous Deals looking like a drowned rat. I hope I didn't make a mistake turning down Hisondine's offer. I just don't have the energy to keep looking for work all the time. Not with my day job as well. This is only supposed to be a gig to pay off my college debt.

It's silly to keep thinking about him when I need to focus.

I can tell how bad I look when Sofia's green eyes go wide and her mouth drops open for a moment before she collects herself. "Meika! Are you alright?" She looks as flamboyantly boho as ever, her long ruffled skirts swishing around her ankles and bangles jangling around both wrists.

Sofia is the clairvoyant owner of MD and I've known her for years.

Forcing a bright smile, I nod. "Yup. Minor mishap, but luckily I met a very nice troll who gave me a lift." I try not to think about what I'm going to do at the end of the night when it's time to go home. One thing at a time. "I don't suppose you've got a towel handy?"

Sofia hurries off and is back in a moment with a huge fluffy white towel and a slinky black dress that looks like it might fit around one of my thighs. "This is the only dry outfit I've got on hand, but I'm sure it will fit. Look how stretchy it is." She puts both hands into the dress and pulls the material out so it stretches as wide as her arm's length.

I dab at my hair and my chest with the towel. It's no good, though. The top and skirt are completely drenched. "It might have to do."

The Monstrous Deals office is really a semi-detached townhouse with a reception room and an office. Sofia works on the ground floor, and there's private living on the first floor. The basement is a bar where humans and supes mingle and meet potential matches. These cocktail nights are a regular

part of the MD social calendar and they can be a great way to find a new client or pick up some extra work. If you bring your A game. The trouble is, every other escort working for MD also has the same idea, so you have to dress to impress.

In the small bathroom, I struggle out of my wet things and pull the borrowed dress over my head.

Sofia is right. It stretches to accommodate my curves. Just. However, since my corset top doubled as a bra, the only thing I have on beneath the dress is a tiny black thong.

Welp! Nothing for it. I guess I'm freeing the nips tonight.

At a knock on the door, I open it to find Sofia with both arms full of makeup. She pauses and looks me up and down, her long earrings jangling as she does. Then she grins. "Oh, that suits you. You need to keep that dress."

I glance sideways into the tiny mirror, but I'm too short to see anything below my neck. At least one person thinks I don't look like a total disaster anymore. With Sofia's help I'm put to rights again. As I lean forward to apply the last of the new layer of mascara, I catch myself wishing my grumpy troll could have seen me looking like this instead of something that crawled out of a puddle.

Then I scold myself. He clearly was not a potential client. I need to get my mind off him and onto the job. Since the library cut my hours and my last client ended things, I'm a bit high and dry.

Sweeping my braids over my shoulder, I emerge from the bathroom and do a little spin. "What do you think? Good as new?"

Sofia nods. "Even better! Go get 'em, sunshine!"

With my normal bounce back in my step, I descend the stairs to the Monster Bar.

The place is heaving tonight. I can hardly hear anything beyond the steady beat of the music, the hum of voices, and the sounds of Maurice and his team mixing cocktails behind the bar. I wave to the tall, blond werewolf as I make my way between tables to the back of the bar where I've already

spotted a likely target. He gives me a pointy-toothed grin when he sees where I'm headed that tells me my instincts are correct. Maurice has a great nose when it comes to finding a good match. He's almost as good as Sofia at pairing escorts with clients.

I squeeze past a petite brunette I vaguely recognize and into the dark corner where a dragon with an expensive suit, orange scales along a sharp jawline, nurses a glass of whiskey. The flash of a gold watch catches my eye when he raises the glass to take a long drink and I'm pleased when his gaze flicks to mine and the corner of his mouth lifts in a half smile. Before I can make it to his table, though, a curvy Latina with the longest hair I've seen in a while slips onto the bench seat next to the dragon and gives him a sultry smile. His attention is drawn away from me and he turns to the escort with a hungry grin.

Not this time, then.

Diverting my path, I move back toward the bar and find a spot beside a satyr with a wild mop of brown curls and filed-down horns. He takes me by surprise, since I have to look twice to even tell he's a monster. He's wearing long trousers over his furry legs and it's only when he moves that I spot the way the joint moves differently to the way a human man's legs would.

"Good evening." He lifts his drink. "Can I get you something to drink? You look like you could use it."

I smile gratefully. He's not the type I'd normally go for, but I can't afford to be too choosy. "Thank you. Champagne, please."

He buys the most expensive one they stock at Monstrous Deals, making me smile. Clearly, he's someone who's not afraid to splash his money around to make a point. I accept it gratefully along with the wink Maurice shoots me as he serves it. Then I turn to my new friend. "So I don't think I've seen you at one of these before. I'm Omeika. Nice to meet you."

His smile grows wider. "Nice to meet you, Omeika. I'm Antonio Gruffio. I'm new in town, actually. When I heard

about Monstrous Deals, I couldn't resist experiencing it for myself. Sounds too good to be true. Back in Roma, where I'm from, human girls are not so willing to associate with monsters. But here..." He shrugs and lifts his drink to clink his glass against mine. "I'm very much a fan."

I nod. "Heartstone is pretty liberal in most things. But there are still some people who'd rather judge a book by its cover."

Antonio's eyes drop visibly to my chest and he spends a long moment apparently judging me by my appearance. When he looks back up, he shows absolutely no repentance for having openly checked me out. I guess that's what we're all here for.

I keep my expression friendly, but internally I'm rolling my eyes. Do I really want a long-term client like this? A guy who thinks just because I'm offering a service in exchange for money, that everything is on the menu.

"Some books have just the right cover." He takes another long look at my boobs and then a long sip of his drink, clinking it back on the bar loudly enough that Maurice turns. "Another, please. Again, the best for me and my friend."

I slide softly from my stool while Antonio is distracted and look around the bar for someone else to talk to. Just as I'm about to make another attempt at the big shot dragon in the corner, a hand slides over my hip. I turn in surprise. "There you are, bella. I thought I had lost you in the crowd. Let me introduce you to my brother."

Not wanting to be openly rude, I let Antonio guide me across the room. At a long table, another shaggy haired satyr sits with his arm around two blonde women cuddled up next to him. On the table there are two more bottles of champagne and a large charcuterie board.

It's like that for the rest of the night. When I make an excuse and slip away to the bathroom, Antonio is waiting for me when I come out. Every time I even look at anyone else he's there with a witty comment, sliding into my conversation until whoever I'm talking to gets sick of him.

After four hours of this, I resign myself to the fact I'm not picking up anyone except him. He gives me his number and promises to book me for some event he's got coming up next month. Next month!

I could growl with frustration. I need something this week. But seeing as he's monopolized all my time this evening, he's left me with no other options. I should have taken Hisondine's generous offer and called it a night!

I give up and take the subway home, my mind on my car stranded on the motorway and the mysterious passenger of the sleek black Hummer who picked me up. Yeah, I Google. Who wouldn't?

There's no question in my mind he's a billionaire. He oozed confidence and control along with a large dose of grumpy, but I can work with that. I'd rather a grump than a guy who thinks he owns me before he even pays for the first night.

Turns out Hisondine's a multi-billionaire. Monolith Solutions is the largest construction company in the state. He also runs most of the city's toll roads and Wikipedia suspects he has his fingers in agricultural stock, too.

I should have stuck around and worked harder at landing him. I sigh. Doesn't matter. Something will come along. It always does. I just need to stick it out a few more months, maybe a year. Then I can give up escorting and dedicate my time to my passion project—an encyclopedia of monsters!



FOUR

Hisondine

“Earth Father’s fiery fury, Bubbrur! What do you mean they canceled the meeting again?”

The small gnome visibly swallows. “Ah, you see, boss. They say you’re a little...intimidating... and it’s, ah... it’s not a good look right now.”

I take a breath to cool my core. It doesn’t work, though. I’m boiling like a volcano inside, despite the fact it’s not Bubbrur’s fault the council rejected my bid for the Quest Bridge project. I’ve heard rumors they’ve been in talks with another company who thinks they can run Heartstone’s toll roads better than I can.

I know what will happen. These humans are all the same. Now I’ve been forced to come out as a supe, they don’t want a bar of me. They’ll make some excuse about how someone else could do it cheaper than I can. I’ve heard it before. Then they’ll hire some human bastard who will up his prices as soon as the first storm hits and leave the roads in such poor condition that accidents triple.

I always make sure the roads are in good condition.

It takes investment to run a road system. Particularly around here where summer storms hit hard and fast at least once a week, and big trucks from upstate tear up the roads as soon as you fix a hole.

“Make another meeting. I don’t care what you have to do. Just get them to listen. If I can get them in a room and show them the condition of the roads when I took over, I can remind them why I’m the best.”

Bubbrur tugs at his collar. “Ah... I’m not sure that’s a great idea, sir. Last time you had a face-to-face meeting with a client, they almost fainted.”

I scowl. I’d forgotten about that. So I get a little heated when someone suggests cutting toll prices and cutting back on

some of the maintenance staff I employ. Is it my fault I take safety seriously?

“Well what do you suggest?”

Bubbrur shifts nervously in place for a moment. “Maybe we need to hire someone to do your PR. Someone charismatic. Someone...” He waves his nobbly hand in front of him until I put him out of his misery.

“Someone human you mean?”

His gray, gnarled face deepens in color. “That might not be such a bad idea. Yes.”

I’ve had as much as I can take for one day. Not dignifying his idea with an answer, I point to the door. “Get out. Don’t bother me again until you’ve got some good news for me.”

The end of his long ear flicks and he opens his mouth.

Another glare from me and Bubbrur closes it again and hurries out, shutting the door behind him. I shouldn’t be such a jerk to my staff. They’re good at what they do. They have to be, or I don’t keep employing them.

I make a mental note to apologize to him later, when I’ve calmed down. I get to my feet and stomp over to the kitchenette to pour myself a glass of cold water. The hiss as I gulp it down tells me all I need to know about the state of my core. I need to cool it, or I’ll be in danger of cracking something.

I glance at the time. The sun is high in the sky. I never work well at this time of day. We trolls might not turn to stone in the sun like the old myths say, but our brains can overheat at midday. Is the air-con even on in here? No wonder I’m out of sorts. I need to go home and rest, and think about this with a fresh mind tonight.

When I get home, though, I’m too restless to relax. Instead, I head straight for the gym. Even lifting weights until my arms creak does nothing to soothe the boiling turmoil within.

I gulp down another three glasses of cool water and slam the cup on the kitchen counter, reaching for my tablet. Without conscious thought, I open the Monstrous Deals app and go straight to her profile. The profile I've viewed hundreds of times for the last four days since meeting her.

Omeika's sultry smile does nothing to cool my core, but at least it's boiling for a pleasant reason now. I palm a cock I know I should force into a flaccid state, staring at the swell of her breasts and the curve of her ass. That's an ass a troll could hold on to. Could devour before he uses it as his anchor while pouring himself into a vessel strong enough to take that fire.

That's what I need.

Didn't she say she was looking for a monster client? Why not me?

Suddenly decided, I dial the number before my core can cool and harden around my self-doubt.

A woman with a warm cadence to her voice answers after three rings. "Hello, and welcome to Monstrous Deals. How can we make your dreams come true?"

Fitting. I know exactly how. "I want Omeika."

"Omeika is a very popular choice. Let me check her next availability."

"I want Omeika tonight!" It's too late to snatch back the roar and I wait with bated breath for the woman to hang up and leave me boiling.

To my surprise, though, she doesn't hang up. "And I would love nothing more than to give you what you want, sir. Believe me. That's what we do here at Monstrous Deals. But I'm sure you understand why we take good care of our escorts, too."

That makes me pause. Makes me take a deep breath. The last thing I want to do is scare her. Make her feel like she's not safe with me. I'm glad this organization seems to be vetting clients. It makes me feel a hell of a lot better about the fact I dropped her off and didn't even wait around for her to leave the other night.

“Of course. I apologize.”

The woman on the other end of the phone makes a little clucking noise. “Are you a current client?”

“No.”

“Have you ever booked with Monstrous Deals before?”

“I have not.” I grind this out through clenched teeth to keep from growling at her again.

“I know that Omeika was looking to take on a new client, so I’m sure she’ll try to fit you in.”

I’m immediately jealous of every other bastard who gets to put his hands on her. But I push my rage into the boiling core of me and wait.

“It looks like she might have an opening tomorrow night. How’s that for luck? Now if you give me your details, I’ll rush through our security screening and, provided everything looks good, and that Omeika accepts your booking, we can arrange for her to come see you tomorrow. Does that sound OK to you?”

It sounds like too damn long to wait, but I don’t say this. “Yes. Thank you. You’ve been very helpful.”

“Perfect. If you hold the line, I’ll take down your details and we’ll see what we can do.”

When I finish giving her three forms of ID, and my address, and the length of time I want to book Omeika, I hang up and pace to my bedroom. Starting the shower and switching the temperature as cold as I dare, I climb into the lukewarm water. My skin groans and creaks with the stress of the fire within versus the cold water on the surface and I concentrate for a moment on cooling my temper. I need to calm the fuck down to make sure I’m safe for her.

The last thing I want to do is hurt or scare the woman.

Fuck. This could be a very bad idea if I can’t keep my cool. I just need to focus. I won’t have her. I just need a taste. I just need to make sure some other prick can’t have her.

I might be imagining it, but when I step out and reach for my towel, my hand seems to shake a little. I wonder again if I've made a big mistake.



I'm certain I've made a mistake when I open the door and she's standing there on my doorstep. She's dressed in a long gray clingy dress that hugs every sweet curve and emphasizes every movement of her ass. I usher her inside and into the living room.

Earth Mother, the way she moves is mesmerizing. I could watch the wobble of her ass as she walks all day long and not think of a single damn thing, except how much I want to grab her. To touch her. To put my hands and mouth all over that body that looks like the Mother herself made flesh.

She's the color of loamy soil. The rich fertile soil you get on volcanic mountains where myths come to life. I have never felt more religious than I do right now, staring at the perfection of her beauty.

Fuck! She's talking and I haven't heard a word she said.

"I said what did you have in mind? And what would you like me to call you? Is Hisondine OK?"

"Just Dine. The rest of it's a bit of a mouthful."

Her gaze drops from my face slowly down my body and all the way back up again. Her smile twitches. "Well you look like a bit of a mouthful, honey, so maybe that's appropriate. So, Dine, what did you have in mind?"

She's so different from the way she was the other night. Flirty. Joking. Of course, she is. Now, she's working. The thought hits me like an avalanche and bile rises in my throat. I don't want her to see this as work. To see *me* as work. I guess I should have thought of that before I booked her.

I pause beside the dark granite countertop of my kitchen—one made for humans before I bought the place. Suddenly I feel awkward. I don't know how this works. I don't even know

how this works when it's completely natural, two people following their instincts. Let alone with a sex worker. Why did I think I could do this? "I'm not sure this is such a good idea after all." My voice comes out all choked.

Omeika frowns.

"Listen, honey, you have me for the next two hours, so there's no rush, OK? Why don't we have something to drink and sit down and relax. Get to know each other."

She sashays forward, leaning forward to rest her elbows on the counter in front of me and giving me an enticing view down her cleavage—no doubt intended.

I clear my throat and look away. "What would you like to drink? I'm afraid I don't have much in the way of human-friendly options, but I do have wine. Do you like wine?"

"Sounds perfect."

I nod and walk mechanically to the wine fridge to retrieve it. When I bring the bottle back, she seems impressed. I fumble around the kitchen until I find wine glasses and set two on the counter. Normally, I don't drink. But tonight I'll take anything that might help soothe whatever has my veins pumping with lava and my shell hardening on its own.

I pour two glasses and hand her one.

"Thank you." She lifts the glass and I follow custom, touching mine to hers as gently as I can. Then I down the whole glass in one gulp, ignoring the burn and pouring myself another. When I've polished that off, too, my body still feels fired up, but at least the hard edge is gone from my spine.

Omeika narrows her eyes a little, but her smile stays in place. "You OK, honey? Does this make you nervous?"

"No." Why is all the wine gone? I fetch another bottle from the wine fridge, but when I turn around, she's still watching me.

"You're different tonight."

I scowl. "Different from what?" I know damn well what she's talking about. I'm as awkward as a damn earthworm in

the open air with her here in my space, but I'll never admit it.

She takes a sip of her wine. "The night we met you were so bossy, so sure of yourself. Don't you want to tell me what to do?"

I absolutely want that, but the words stick in my throat. "You're different, too."

She lifts a brow. "Oh yeah?"

"More... playful."

"Is that bad?"

I fold my arms across my chest. "I don't know."

Across the counter, a small, soft hand strokes up my arm and I flinch away.

"You don't want me to touch you?"

I shake my head. "I don't think that's a good idea." I can already feel my core boiling out of control at her nearness. I'm hard in places I'm not even sure I want to be hard in, and soft in others, all out of alignment.

She withdraws her hand. I think I've offended her. She'll probably get up and walk out any moment.

Instead, she tugs at the skirt of the dress, drawing my eyes. "What are you doing?"

She keeps pulling up the hem, tugging until the slinky gray material rises above her calves, above her knees and halfway up her thighs. "If you don't want me to touch you, what if I just touch myself for a while? Would that be OK?"

My mouth falls open, but absolutely nothing comes out. Nothing, unless you count all the breath in my lungs that vanishes at the sight of the hem slipping up her thighs to reveal a tiny black thong and more of that perfect smooth skin.

"You like that, honey?"

I nod, unable to do anything else.

She smiles. The hem of the dress skims higher, revealing a gently curved belly and the dip of a small waist. Earth

Mother's blessing, she's not—

She crosses her arms over her body and draws the dress the rest of the way over her head, holding it out and dropping it to the floor beside her. My heart lurches in my core.

I can't touch her. I'll lose control.

But I can't bring myself to stop her. She slides a hand down her belly and over her panties, cupping her mound and watching me with hooded eyes.



FIVE

Omeika

Dine devours me with his eyes as I rub gently over my panties already damp. Something about this feels so wicked. Don't get me wrong. I like this job. I wouldn't do it otherwise. But something about just touching myself, putting on a show for him feels decadent.

A low rumble deep in his broad chest makes an insistent throb start up in my pussy. I massage more firmly over the damp fabric. Soon that's not enough. I slide my panties over my hips and drop them to the floor on top of my dress, enjoying the way Dine's red eyes glow brighter as I do.

Since the other night, I haven't been able to stop thinking about what it would be like to have that deep gravelly voice commanding me. Or his impossibly large hands on me.

I'm a little bit surprised to be honest. He caught me by surprise the night we met. In those first minutes, I didn't have on the mask I wear at events like the cocktail party when I'm trying to charm a potential client. But maybe Dine doesn't need that from me.

I can't describe how freeing that feels.

Instead of worrying about what he wants, I do what *I* want. Walking around to join him in the kitchen, I brace myself with my hands and hop up so my bare ass is on his fancy granite counter. Then I spread my legs to let him look.

He doesn't disappoint.

His mouth drops open and his gaze shoots straight to my flushed, wet pussy, which I spread open wider for him with my fingers.

He groans and suddenly two large hands cage me in. The heat of his skin radiates to my outer thighs even though we're not touching. I'm not surprised his skin is hot. The inferno blazing in those red eyes makes me wonder if what I've heard is true—if trolls really have a molten core.

“Keep going.”

Metal on grindstone, his voice rumbles through me and moves my hand before I’ve consciously decided. I circle my aching clit, moaning at the feeling, loving the way he’s anticipated my desire.

“Faster.”

Instead of circles, I switch to making hasty swipes backward and forward across my clit. My body bucks. Pleasure edges on pain, but I don’t care. Normally, I’d never touch my clit so directly. I’d stimulate around it, teasing and building toward my climax slowly.

Not this time.

This time I’m rushing headlong toward an orgasm that feels like it’s chasing me, instead of the other way around. This time I want direct stimulation, rough and consuming and punishing, as if his big firm hands are the ones touching me and bringing me to the height of pleasure.

I gasp when he bends lower. His breath stutters over my wet pussy, adding to the sensation.

“Don’t stop.”

As if I could! I move my hand frantically. The wet sounds I’m making only seem to heighten his enjoyment. Lord knows I don’t care. I love it.

My pussy is dripping for him. Breath coming fast and hard, my muscles clench.

God, I haven’t come so hard in ages.

It takes me forcefully.

My belly tightens. My mouth parts on some incoherent noise. Sweetness pulses from my core, right through my body, and curls my toes, making me weak.

By the time it’s over, my legs are shaking and sweat dampens the back of my neck.

I blink into fiery red eyes for one long moment. Then something in him snaps. “Get out!”

I giggle, still come-drunk on pleasure. “What?”

“Get out! Now!”

Dine pushes away from the bench, scrubbing both hands over his face, and lets loose a roar I’m too stunned to interpret.

“Did I do something wrong?”

He only roars again, pacing. He’s not looking at me.

“Dine?”

Sliding from the counter, I hastily gather my things. I’m just wondering if I should call the MD security team who are always standing by to swoop in if a job goes wrong, when Dine looks up. “Just get out before I do something I’ll regret!”

Clutching my purse to my chest, I run from the room, too shaken to respond. Not once in the four years I’ve been doing this have I ever had a client respond like that.

In the vestibule, I slip on my heels and hurry out the door, fumbling with my phone to check out of the job, and let the MD team know I’m safe.

On the commute home, I keep running the booking through my head over and over. I can’t deny Hisondine made me feel more alive than I’ve felt in months. More turned on than a client has ever made me.

His outburst was so unexpected. He didn’t touch me. Didn’t even look like he was going to, but the pain and anger in his voice left me shaken. That and the threat behind his words. Would he really harm me? Trolls have a bad reputation. They’re strong, sure. Almost unstoppable if they have a mind to destroy something. But violent? When I was researching for my book, I looked into crime rates associated with monsters. Rates linked to trolls are much lower than some other types of monsters. Then again, who knows whether any of the statistics can be believed? I’m almost certain they’re skewed by anti-supes haters who report a supernatural who looks at them the wrong way whenever they get the chance.

The last thing Dine said to me was ‘Get out before I do something I regret.’ Was he worried about losing control?

What has made my big grump so afraid of hurting others that he can't take pleasure for himself. I sit on the subway and stare out the window into the darkness, wishing I could ask him. Then I remember the app!

Fishing my phone from my purse, I open the Monstrous Deals app and send a message, praying he'll read it. At this stage, I don't know how I'm going to sleep without at least some kind of answer to my question. If I'm honest, what I really want is the chance to see him again. I just don't know if that's safe.

Omeika: hey, I'm really sorry if I upset you

A tick appears almost instantly, letting me know Dine has read my message. A moment later three dots appear and I wait in agony for him to type his response.

The dots disappear, appear again, then disappear. Finally, a reply pops up just when I'm about to give up and close the app.

Hisonidine: It's my fault. I should never have made the booking

Omeika: why not? I had a good time. I hope you did too, at least I hope you liked some of it. I haven't come that hard in ages

Hisonidine: you haven't?

A smile lifts the corner of my mouth.

Omeika: no. In fact I'm sure I should feel guilty about the fact that you paid me for that!

Hisonidine: I could have paid ten times what I paid tonight and it would be worth every dollar. Believe me. It wasn't you

Well, now I'm genuinely smiling, grinning stupidly to myself in the busy train car.

Omeika: so does that mean you might let me do that again sometime?

I haven't decided whether that's smart, but I can't help asking anyway.

Hisondine: absolutely not.

My smile instantly turns into a frown.

*Omeika: *crying* that's very cruel. To make me come that hard and then tell me I never get to see you again*

The three dots are back, dancing on and off the screen. Clearly, he's wrestling with whatever he wants to say. I find it surprisingly sweet to think that.

Finally:

Hisondine: it's not safe for me to book you again. I'm afraid of what I'll do if I have your luscious little pussy laid out for me again like that

I chew at my lip. I guess I was right. He is worried about hurting me, but just the fact that he's worried about it makes me as sure as I can be he won't. Still, it seems like I need to build a little trust with him. An idea occurs to me.

Omeika: what if I touched myself for you again, but next time we do it online?

Hisondine: you would do that?

I laugh. The lady sitting next to me glances sideways at me, but I ignore her.

Omeika: of course! If you'd like that. And you won't have to worry about keeping me safe

Hisondine: when?

I grin. It's more than the satisfaction of retaining a client, though Lord knows I should be more worried about that. I'm itching to see if I can get him to open up to me a little more, so I can find out what is bothering him so much.

Omeika: when would you like to?

Hisondine: tomorrow?

The train stops and I almost miss my station, I'm so wrapped up in our chat. I leap up and hurry off just in time, almost walking into someone as I navigate toward the escalator while texting.

Omeika: I'd love to. Just send the booking request through
xx

Two minutes later a notification pops up with a new booking request and I hit accept. I'm floating as I walk from the metro to my apartment, despite the fact that I still haven't fixed my car and I've got a meeting I've been dreading tomorrow morning.

I'm asleep almost as soon as my head hits the pillow and my dreams are filled with blazing red eyes and a gravelly voice that stirs my core.



SIX

Hisondine

She's a damned genius!

I can't believe I've never thought of it before. Of course I've watched porn and lusted over females before. I've met the occasional female in person who could turn my head and make me want her.

I've never met one I wanted so ferociously. There's only one explanation for it. She's my *konu*. My woman. There are no female trolls. Centuries ago, my people used to imprint on a female from another race, steal her, and rut her. Nine times out of ten that would result in the death of that female. Either because the ritual wasn't performed, or because the troll himself was too rough with her, or her body was simply too small to take him.

A pained hiss escapes my lips. The thought of hurting Omeika that way is intolerable.

That's why I need to keep my big ugly mitts off her. I should have seen it straight away. I'm only grateful I didn't harm her when the need to rut took me while she was laid out before me.

That's why I can't do that with her again. Not face to face. But this? This is the perfect solution.

I don't think I sleep at all that night. Instead, I pace my home, impatient for the hours to tick by until I can see her again. I won't be able to smell her. Won't be able to taste her in the air as she spreads herself open for me. That's OK. I think the taste of her is forged into my memory. I'll savor that while I watch her come apart for me.

I spend far too long considering where to take the call when it happens. Should I take it in my bedroom? Is that too intimate? Perhaps that breaks some boundary for escorts that I'm not aware of.

Should I take the call in my living room? Is that sexy enough?

Then I realize, of course, the angst is pointless. There's no need for me to even turn on my camera. She doesn't want to look at me. I'm paying her to show herself to me, but she'd probably prefer it if I didn't return the favor.

I don't know how I function that day. Work goes past in a blur of angry orders to my staff and frustrating phone calls and meetings I couldn't put off.

Two minutes before eight o'clock, I settle on my custom-made chair in the living room, my tablet tucked into the stand I use for reading. The damn thing buzzes and I nearly jump out of the chair, then I fumble it and almost drop it until I see it's Bubbrur. Scowling, I dismiss the call.

I'm not nervous. I'm the paying customer here. I'm just edgy because I haven't slept.

I set the tablet carefully in the stand again and call Omeika.

She answers moments later and my internal temperature instantly goes up about a hundred degrees when I see what she's wearing. She has on a little red bra and a tiny thong, with a suspender belt that emphasizes the dip of her waist and the swell of her generous thighs.

She smiles and my mouth instantly waters with the desire to taste her. So much so I can't find the words to greet her.

Luckily, she does. "Hi. Right on time. But I can't see you. Have you got your camera switched on?"

I swallow thickly, forcing the words to form on a tongue that feels like it has hardened into stone. "No. I thought it would be better that way."

"Oh." Her mouth turns down at the edges until she turns it into another smile. "Don't you want me to look at you while I come for you? Don't you want me to think about those big hands on my little body?"

As she says this, she slides her own hands up her belly to cup her breasts over the bra and my chest near implodes.

“Y-yes. No! I don’t know. Is that what you want?”

“Mhm.” Her hands squeeze and release her breasts, kneading at their round fullness and drifting up to her neck, then back down to her belly again.

I watch, mesmerized.

Either she is a very good actress, or she really wants to look at me while she touches herself. Maybe she needs to get a sense of how much I’m enjoying myself. She seems like the type to take pride in her work.

That must be it.

I shake my head even as I reach for the button to switch on my camera. “Happy now?” I avoid looking at the tiny image of my own face and concentrate on her.

“Mmm yes. Hi.” She smiles. “Now tell me, where do you want me? You want me on the bed, sugar?”

Where do I want her? Here in my apartment. In my lap, using me for her pleasure. There’s no way she could use this monstrous cock for that, though. It would break her in half. “Yes. On the bed.”

She doesn’t complain about my gruff words, only holds the phone up so I can see her walking to her bedroom. Then she gives me a look around the room. I drink in every tiny detail like the gifts they are. Her room is full of books. That’s the first thing I notice. Decorative shelves hang around her bed with stacks of books piled on top. Plants with trailing leaves hang down like the hair that trails over her pretty shoulders. Everything is decorated in rich, earthy colors. Browns and reds and beige with wooden touches.

Omeika props the phone up on something—I imagine it’s her nightstand—sliding back onto the bed and spreading her legs.

Earth Mother’s bounty! The way the underwear cuts into her juicy pussy lips leaves part of each plump fold exposed! I

cannot take my eyes away from it. From her! She runs a hand slowly up her thigh and I feel every inch she caresses, like she's touching me instead.

My body is alive with sensation. My core is boiling. I tug at my shirt and when I can't wrench the thing over my head, I tear it off instead. Unfastening my fly and releasing my cock, I let it harden with a nudge of innate magic, just to relieve some of the tension.

Omeika's smile grows and she makes another low moan that shoots heat up my spine. I'll give it to her, she's a very good actress.

"That's it, sugar. Touch yourself for me while I put on a show for you."

With a growl, I wrap my fist around my shaft and do just that. It feels so good it's hard to keep control over my movements to make sure I don't embarrass myself. I grit my teeth and force myself to stroke it nice and slow.

Omeika unfastens something at the crotch of her panties and suddenly her gorgeous pussy is bared for me. I lean forward, staring into the screen that feels too small. If I were there, I'd be able to smell her. Inhale that luscious flavor that sits somewhere between rich earth and early spring cherries. When she runs her fingers through her folds, it's obvious how wet she is. I can't help the groan that tears from me when she does it again and again, and I match her pace with the movement of my fist over my aching cock.

"Tell me what you want to see." Her voice is low and breathy and I don't miss the way it hitches each time she reaches the apex of her cunt. She likes that spot. That's the spot I watched her rub when she laid herself out for me like a meal on my kitchen counter.

My cock twitches in my palm, reminding me of the way I can't go into that room now without thinking of all the nasty things I'd like to do to her if I ever got the chance.

"I want your pleasure." I shudder as a spike of my own tightens my balls. "I want you to come so I can imagine you

coming on my hand, or my tongue.”

“Mmm.” She moans again and I recognize the swift, sure movement that brought her to climax last time I watched.

“That’s it. That’s what I want.”

Omeika rubs her slick pussy and I revel in the erotic sounds. I study the way her eyes flutter closed and her mouth parts. “Your thick fingers would feel so good inside me.” To make her point, she thrusts two fingers deep inside her pussy and I groan.

“You’d feel so good right here. I bet it would feel good if you let me have your cock, too.”

I shake my head. Not for her, it wouldn’t.

Omeika has her eyes closed still, so she misses the movement. Rather than break the spell, I try to concentrate on her building orgasm. “Rub that spot for me, treasure. Forget my cock. It’s your pleasure I’m after.”

She draws wet fingers from her pussy and spreads that honey over her little nub. She sucks in a breath. Then she opens her eyes, biting on her lip, and looks straight at me while she goes back to rubbing just like I told her.

The look cuts straight through my rocky shell and wraps a fist around my heart inside my molten core. Or perhaps that’s my balls she has captive. They tighten and my fist clenches around my throbbing shaft.

“Is this good, sugar? Is this what you wanted?”

I growl. “Yes.” The word doesn’t feel sufficient. This is *everything*.

Omeika throws back her head and moans long and loud. Her hand speeds up. “Oh, I’m close. I’m going to come, baby.”

My own climax is close, too. The head of my cock is slick with hot moisture. It dribbles over my knuckles as I pump faster and harder. “Could you come more than once if I wasn’t watching?”

She laughs a breathless laugh. “Always.”

“Then don’t you stop now. Forget about me. I want you to lose yourself in it. Take as much pleasure as you want. It still won’t be as much as you deserve.”

With a gasp, she closes her eyes again, nodding her head. Her brows furrow. Her mouth parts, and then her toes curl as it takes her over. I don’t even need the long low moan she lets out or the strangled words as she tries to tell me. I see her body convulsing as the orgasm overtakes her. And Mother’s bounty, she is beautiful!

Her legs jerk and she falls back onto the bed as her cunt floods with moisture. What a fucking waste. If I was there, I would bury my face in her and make sure she coated me with it.

She slows for a minute. Her chest rises and falls on a long sigh. Then my perfect little human begins again, rubbing those magic little circles around her nub and squeezing her legs around her hand as she moans. *Good girl.*

Sometime during all of this, I stopped stroking my cock. I had to. Watching her come for me while I touched it would have made me spill.

Though it costs me more than I’d like to admit, I force myself to speak. “Switch off, if you want to. Don’t worry about me.”

She lifts her head and blinks up at me through the camera. “No, sugar. I want you to come with me this time.”

Fuuuuck!

My hand moves of its own accord. I couldn’t stop it if I tried. Soon I’m pumping my cock furiously, unable to drag my eyes from that luscious pussy as she rubs and strokes and coaxes another orgasm for me. She tips over the edge moments before I do. I’m certain I feel her coming for me when her belly clenches and her toes curl.

Pleasure shoots up my spine and collects in the palm of my hand as hot spend floods from me. My cock pulses in time with the spasms of her cunt as she milks it for both of us.

I'm gasping when she sits up and brushes the hair from her sweaty face. "Baby, did you come?"

I nod, not trusting my voice.

"Mmm, that felt so good."

"It did?"

She laughs. "Oh shit, are you kidding? Didn't you see how hard I came?"

I'm breathless as she sits, smiling into the camera like she's sitting right in front of me. I just want to gather her into my arms and cradle her close. I want to pet her and tell her how perfect she is.

Of course my come would burn her. She hasn't been through the ritual. Fuck, I can't think about that with her laid out for me looking like that.

My come steams gently on my belly reminding me I should clean up. I don't want to end the call, though.

"Baby, I had such a good time. I'm going to go clean up now, but I hope we get to do this again."

I hardly notice the sell as she lifts the camera, still smiling, and walks me to the bathroom with her. I can't blame her for doing her job.

"I'd like that." It's the honest truth. I'd like nothing more than to book her every night. To tell her never to take another client. I want all her orgasms to belong to me.

I smile with satisfaction at the thought perhaps she doesn't come with her other clients. Then I feel like an asshole, because I'd never deny her anything, pleasure included.

"When can I see you again?"

She grins as she reaches into the shower to switch on the water and I almost open my mouth to ask if I can watch that, too. Internally, I scold myself. She probably wants some privacy. "How soon do you want to?"

"Tomorrow night?"

To her credit, her smile doesn't even falter. She just nods. "Perfect. Same time?"

"Yes." I fumble with the words for a moment, but I need her to know how amazing she is. "Omeika you were perfect. Fucking perfect. I'd give anything to see you just like that every night."

"Aw, sugar, that's so sweet of you. You better stop or you'll get me all restless again!"

I mumble a goodbye and end the call, mortified by my lack of sophistication. She doesn't need me gushing over her. No matter how much she laughed and sighed and came for me, I have to remember that for her it's work. Nevermind that I'm almost certain I'll be replaying the last half an hour over and over in my head for weeks.

At least she accepts the booking request I send through moments later. She's mine for one more night. What can a beast like me hope for beyond that?



SEVEN

Omeika

I end the call and step into the shower, still grinning from ear to ear. My chest is tight with sweetness, my limbs are shakier than they have a right to be, and I feel like laughing.

The money from tonight's job is already sitting in my bank account, but if I'm honest, it's more than that. I had fun tonight. Actually had fun. When Dine suggested ending the call and playing by myself, there wasn't a part of me even tempted.

Girl, you gotta be smarter than that!

I can scold myself all I want. It doesn't change the fact I like him. Which is dangerous. Liking leads to more. That's what everybody says. Everyone who's been working for MD as long as I have. Trouble is, I've seen girls find genuine happiness. I know a girl who found a mate—honest to goodness mate—through MD. It can happen. I just shouldn't assume it's going to happen to me.

After I have a long shower and pamper myself a bit, I sit up watching Gossip Girl and try to melt my mind with trash rather than give in to the things I'm feeling. It doesn't work, of course. When I slip into bed, I catch myself picturing Dine's scowling face as he says the sweetest things. I've been called sexy and gorgeous and stunning. I don't think anyone's ever called me perfect. The fact he clearly didn't want to admit it only makes it more endearing. I wonder what he'd be like when you get to know him and his walls come down.



I'm sitting in my auntie's salon, Satin Styles, the next morning trying to sip my takeaway coffee while she touches up the extensions on my braids.

“So, you still working up at the library? Sasha said you haven't been there the last few Fridays she's been.”

I sigh. With the distractions of the last few nights video calling with Dine, I'd pushed the drama at my day job to the back of my mind. I shouldn't be surprised Auntie Alaya found out I've had my days cut. There's no keeping anything from her. I swear to God she knows someone who knows everyone in Heartstone. "Yeah. For now."

She yanks the next one particularly hard. "What you mean for now, girl? Didn't you get that big college debt because you had to have that job?"

"Yeah, I know. I just never thought it'd be so political."

"They still giving you grief about the sex books?"

I grunt, finally managing a sip of my coffee. Saturdays once a month getting my hair done is usually my version of therapy, but I don't want to talk about work at the library today. The news about my other job feels like it's about to burst a hole in my chest. "Did I tell you I found a new client?"

Auntie sniffs. "Go on. Tell me about him. But don't think I've forgotten about the library, because I haven't."

Don't I know it? She'll bring it up again before she's done with me. "Well this new client of mine"—I attempt to steer the conversation back in the direction I want—"is a real sweetheart. In fact, yesterday he had flowers sent to my apartment."

I'm grinning to myself, remembering the note attached to the big bunch of red roses: *Couldn't stop myself thinking of you when I saw these, so I figured you should have them. They aren't as beautiful as you, but it's the best I can do. Forgive me.*

"I didn't think you gave out your address." Auntie tugs hard on the next braid and I wince.

"I don't, but clients can send gifts through the app. I thought it was nice."

"Mhm." She doesn't say anything for several minutes, just keeps working.

After a while, I can't stand the silence anymore. "What?"

She stops and sighs, rubbing my scalp with the tips of her fingers and dropping her voice low. “Meika, baby, you know I don’t care what you do, if it makes you happy. But you always wanted to work with books. You love books. Don’t give that up for a few years of fun with these rich guys who don’t really see you for everything that you are. Trust me. Guys are fun, but these guys won’t be there when you want to start a family. They won’t be there when you get sick or when you have a bad day. That’s not how it works, is it?”

I drop my eyes to my red painted toenails peeping out of my wedges, rather than meet her concerned expression in the mirror. “No. You’re right. I just don’t know if the reality of working for the state library is what I had in mind when I was in college. I don’t want to be arguing with my boss and causing problems, but I can’t keep my mouth shut about it either.”

Auntie gives my scalp an extra little rub, then goes back to the last few braids. “I know, baby. You’re not a troublemaker. But you have to stand up for what you believe in. That’s how your mama raised you.”

“Don’t tell her I got my hours cut. She’ll only worry.”

“Your secret’s safe with me.”

We don’t talk for a while. I give it about a week until my ma finds out. She’s even better at extracting information from people than her younger sister. I know she’ll worry. I’m worried about it myself. Now my hours have been cut, I should probably take on another client from Monstrous Deals.

Only, I’ve been holding off.

It’s not unusual for me to have more than one client. I normally see a few monsters just to keep things interesting and make each date feel fresh. But since I met Dine, I haven’t truly looked for anyone new. It’s foolish. The more I think about it, the madder I get with myself.

I’m going to look harder tonight.

Right after our eight o’clock date, that is.

Maybe with a little convincing, Dine would book up all my time and I won't have to look for anyone else.

As if she's reading my thoughts, Auntie tugs on a braid and I look up to meet her too-knowing gaze in the mirror.

"Just be careful, Meika."

I smile. "Yeah. Always."

That doesn't stop me dreaming about him all morning.

As I wave my auntie goodbye and promise to call my ma, my phone buzzes in my hand.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Meika. It's Sofia here." The warm voice of the Monstrous Deals owner is a little less perky than usual.

"Hi Sofia. What's up?"

"Sorry to call like this, but Kirsten had to cancel her bookings this week, and I'm looking for someone who could take some of them for me."

I bite my lip. Wasn't I just thinking I could consider some other clients? "Yeah, I might be able to help. When? What's the booking?"

"Oh thanks, Meika. That would be amazing. I've already contacted the client for tomorrow night, and he says he doesn't mind an alternative. In fact, he said he met you at the cocktail party a few weeks ago. His name is Antonio Gruffio, one of the three satyr brothers who are new in town. He's very friendly. I'm sure you two would get along."

I nod. I remember him. I'm not excited about taking his booking, but it could be worse. "What does he want?"

"Dinner and back to his place afterward. I checked his wishlist and he's not into anything that you don't offer."

I sigh. "Yeah. Why not? I do need the work."

"I remember you said you were looking for more. I hope this one works out well for you. Seems like the sort who'd be interested in becoming a repeat client."

“Thanks. Did Kirsten say why she canceled? Is everything alright?” I’ve known Kirsten for a few years now. We’re not close or anything, but I know sometimes her mom needs help to look after her dad.

“Oh.” Sofia pauses for a moment and an uncomfortable prickle starts up on the back of my neck. I’m walking past a busy intersection, so I bring my free hand up to cover my ear, making sure I’m not missing what she’s saying.

“Sofia? You still there?”

“Yeah. Maybe if you get a chance you could check in on Kirsten this week for me? That werewolf client she’d been seeing since last year found his fated mate last week. Canceled all his bookings and ended contact. You know how it is.”

I nod, dumbly. I know all too well. Kirsten was pretty attached. Anyone could see that. She might not have stopped taking other bookings, but that doesn’t mean she hadn’t grown attached. I’d heard her ask other girls more than once about werewolf mating claims. I shake my head. “That’s a shame. I’ll definitely send her a message this week.”

“Thank you. I think she’ll be fine, but she said she couldn’t face seeing any clients right now.”

I end the call. My mood matches the drab tiles of the subway tiles as I wait for my train.

I’ve been stupid. I let myself get caught up in something that’s not real. This is a timely reminder to be more careful. Instead of letting myself think of Dine on the trip home, I bring up the Monstrous Deals app and type out a message to Antonio.

Omeika: hey, happy to take your booking for tomorrow night. Is there anything you’d like me to wear or bring with me?



EIGHT

Hisondine

Booked?

The fuck?! Who would dare book my woman? It must be some kind of error. She said nothing to me about taking any other clients. Yet when I refresh the page and try again to make a booking for tomorrow night, the same message pops up. The same thing happens when I try for tonight.

I scowl.

Intolerable.

I dial the number without even thinking twice. The same pleasant female voice as before answers. “Good evening. Welcome to Monstrous Deals. How can we make your dreams come true?”

“There’s been an error. With your app.”

“Oh, I do apologize. Can you let me know what the error is, and I’ll do my best to have it corrected as soon as possible, sir?”

“It says Omeika is booked, but that’s impossible.”

“Ah...” After a pause, she makes a quiet humming noise I don’t like the sound of. “It seems there’s no error. I can see here that she is booked out tonight and she’s marked the following night as unavailable. Would you care to make a booking for Tuesday night? I can see here that’s free.”

“Tuesday?! How am I supposed to go that long without seeing her?” I roar the words so loudly they echo off the walls of my minimally furnished office. Bubbrur taps on the door and walks in with an anxious look on his face. “Is there something you need help with, sir?”

“No,” I bellow. Then reconsider. “Yes. Wait.”

Returning my attention to the woman on the phone still trying to pacify me, I snarl, “Please book any remaining times for me for the foreseeable future. I’ll pay double the normal

price, if you'll make sure she doesn't receive bookings from anyone but me."

There's that damned noise again. "I'm very sorry, sir, but that's not how Monstrous Deals does business. If you'd like to negotiate a special contract with one of our workers, that can be arranged, but we have certain measures we take for their protection. I'm sure you understand. And if you don't, I'm afraid we'll no longer be able to accept your business."

I grind my teeth and bite back the retort to her veiled threat. I do not want to lose access to Omeika.

"Very well. Will you *request* that she considers a special contract with me? And in the meantime, I want the next five times reserved for me. If she accepts, of course." The last is hissed through gritted teeth. It's a fucking outrage she isn't available today.

"I'm certain we can find an arrangement that makes everyone happy," the woman says smoothly. "After all, we're in the business of making dreams come true. I'll be in touch as soon as I know more."

"Thank you." When I hang up, Bubbrur is still standing there fidgeting from one wide flat foot to the other by the door. I attempt to cool my core.

"I need you to find Omeika."

"The escort?" He blinks sheepishly at me and beneath my desk I clench my fists on my lap.

"Yes, the escort. I don't care what you have to do, or who you have to bribe, just find me an address or a phone number. Today. Got it?"

"Ah... yes, sir. Is there anything else?"

"No. Just make sure you get it done. And offload any other duties to someone else until you do."

"Yes, sir."

"Thank you."

He trots off and I sink back into my chair with a sigh. He's never let me down before. Doesn't matter how impossible the task. I breathe a little easier knowing by evening, I should have a way of contacting her. Then, I just need to make sure she sees reason and accepts my deal. I could kick myself for making the assumption she wasn't seeing anyone else. From today, I'll make it clear she's mine. I'll pay whatever it takes to make it so.



Five hours later, long after he should have finished for the day, a very nervous Bubbrur returns to my office and clears his throat. "I um... I have the address you requested, sir."

"Very good. What is it?"

He squirms and I sigh, putting aside the contract I was reading to give him my full attention.

"What's wrong?"

"You're not going to like it."

"You know what I like even less? This pussy footing around. Out with it."

Bubbrur winces. "The best I could do was get a trace on her phone. I don't have an address exactly, more like a current location."

"Even better." I push to my feet, crashing my chair against the wall, but I pay no attention. "Cancel the video meeting with Tokyo tonight and wipe my schedule for tomorrow, too."

"Ah, sir... I don't think it's a good idea..."

"I don't care what you think, Bubbrur. This is necessary. Now give me that location."

"Sir, it's a restaurant. She's probably meeting friends, or out on a date."

"The hell she is!" I snatch his phone from his hands and glare down at the location. "Get my car ready."

“Yes, sir.” The look he gives me is so dejected I make a mental note to add a bonus gemstone to his pay this fortnight. I don’t have time to stay and fuss over him, though. I’ll be damned if I’m standing around here playing nice with my PA while my woman is out with somebody else. It makes absolutely no difference she’s not really mine. According to my heart, she is. According to other organs is perhaps a better description. Whatever it is, it is absolutely imperative I find her. I try not to think too hard about what I’ll do when I have.



NINE

Omeika

“She’ll have the oysters, followed by the beef fillet with truffled jus.”

Antonio talks over me and what I was saying goes unheard by the waiter, who is smart enough to know who’s paying the bill.

I sigh and take a sip of the merlot I also would not have ordered, and remind myself again this isn’t a real date. This is work. Much as I’ve let myself be charmed by the last few weeks with Dine, I can’t forget that.

I haven’t stopped thinking about Dine since I arrived. It doesn’t help that everything Antonio does has me secretly fuming. It’s not like he’s being a complete jerk or anything, either. He’s just not invested in what I want. Why should he be? This date is for his enjoyment. Because it gives him a kick to be seen with me, or because he wants to impress someone, or lord knows what. He’s paying, and I’m here to please. I need to stop rolling my eyes and get with the program.

“Did I tell you that my brother exports truffles all around the world?”

Only about a hundred times. He can’t stop boasting about all the business ventures he and his family own.

“Oh, really?” I lean my chin on my hand, feigning interest. “Does he use dogs or pigs to find the truffles?”

“Dogs.” Antonio smiles. “Pigs are traditional, but dogs are smarter. They find more, no?”

I smile and lift my glass when he raises his to toast his brother’s success.

Antonio starts talking about the perfect weather conditions for cultivating large truffles, so I zone out, wishing I could slip my phone out of my purse and check the Monstrous Deals app to see if I have a message from Dine. I feel bad for accepting a

booking with another client before discussing it with him. Which is ridiculous. He knows I'm an escort. It's not like I'm his girlfriend or anything.

It doesn't stop me from comparing the way he looks at me, with palpable desperation in his fiery eyes, to the way Antonio regards me coolly over the rim of his wineglass, as if I'm another item in his collection. He asked me when he picked me up if he could take me back to his place to show me his garage of sports and vintage cars. I thought at first it was just a polite way of letting me know he requires a full-service date tonight, but the more we talk, the more I think he really does want to show off to me. He can't help himself, it seems.

As the waiter returns with a top up for our wine, Antonio spots him looking at the expensive gold watch on his wrist and launches into a monologue on where he got it, and how it was a special present from a Swiss ambassador he met once at some function.

Holding in my yawn, I drift my gaze across the restaurant. I have the perfect view to catch the moment the poor maitre'd is almost swept off her feet by seven foot of rocky muscled troll as Dine charges in.

His blazing red eyes lock on mine almost instantly and, though it might be my imagination, I swear his nostrils flare. He ignores the maitre'd, the table of businessmen he bumps, and the waiter who tries to flag him down as he strides straight across the room, right to where I'm sitting. Antonio and our waiter pause mid-conversation to stare up at the hulking figure of Dine towering over us. He doesn't look at anyone except me.

"What are you doing here?" I whisper the words, but they still carry across the restaurant since the noise died and people turned to look, sensing something brewing.

"What are *you* doing here?" He scowls.

I can't help laughing. Before tonight I wouldn't have said it was possible for a massive troll to pout, but I can't think of a better way to describe his expression. I gesture to Antonio, who is leaning back in his chair, enjoying the show.

“I’m on a date. Which is why the app says I’m unavailable. What about you? Are you meeting someone?”

“Yes.” He turns, reaches out one long arm and snatches an empty chair from a nearby table and sits down next to me. The chair gives an alarming creak and Antonio’s expression turns from smug to outraged.

“Scusi, you can’t just sit down at my table.” He turns to the waiter, who looks distinctly uncomfortable. “Can’t you do something about this?”

Smothering another laugh, I make a shooing gesture at Dine. “Go! I’ll call you when I get home, OK?”

“Like hell you will!” Antonio stands, glaring at Dine who simply folds his massive arms across his chest. The sight is ridiculous. Antonio isn’t a particularly short guy, but Dine is so large he hardly needs to look up, even while he’s seated and Antonio is standing.

“She’s mine tonight. I’ve paid. It’s done. Now kindly make yourself scarce,” Antonio says.

“Ah, if everyone would please calm down.” The poor waiter flaps his arms around uselessly. No one is paying any attention to him.

I round on Antonio. “You haven’t bought me. I’m not a piece of meat. It doesn’t work like that.”

He laughs incredulously. “Scusi, bella, but is that not exactly how it works?”

I feel, rather than see Dine stand behind me. His looming presence is a spike of energy all up and down my spine. “Nobody buys her.”

I turn. Dine is boiling with rage. I raise my hands and take a step closer in an effort to placate him. I’m yanked around again. Antonio’s grip on my shoulder is surprisingly strong. “You don’t go to him.”

“And you don’t touch her!” Dine roars. “Not if she doesn’t want to be touched. Not unless you want me to end you right here, right now.” In the resounding silence, the whole

restaurant just stares at us. I don't even care. Low in my belly, I tingle from the deadly tone in Dine's words and him standing up for me like that. I don't need it, but I sure as hell don't hate it.

In a far softer tone, Dine says to me, "Did you want to be touched by him?"

I swallow. I know I should say I don't mind, but it's not true. In this moment, there's nothing I want less.

Before I can answer, Antonio scoffs. "This is ridiculous. I won't be insulted like this. Come with me, and we'll find somewhere else to eat." He reaches for me again.

I have only a moment to act as I see Dine's muscles bunch for action. Without thinking, I lay my hand on his chest and he freezes as surely as if he really was pure stone. "Dine," I say very slowly. "I'm not feeling well. Could you take me home, please?"

"What?" Antonio splutters. "I will take you. Come with me."

This time Dine's voice is pitched low, but it is no less deadly. "If you wish to live, you stop telling her what to do. Immediately."

I give him a little push. By some miracle, he budes. Hooking my arm through his, I ignore the stares of the other restaurant patrons and the concerned looks of the wait staff. I ignore Antonio's angry huff. "I had better get a refund for this! You have not heard the last of this."

It's probably the worst business decision of my life, but as I walk out of that restaurant with Dine, I'm buzzing with feeling. Adrenaline, from how close that came to violence, and flattery, from Dine's reaction and protectiveness. Not a single fiber of my being feels regret for the paying customer I just walked out on, even though it will cost me tonight's pay and a potential future client.

All I can think is I get to spend time with Dine. And that's dangerous. Very dangerous.



TEN

Hisondine

My mind is almost completely blank as Omeika pushes me out the door of the restaurant and back to my car. Luckily, the thing is impossible to miss, taking up half the street. A line of cars sits behind it, and some drivers are beeping. Others are actually getting out of their vehicles to see what the holdup is.

My driver knows I'll pay her handsomely to stay right where I told her to, though. I can always rely on Thrubbne. You wouldn't expect a gnome to be such a good driver, but once I had the car modified for her, she took to it like a kraken to water.

Omeika's soft hands are on my body, setting me on fire through layers of clothing and the crust of my skin. It's the only thing anchoring me to sanity.

I want to storm back in there, grab that little satyr by the throat, and squeeze the life from him. I could do it, too. My fist could easily wrap around that scrawny girth. I'd tighten it incrementally and watch his smug face turn red. His eyes would bulge, his mouth would open as he gasped for air he couldn't draw.

"Dine!"

I'm startled from that satisfying vision with Omeika's sharp word. She pushes me again and I realize the door to my stretch Hummer is open and she's trying to get me inside. Thrubbne wisely stayed inside the driver's seat. In this state, I'm not someone you want to mess with. I don't know how my little human has the courage.

Reluctantly, I let her push me into the back of the car and pull her in next to me when she takes too long. I reach past her and shut the door, breathing in deeply to savor the scent of her.

It's been too long.

How did I forget the subtle tart note that rides high above the rich sweetness of her perfection? I run my eyes over the

slender line of her neck, down to the swell of her breasts in the low-cut tan dress she wears.

Two soft hands cup my cheeks and bring my gaze to hers. “Dine. You can’t just storm in and threaten to kill someone because he took me out on a date!”

I growl. “I can threaten to kill him for touching you. I *will* kill him.” My fists bunch. My core surges.

The car starts. I hear the hum of the engine, then all my conscious thought is sucked from me when Omeika climbs into my lap. Her legs straddle my hips. Her full lips are inches from mine. Her pussy is flush with the growing bulge in my lap I should have better control of.

But I know her pussy is dark and smooth on the thicker outer lips and pretty pink inside, like a secret waiting to be told. My mouth waters.

“You won’t kill anyone. You don’t need to.” Her thumbs stroke down my cheeks and her fingertips trace my brow.

My hands clench the seat so hard I’ve probably torn the leather. “I needed to kill him for touching you when you didn’t want to be touched. When I want so badly to touch you, but I can’t.”

“Shhh. Why can’t you?”

Her thumb grazes my open lips and I shudder. Everything in me is screaming at me to put my hands on her body. To grab those generous hips. Take a handful of that thick ass. Hold her against me and never let her go.

“I’m right here, baby. You can touch me. I want you to touch me.”

My resolve cracks.

With a groan, my hands slip up her thighs, fitting at her slim waist. Omeika makes a low little moan, rocks her hips and grinds against me. Earth Mother’s bounty, how many times have I dreamed of this?

Without another thought, I lift one huge paw to the back of her neck and pull her roughly to me in a punishing kiss. I’m

acting on instinct. I've never done this with any female before, but I know in my core what I need. I need her mouth on mine. I need to taste and be tasted. I need the soft moan she makes as I plunder her lips again and again.

I could live right here. Her body is as welcoming and lush as the Earth Mother herself. She grinds that little pussy over me, and I give in to the need to harden my cock. She must feel it. In fact, I'm certain of it. The way she moans as she rocks her body on mine tells me she enjoys it.

I try to be gentle. I really do. But I can't help the urge to touch every inch of her rich dark skin bared by the dress that reveals so much, yet not enough. I skim shaking fingertips along her neck, slipping them along the place where fabric meets flesh.

Instead of complaining about the rough texture of my hands, she arches into my touch. Her head falls back. Her chest rises and falls with rapid breaths and she clings to me while I explore her. When that's no longer enough, I push aside the neckline of the dress until I bare her large dark nipples. Until I can lower my head and feast on them like I've dreamed of doing.

At first, they're soft. Pliant under my tongue as I taste their salty sweetness. As I tease and flick them, they harden and stick out further, as if begging for my touch.

My core boils with a pressured heat. Nothing like the fire of my forgotten anger. Like a welling pleasure she feeds and coaxes into life until it grows and clamors to break free.

"Isn't this better than worrying about someone else's hands on me?"

I groan when she slides her hands over my shoulders and clings to me. "Yes."

"Isn't this better than those video calls where I had to watch you from too far away and never got to touch you?"

"Yes." Earth Mother's blessing, it is a hundred times better. I can't even remember the reason I wanted to watch like that instead of taking what was right in front of me.

“And don’t you want to come for me? Let me touch you and do that for you?”

“Fuck, yes.” I can hardly form the words as her clever hands somehow tease open all the buttons on my shirt and make short work of the fastening of my trousers. In a heartbeat, she has my cock free and clasped in her firm, sure grip. I groan at the sensation of bliss.

It’s too much. It’s not enough. I buck my hips, longing for her to stroke me the way I stroked myself so many times thinking about her hands on me. Her sweet body next to mine. Under mine.

Father’s fiery fury, when she begins to move, I think I’ll die. The scorching pleasure drives me to the brink of release almost instantly. I gasp. I curse. I swell and ache in her palm.

“That’s it. This is what you need, isn’t it, baby?”

“You are what I need.”

“Honey, I’ve wanted this for a while now. I want you to come for me. Are you going to give me what I want?”

“Always.” I growl the word. It’s a vow and a confession. I want to tell her I will make sure she has everything she wants from this moment on, but I’m too breathless. I’m too caught in the spell she’s woven over me.

Her soft hands slide up and down my cock, faster and faster, until I’m losing control.

I need to tell her to be careful.

Already hot moisture beads at the tip, threatening to burn her pretty skin.

She leans over and spits a cool drop of saliva, coating my skin, sizzling and settling as she rubs it over the head. I just about explode.

“Omeika, be careful!”

“Oh, honey, you can go ahead and make a mess of my dress. I don’t care.”

“No. Be careful!” I curse when her hand continues to draw the very essence from me. She squeezes me tight. Pumps me firmly. I barely make it in time.

My balls tighten and I gasp. I grab her roughly, pulling her to the side and off my lap.

Molten seed erupts from my body, splattering the seat opposite and scorching the leather in long ropes.

“Oh!”

Omeika stares at the mess I’ve made. Her eyes widen as she looks from it back to me. Any moment, I expect a look of horror to cross her face, but she just grins. “I had no idea. How does a human have sex with a troll, then? Is it even possible? I bet someone has invented a special condom, right?”

I gather my scattered wits enough to shake my head. “No. Not necessary. There’s a ritual. To prepare.” Pulling off my shirt, I do my best to clean the mess. Then I look back at her in wonder. “That’s your thought. After witnessing that? You—you want *that*?”

She slides closer, hugging my thick bicep and resting her head against my arm. “Baby, that was hot. Of course, that’s what I’m thinking. You got me all worked up.”

I stare. Of course, I want that, too, but she’s human. I’ve never heard of a troll-human couple. I can’t see how it would work. Other species are large enough to take us. Not humans. Yet she stopped me right on the verge of a rage.

It’s damn near impossible to stop a troll once he gets in a rage. There can be no question, she’s mine. My *kuna*. I shake my head, trying to clear the tempting image of Omeika wearing the soil of my homeland on her skin, preparing her body to take mine.

“I will take care of your needs.”

I should have offered first. I should have never let her do that for me before she was thoroughly satisfied. “But I won’t fuck you. And I won’t perform the ritual.”

The ritual would make her mine. I don't know if I could ever let her go again once she took my soil and my cock.



ELEVEN

Omeika

I think about Dine's words the rest of the drive back to his place. I'm dying to ask him why he's so sure he'd hurt me. Obviously, the issue of his burning come has to be resolved. But he said there's a special ritual for that. So why won't he do that with me?

Still, tonight isn't the time to push him. Even though he seems much calmer than when we first left the restaurant, it's clear he still has a lot on his mind.

His place is just as huge as I remember. All stone surfaces softened with lush furnishings and warm lighting. Just the fluffy rug on his floor kinda makes me want to curl up here and never leave. Instead, I slip off my heels and dig my toes into the shag pile with a sigh.

From the kitchen where he's fetching me a drink, Dine gives me a long look. He brings over my vodka lime and insists I sit on his enormous leather sofa and put my feet in his lap. I just about melt into the seat when warm, firm fingers knead into my aching muscles. God, his hands feel amazing on my sore feet. Like one of those hot stone massages, but if the stone was supple and could rub you down as well. Should I ask him if he meant what he said about taking care of me as well?

Right before I turn into boneless mush, he slows and looks up at me, those flaming red eyes searching mine. "I don't like you seeing other clients."

I feel all type of ways about this. What I really wanted him to say is, 'I don't like you seeing other guys.' Does this mean he still thinks of himself as a client and this arrangement is temporary? I know that's how I should be thinking about it, but I can't seem to make my heart get on board with that.

Why would he care, if that's all this is to him? But, if it means more, why would he phrase it like that?

I should care more about the grumpy, possessive edge to his tone. I don't, though.

“Does this mean you want me all to yourself?” I keep my voice lighthearted, too scared to ask what's really on my mind.

“Yes!” His hand tightens around my foot. “That's what I called Monstrous Deals for today. How much do I need to pay? Tell me and it's yours.”

The corners of my mouth only dip for a moment. So, I am still an escort. Of course, I am. I can't believe I was stupid enough to let myself think for a moment— “I guess that depends how often you want to see me. I can't see you everyday—”

“But you won't see other clients?”

I shake my head. “No, baby. Not if you want me to yourself.” *Foolish, Omeika*. I still can't help giving him whatever he wants. “I have another job, though.”

He seems to relax a little at this. His large, warm hand slides up my leg and back down, caressing and stroking. “What is your other job?”

“I'm a librarian.”

He chuckles. It's such a warm, rich sound I sit up to see his face better. I love the way lines appear by his eyes like tiny fissures in weathered stone. “That was not the answer I was expecting.”

I smile. “Most people don't. I guess librarian and escort don't often go together. I really always wanted to be an author. I love books and reading so much.”

“So what stopped you?”

I sink back against the back of the sofa, letting him lull me with the strokes of his hands up and down my leg. “I'm not sure I'm cut out for it. Not fiction, anyway. I never had a story to tell. But I am writing a book. A non-fiction book. Customs, mating rituals, and sexual education for different supernaturals.”

I expect him to laugh again. It's a silly idea.

When I look up, he's studying me with that serious look of his. "That's excellent."

"What? No one would read it."

"I disagree. I think plenty of people would read it. They should read it. So many species don't write down these types of things. Younglings have to rely on trial, error, and instinct, and that can be risky."

"That's terrible. Sex education is important. Like trolls. People should know about troll semen."

He scowls. "So they can stay away from us, you mean?"

"No! You said there was a way of protecting your partner. If people knew about it, then they wouldn't need to be scared."

He shakes his big head. "They should still be scared. Look at me."

"Is that all that's holding you back?" I sit up excitedly. "Let's perform the ritual right now."

Dine snatches his hands away like I'm the one with a boiling core. "Don't ask me that. I won't perform the ritual. I'd have no hope of holding back if we do."

I'm about to push just a little more. I shouldn't. It's clear he won't consent to it, and I of all people should be looking for enthusiastic consent. He takes hold of my ankles suddenly and pulls my legs apart, tugging me forward. I slide down the sofa toward his face. Then he looks up at me from between my legs, a place where any guy looks good from, but Dine in particular. "Do you need to be satisfied, Omeika? Is that why you protest so much?"

My pussy, which I thought had settled, instantly gushes with moisture again and I gasp.

Dine inhales deeply, rubbing the tip of his big blunt nose against the crotch of my panties, and I swear they're flooded.

Oh. My. Lord. This troll is mighty sure of himself for a guy who's never done this before. At least I think he's a virgin. That's what he implied. Though, now I come to think of it,

perhaps he's had sex with other monsters, just not with a human.

The flurry of thoughts take wing and escape me when a hot huff of breath warms my inner thighs. Moments later, Dine's tongue laves at the crease, dipping beneath my panties, teasing me, but not touching where I want him.

I moan and clutch at his head. I hope he doesn't mind.

Pretty sure he doesn't when the low rumble of his groan travels right through me. Huge hands under my ass haul me closer and he kisses over the soaked fabric of my panties. I don't know if it's his saliva, or my juices, or both. I can feel how wet the panties are and they're practically steaming with the heat radiating from Dine.

"Off." He tugs at the panties. "Let me have you."

I go to pull them off, but in the next instant he tears them from me, dropping the useless material on the floor and pulling my legs further apart again.

Oh shit. He parts my folds with a thick thumb and dives into my cunt like it's his last meal. The ravenous noises he makes are enough to have my eyes rolling back in my head. I grab the sofa for dear life as he devours me. He's messy. There's no strategy to his pussy eating. But he goes straight for my clit, finding it after a few swipes of his large tongue. When he hits just the right spot, I moan loudly, clutching at his hair. "That's it, baby. Right there. Just like that."

The pressure, the enthusiasm. Within minutes I'm losing my damn mind. His two large tusks spread me wider for him to devour more deeply. All those times I touched myself for him while he watched weren't wasted. This is a man who pays attention.

Right when I'm wishing for something more, he slips one thick finger inside me, all the way past the knuckle.

I come, quickly and forcefully, gushing over his hand and chin. My legs shake and my belly clenches. My pussy squeezes around him as if I could somehow keep him there.

Dine looks up at me in wonder. "Fuck."

I laugh. “Baby, I know.”

“Again.” His tone is demanding. It brooks no disobedience, but I’m not afraid of him. My grumpy troll would never hurt me.

“Is that right?”

“Yes! I want you to come again for me.” This time he begins to move his finger, stroking against the inner walls of my pussy, coaxing more pleasure from me immediately. I’m already on edge, sensitive from the orgasm he just wrung from me. It doesn’t take long to get back to the brink.

I buck when his hot mouth lowers onto my pussy again. When he runs his tongue through my wetness, I sigh. I clench as soon as he suckles on my clit, and I come apart when he moves his finger and mouth in unison.

Somehow, he draws two more orgasms from my tired body and I collapse back against the sofa. This time, when he looks up, his face is coated in my slick and his eyes are darker than I’ve ever seen them. “So beautiful.” His tone is soft and reverent.

“Thank you, baby.”

“I mean it. You’re perfect. Thank you for sharing that with me.”

“I should be thanking you.” I try to hold it back, but a yawn rips from me before I can stop it.

Dine frowns.

Before I can respond, he lifts me and carries me down the corridor to a sumptuous bedroom where he lays me on the bed. “I will pay extra tonight if I can keep you until the morning, but do not fear that I will disturb you. I will sleep in my own room at the other side of the house.”

Dangerous. He’s so, so dangerous, but I give into it far too easily.

I smile up at him as he tucks me into bed. “Baby, you’d better be careful. A girl could get used to this.”

After all the orgasms and laying on the sumptuous mattress, I barely remember to check in on the MD app, and let them know I've switched clients. With a little twinge of disappointment, I write out the note that I'm with Hisondine who requested a last-minute booking. How can I have forgotten that this is work?

Still that's gone when I lay back and close my eyes, remembering the way he made me feel with his huge hands and his mouth and those blazing eyes that look at me as if I'm precious.

I go to sleep without even worrying that Dine's cotton pillowcase is going to make my braids frizzy, or that I didn't bring a toothbrush or a change of clothes. Just being near him, having him around, feels so right I drift into a dreamless, solid sleep like I haven't had in months.



TWELVE

Hisondine

I stand in the doorway to my guest bedroom watching her. The pale morning light has begun to peer through the curtains, probably in search of her beauty as well. I could watch her all day.

I shouldn't.

I told her I wouldn't disturb her. Surely if she wakes and sees me standing here watching her while she sleeps she'll be disturbed. Who wouldn't be? Look at me. I know that supernaturals are no longer in hiding, but that doesn't mean I don't see the looks of disgust I get from most humans. Disgust or outright fear.

Omeika stirs, rolling onto her back and lifting one arm above her head. The blanket slips down and reveals a hint of one dark nipple. My mouth waters, but it feels doubly wrong to look at her like this when she doesn't know I'm here.

As stealthily as I can, I creep to her bedside and pull the blanket up so it covers her again. I should have loaned her something to sleep in. I should have let her go home to her own place where she has everything she needs instead of insisting on keeping her here like—well, like a troll who found his mate.

I scowl at myself, dismissing the stupid thought. She could no sooner be my *kuna* than a phoenix could take a sea monster. But how can I deny the signs? Her scent—like nothing I've ever smelled before. Her touch that stills me in a rage. The deep, deep urge to claim her and possess her in every possible way.

Yet, she's human.

Omeika opens her eyes before I've come to my senses enough to move. She blinks up at me for a moment before a slow smile creeps over her face and leaves me breathless. "Well, good morning."

“I’m sorry. I should not have disturbed you.”

“Don’t be silly.” She sits, giving me the full view of both beautiful breasts and my throat tightens. I can’t believe this perfect creature let me touch her. Let me do unspeakable things to her body last night.

Just the memory has my cock twitching.

“Do you have to work today? I’ll get out of your hair.”

I shake my head. “No. No work today.” Bubbrur has canceled my meetings today and I’m going to take advantage of it. “Stay.”

She smiles at me. “Then do you have something I can eat? I’m starving. I forgot to eat dinner last night.”

I silently curse myself. I should have done a much better job of preparing. I have nothing in the house that would be suitable for a human. “I will take you out. Anywhere you like.”

Omeika looks down at herself. “Ah... that sounds lovely, but I only have the clothes I was wearing last night.”

“Not a problem.” This I can solve easily. “Take a shower and I will have something for you when you finish.”

Her eyes widen, but she slips from the bed and goes to the bathroom, trusting me to carry through with my ridiculous statement.

I rush to the living room and phone Bubbrur. “I need women’s clothing. And shoes. Something she can wear to brunch. Something for later as well. Just lots of clothing. Get it here in half an hour!”

“W-what clothing? What woman? What size is she?”

In the end I give him instructions to purchase the same thing in multiple sizes and bring it all to me as quickly as possible. True to form, the little gnome has it here in forty minutes, which must be some kind of miracle.

In the meantime, Omeika puts on one of my shirts. I’m tempted to tell her to wear it to brunch, except I can’t have

anyone but me looking at her bare legs disappearing beneath the oversized shirt and the slide of the fabric down one shoulder, revealing smooth skin the color of umber.

When I emerge from my own shower, I find her in my library, perusing the shelves full of dry engineering manuals. I can't believe she could find something to interest her here, but when I enter, she turns and smiles at me. "I should have known you were the kind of guy to have a library. Could you be any more perfect?"

My heart gives a lurch inside my core and I have to remind myself she is good at what she does. I hate to think of this as a job for her, but that's the reality. Though she pleases me in every possible way and makes it seem effortless, I can't afford to forget I am paying her. Would she still be here if not? Impossible.

Still, while I have money to do it, I can't bear to give her up. So I close my eyes to it and drift a little longer in the dream.

She looks almost as good in the little yellow sundress and heeled sandals Bubbrur found as she does in my shirt. Omeika's smile as she spins to show me the full effect says everything, and I almost combust when she slips her small hand into mine when we climb from the Hummer outside the West Boulevard Hotel. My company did the construction five years ago when I was more heavily into resorts and accommodation rather than roads. We bought up parcels of land in strategic locations, developed them and sold to the highest bidder. So I know with certainty the rooftop restaurant at this hotel has one of the best views in the city, and I've heard they do a fantastic buffet breakfast.

Omeika's face when we step out of the elevator and walk beneath the vine-covered trellis is worth it. Even though it locks my spine with fear when she rushes to the clear balustrade to look down at the view. We trolls don't do well with heights. There's something unnatural in being so far from the Earth Mother, although I know for certain this building is as sturdy as they come.

I usher her away from the edge and to our table. Easy enough when she spots the buffet.

“You know it’s lucky I don’t have my big purse,” she jokes. “My grandma is the queen of handbag stuffing to get the most out of a buffet. I wouldn’t want to embarrass you.”

I just shake my head and try to hold in my slightly manic grin. If anyone should be embarrassed it’s her. I see the looks people give us from the corner of my eye. They look away as soon as I turn my head, but I see them. I’m used to it, but Omeika isn’t. How could she be?

She gathers a huge plate of food and insists on leaning across the table to feed me morsels of fruit. When she’s polished off the fruit, three pancakes and a large serving of scrambled eggs, she sits back in her chair with a contented sigh. “Mmm, amazing. I love this place.”

I don’t. I can’t help sneaking glances at the glass balustrade when I think she’s not looking. It’s disconcerting. I’m starting to remember why I never came up here before.

Omeika giggles. “Is it just me or are you a bit scared of heights?”

I fold my arms across my chest with a huff. “No.”

Her smile turns wicked and she pokes a small finger into my ribs. It shouldn’t make me squirm, but somehow the lightest touch from her draws a reaction from me. “You are! Admit it. If not, could we go get a picture? Would that be completely crass?”

I can’t help smiling at her enthusiasm. Giving into her request, despite the fact it almost brings hives out on my rocky skin, we step near to the edge of the building. The clear balustrade is worse because you can see the floor abruptly end and the world fall away into sky right at your toes.

I shudder.

Omeika tucks in against my side and holds up her phone to take a selfie. An older woman with a neat gray bob and a dark pearl necklace approaches her. I’m instantly on alert, waiting for the comment. Some people don’t say anything. Some are

openly hostile. It's the other ones that get to me most. The ones ushering small children to the other side of a road when I walk past, or clutch their handbag tighter as if I might snatch it. Like I've not got a thousand times the worth of the contents of their wallet available at the touch of a button.

Unexpectedly, this woman smiles warmly at me and holds out her hand. "Would you like me to take the picture, dear? Is it your honeymoon?"

I'm so stunned I have nothing to say. Omeika returns the woman's smile and hands over her phone. I dutifully pose for the photo, but I'm sure if I smile it looks more like a grimace.

"Thank you so much!"

The woman hands back Omeika's phone. "Oh that's no trouble at all. You two look so happy together. It's lovely to see young folks in love."

Even though I can hardly believe it, Omeika doesn't contradict the woman. She just leans her head against my arm and grins.

At that moment, I could just about leap from the building and fly home. OK, that's going a bit far, but my heart leaps and my chest groans with the strain of containing it. I clutch the handrail while Omeika's not looking as I turn and follow her to the elevator.

As my driver pulls up outside her apartment, she leans close and presses the softest kiss to my cheek. "Thank you. I had such a nice time today. And I can't stop thinking about last night."

I shake my head, but my disbelief doesn't stop the enormous grin from spreading across my face. "I hope so."

My mind races back to all the things we shared. To her hands on my body and her flavor on my tongue. I very nearly hold the door closed and refuse to let her go. But I can't do that. She's only mine for a while, not for good. No matter how much my heart longs for it to be true and how much my instincts scream for me to make it forever.



THIRTEEN

Omeika

You'd think Monday would be a slow day at the library, but it's the opposite. Monday is Kids Club day and it's my favorite day of the week. I love a quiet library and hours of peace while I shelve or weed books. But I also love the noise and laughter and music of Kids Club.

There's a bounce in my step as I walk through the door with my takeaway coffee in one hand and a half-eaten ham, cheese, tomato sandwich in the other. A bounce which almost turns into a stumble when I see Nina's face.

I love Nina. She's the sort of person you imagine being a librarian when you're a kid. In fact, she reminds me of my favorite librarian at the local library in the district where I grew up. The lady fostered my love of reading by quietly putting aside books she thought I'd like and talking to me about all the upcoming releases.

Nina's frizzy gray hair is half-gathered into a messy bun at the back of her head. The other half refuses to be tamed and wisps around her face, curling around the edges of her green cat's eye glasses. When she spots me, her pale face turns paler and she brushes her hands down the front of her oversized brown cardigan. "Meika. Did you have a good weekend?"

"Actually, I had a lovely—"

"Good, good." She cuts me off before I finish and I catch a tremor in her voice that's not normally there—unless she has to tell off the teens from the local high school for talking too loudly in the reading nook. "There's actually something I have to speak to you about. If you've got a minute."

"Of course." I follow her into the break room, which smells of raisin bread and tea. I take a seat in the worn pink sofa chair opposite her. "Is everything OK?"

She picks at a ball of lint on her cardigan, not making eye contact with me. "Not really." Then she sighs. "Meika, I don't

know how to tell you this, but there have been some complaints.”

I frown. “Complaints about what?”

She clears her throat. “Well I had a phone call this morning. It seems the minister received an email about a local librarian distributing inappropriate material to minors and promoting underage sex.”

“What!?”

Nina clutches at the hem of her cardigan and her eyes snap to mine. “I’m sure it’s just a misunderstanding, but—”

“I booked a sexual health workshop because the local school doesn’t offer sexual education until freshman year of high school.”

Nina splutters. “They’re not having sex at freshman year!”

I shake my head. “Some of them are having sex or sexual encounters earlier than that, whether or not they know about the risks. It doesn’t help to keep them ignorant.”

“I... I just...” Her pale cheeks have turned bright red and I feel terrible. This is why I didn’t tell her about the workshop. I booked it on a Thursday afternoon, knowing Nina finishes early on Thursdays. Because I know this stuff upsets her.

“I’m sorry, Nina. I know you hate talking about it, but that’s not going to make this go away. These kids need the information, and I felt like the library was a safe space for them to come to find information. Isn’t that what we do here?”

Nina makes a little sound at the back of her throat. “I know you’re just looking out for them, Meika. It’s just with the kerfuffle last month about the erotica—”

“Nina, those books are romance books. They’re what every second book request is for these days.”

Nina purses her lips. “I know, Meika, but that doesn’t mean we have to purchase them without investigating the books for ourselves. That’s state money.”

Up until now, I've felt sorry for Nina, but this is a sore point. "So we should censor what books are available in the library? Nina, that's one step away from book burning. Don't you see that?"

Nina stands, straightening her skirt and giving me her best steely look. "I've been advised to ask you to take leave for the rest of this week while the issue is investigated. I truly am sorry to have to do this, Meika. I'm sure you know it brings me no joy."

I gape at her for half a second. Enforced leave? Over a workshop and some book purchases? This is ridiculous. "Nina, I used up all my annual leave already this year."

Nina tugs a handkerchief from her sleeve and wipes anxiously at her nose. "I think the protocol is that it must be unpaid leave, then. I'm really sorry, Meika. I'm going to give you a minute to collect yourself."

She hurries from the room, probably to find a quiet stack where she can collect *herself*. I don't bother retorting. There's no point. The issue has been decided by someone over Nina's pay grade. It's not really her fault.

That doesn't stop me seething while I collect my half-used carton of milk from the fridge and gather the stack of books I had on hold. At least, I guess, I'll have time to read them this week before they're due back. Here I was thinking I wasn't going to get through them all.

Halfway down the street, I remember I left my takeaway coffee on the table in the break room. I don't want to go back for it. I'm not sure I can take any more of the tension between me and Nina. I wonder how long it will take for the others to start talking. No doubt, by the time this gets sorted and I get back from leave, rumors will have spiraled.

I can only hope it gets sorted quickly. Last time I checked my bank balance, I was a few hundred dollars in the red after my student loan repayment came out. I'm not sure how long I can afford to be on unpaid leave. Lucky Dine has been paying me twice my normal rate.

It makes me feel bad. Saturday night and Sunday morning didn't feel like work. Not the way he treated me. It feels weird to accept a payment for it. Yet, I don't think I've got a choice. I guess I'd been hoping to have a conversation with him about whether or not things have progressed to new territory. The sort of conversation you're never supposed to have. The sort of conversation that makes me want to run the other way. But I don't want to end up like Kirsten.

I suppose that'll have to wait. I just hope that's not too mercenary and he can forgive me.

My phone buzzes. I look down to see a message from Dine. The smile curves my lips before I even open it.

Dine: Would you like to come to dinner with me tonight?

Meika: Of course. Where should I meet you?

Dine: My driver will pick you up at 8. Wear something nice

I press my phone to my chest and grin. He's taking me somewhere fancy. Doesn't matter how many years I've been an escort, I'm always a sucker for being wined and dined. I love me a bit of that old fashioned romance, even if it is all staged. It makes the act that much more fun. And with Dine, none of it seems to be an act anymore.

I hope he's feeling even a little of what I'm feeling. I might be reading the signs wrong. I might be totally misguided, but I hope not. My stupid heart is already so far out on this limb the branch is bending. If I'm wrong, I'm about to get very hurt.

The longer I go without outright asking him, the more danger I'm in. Just a few more weeks. Just until this all blows over at work.



FOURTEEN

Omeika

I choose the slinky red dress with the neckline that dips between my breasts and the silky fabric that hugs my curves. I love the way I look in this dress and with the right necklace and heels it looks classy, but still super sexy.

I can practically see Dine's mouth watering when I slide in next to him in the stretch Hummer later that night. His large hand drifts to my thigh and I lose him for a moment while his gaze takes in the whole effect.

When his eyes return to mine, he looks stunned.
"Beautiful."

The word is rasped. It's not lost on me the way his hand tightens on my thigh or the way his throat bobs when he swallows. First task accomplished, then. I just need to hold my nerve until I find out what's happening with my day job. After all, it's always been my goal to give up escorting when the student loan was paid off. If I can make up some extra hours, I might be able to do it sooner and tell Dine how I'm really feeling.

"Where are we going tonight?"

He quirks a brow at me with a secretive smile. "All in good time."

When the car stops on 63rd street, I can hardly believe my eyes. When we walk straight in and skip the line, I know I'm dreaming. Thicket is the most exclusive establishment in Heartstone. They don't take reservations. They're *that* good.

I've seen the line stretch right down the street and around the corner before. More than once. The guy at the door, though, just gives Dine a nod and the people at the front of the line gape in envy when we sweep past and into the dim interior. I blink as my eyes adjust. Then a tall female dryad brushes aside a red curtain with a smile. Her green skin is disguised by the low lighting, but there's no mistaking the way

leaves and fern fronds grow over her body instead of clothes. “Welcome to Thicket, Mr. Hisondine. Chef Greenswade is expecting you. Right this way, please.”

I look sideways at Hisondine. Apart from his self-satisfied smile, which is still curving the corners of his mouth, his expression hasn't changed. How on earth did he get a reservation at the restaurant that doesn't take reservations?

Our dryad waitress ushers us behind a curtain into a small, intimate room with hydroponic plants growing from the walls and a table set with tiny glowing lights. They're not candles. At first glance, I can't work out what they are, until I sit and lean a little closer. They're flowers. The pale white flowers glow, shedding a soft warm light over the space. Forest magic. I've read the owner grows all his ingredients locally using innate powerful magic.

Dine lays his hand on the table, opening his palm, and I place mine into his.

“I hope you like this place. It's a favorite of mine. But I'm afraid they only serve vegan food.”

I grin. “Are you kidding? Everyone who's anyone has been to Thicket. I've had a severe case of FOMO. I can't believe I'm really here.”

His large fingers close over my hand. “I wanted to bring you somewhere special. And it's entirely self-serving. I have a favor to ask of you.”

“What is it?”

At that moment, our waitress returns, with two tiny shot glasses filled with a light pale concoction. She places one in front of Dine and the other in front of me. When she sets out a spoon for me, but not for Dine, I question this. Then he picks up the shot glass between his thumb and pointer finger delicately as if it is about to break. It is totally dwarfed by the size of his fingers. Now I see why the waitress didn't bother with a spoon for him.

“Chef calls this dish floating. Bon appetit.” She leaves us, the red curtain swishing closed as she makes her exit.

Dine lifts the shot glass to his lips and swallows the appetizer in one swallow, setting down the glass to watch me.

I take a smaller spoonful and lift it to my mouth. The dish is light and fluffy, salty with a hint of savory richness, and a crunch that surprises me. “That is not at all what I was expecting!”

“Nothing here is.” Dine grins at me.

By the time the waitress brings the dessert, I’ve hit my stride. Even though it looks like a fallen log with mushrooms sprouting from it in tiny bunches, I know better. When I lift the spoon to my mouth, the first taste is tangy, followed by a punch of sweetness. It’s citrus and chocolate, and somehow it works together with a rich crumb and a dense mousse texture.

Dine brings his own dish to his mouth and takes a large bite. Whereas mine is an illusion, I’m pretty sure the troll version truly is moss-covered log, but he seems to be enjoying it.

He sets down the log and looks at me thoughtfully. “You’ve had a pleasant evening?”

“Of course! This is lovely.” I gesture around at the beautiful lighting and plants, the furnishings, the food. But I get the sense he means more than that.

“I mentioned I have a favor to ask.”

“Ask away.” I take another bite of the delicious dessert while I wait.

“Apparently we were seen. The other day at the West Boulevard Hotel.”

“Oh! Is that bad?” I pause, my spoon partway to my mouth.

“No! It’s very good. In fact, my assistant tells me there’s been a more positive reaction to that outing than to anything I’ve done in the last two years. Including major repairs on the M1.” His scowl is adorable.

Then, I realize what he’s saying.

My eyes widen.

“In fact, I need more. I need as much good press as I can get at the moment while there’s still a chance I could win this government contract for the Quest Bridge.”

“And I can help with that?” I can hardly believe it. But if Dine needs my help, I’m all in.

He nods. “Would it be too much to ask you to appear at public functions with me? To pretend to be my girlfriend?”

I stare. Pretend? If he asked me, I’d be his real girlfriend. But if he needs me to go to events and be seen with him, that’s the furthest thing from a problem. “I’d love to. Anything to help.”

I’d love this to be the time I could suggest it doesn’t have to be fake, but with my job at the library on the line, it’s not.

“Really? You don’t mind?” He looks at me with such a stunned look that I can’t help myself.

Setting down my spoon, I push back my chair. Dine’s hesitant smile falls from his face and he goes to stand as well. “No. Stay right there.”

He freezes in place. His large hands grip the armrests of the chair while I take three steps to bring me around the table. “What is it?”

I smile. “Nothing, baby. Just that I needed to show you how much I don’t mind helping you.” I drop my voice low. “With anything.”

I see him swallow just before I climb into his lap. When he doesn’t do anything immediately, I take his hands and place them on my ass.

He shudders. Beneath my crotch, I feel him harden until the bulge of his cock presses into the space between us and nudges at my pussy.

“I thought—” His gravelly voice breaks off on a curse and his hands clutch at my ass. “Fuck, Omeika. You’ll end me. I thought seeing me in private was one thing, but actually being seen with me. Being seen as my girlfriend...”

I groan and lower myself further, trapping his cock between us. “I don’t mind one bit.” I grind on him, biting my lip to hold back a loud moan as the friction sends pleasure shooting through me. “Not one bit, baby. Now, is there anything else I can do to help you?”

Dine groans. His loud rumble tears through me and probably resonates through the whole restaurant. I don’t care. I’m instantly flooded with moisture. So much that my panties are in danger of being ruined.

“Earth Mother save me, if I ask you for what I really need, I’ll never forgive myself.”

Oh, my poor baby needs release. Of course, he does. I have him all wound up and he thinks I’m going to leave him aching. “Baby, I’ll take care of that. Don’t you worry.”

Bracing on his shoulders, I roll my hips. Dine curses loudly. Then his hands clamp down on my ass and pin me in place. “Omeika, if you keep doing that I’ll ruin these trousers, and your dress, and leave a nasty burn on one of my favorite things in this world. So help me, I will let you do whatever you want with me. Only let me take you somewhere we can make it safe for you.”

I pout, pussy aching to move. He’s too strong, though. “Anything I want?”

His expression is pained. “Not that. Omeika, not that!”

“You said anything, and that’s the one thing I want more than anything else. Can’t we just try? Just perform the ritual, and I’ll show you. I can take it. Trust me.”

Dine lets out a strangled laugh. “I’m not sure I explained it properly. Because it’s not as simple as that. It would take a trip to the ground from which I hatched.”

“OK.” I’d do just about anything at this point. My clit throbs for attention. More than that, my channel feels so empty knowing his large, erect cock is right there begging for my attention. “Where’s that?”

“Iceland.”

Pretty sure I deserve a medal for not screaming!

Instead, I kiss him softly. “Then we can try? Please say we can try. I want to make you feel so good.”



FIFTEEN

Hisondine

How did I let her convince me this was a good idea?

Her ripe little cunt did half the convincing last night. Its fragrant smell had me half out of my mind as she ground in my lap, tormenting my cock so sweetly.

Of course, I couldn't leave her needy.

No. I took her back to my place and licked her pretty little cunt until she screamed my name.

I take great pride in being good at what I do. When I put my mind to something I make sure I learn how to be the best. I might not be the best at licking Omeika's pussy yet, but I will be. I'll erase any other guy from her memory, one lick at a time.

Of course, that left me in agony. Omeika, being the gem she is, would have taken care of me, but I don't like that she could get burned. So I wait and I suffer.

No turning back now.

Omeika's steady breathing tells me she's still sleeping. Her soft, curvy body is curled up against me in the custom seat of my private jet. She's so beautiful it aches. It's like a physical pain low in my gut. It probably doesn't help that, at any given moment, I'm at least semi-hard just from the thought of what it will mean for her to perform the ritual with me. Of what she means to me. And I'm selfish because I still haven't told her.

I won't hold her to the mate bond, though. I'll fucking follow her around like a lost puppy. I'll hire a security team to trail her. I'll make sure no one else can touch her. But I won't make her stay with me if she doesn't want to. Not when she sees what I'm like. At least, I think I won't. I just have to hope I can fight the instincts even now urging me to hoard her like the treasure she is.

Sometime later, she lifts her head and blinks up at me.
“Did I fall asleep?”

I smile down at her. “Only for a moment.”

She glances at her phone and snorts. “You know there’s such a thing as being too nice to me. Didn’t I make you uncomfortable?”

I shift in my seat, fixedly aware of the throbbing bulge in my trousers. “Oh, believe me. I’m uncomfortable, but not because you were asleep.”

She glances at it, which only makes it worse.

I hiss out a breath.

Omeika sits. “Dine—”

“Don’t.” I shake my head. “We’re hours away. I can wait. I will wait.”

Her pretty face creases into a look of worry, but she nods. “OK. Should I go sit somewhere else?”

My hand clamps over her thigh before I’ve considered if it will scare her. Luckily, she only smiles. “No. Don’t go.” It doesn’t matter that the jet has rows of seats. “I want you right here.”

“Then Imma be right here, baby.”

She snuggles close again and her breast rubs against my arm. That’s all it takes. My cock throbs. I hold back a groan. She’s about to be mine. In a matter of hours.

Only she won’t be mine, will she?

Not really. Because she won’t know.

I sigh.

It’s still better than I’d ever dreamed.



The car ride from the airport is slightly less taxing. Instead of spending it in my lap, Omeika looks out the window and looks

intently at the view, as if there's anything to see beyond the blanket of gray clouds and the miles of springy green grass. We pass a field where fat ponies with shaggy manes turn their heads to watch the SUV pass. Omeika sighs. "Everything here is so beautiful."

I look at her to see if she's joking. Perhaps she really can find beauty here. If she can find beauty in me, then she can find it anywhere.

I point to the driveway of the farm. "This stud breeds the best horses in Iceland. They're world famous. I thought about buying it when I made my first billion."

She turns to look at me. "Your first!?"

OK, I can't help the smug look that steals across my face. I might not have looks or charm, but at least I've got that. That's the reason she's here isn't it? Might as well make the most of it.

By the time we make it off road, I'm sweating. And trolls don't sweat easily. It oozes from my pores like hot magma, burning as it goes. I'll ruin my suit if I keep it up, but there's nothing to be done for it.

Earth Mother, I need her.

The driver takes the SUV over the rocky tundra and up onto the lower slope of Hekla, the volcano that made me.

"So, how does this work exactly?" Omeika shifts in her seat so she's looking at me, a worried expression on her face.

"It doesn't tie you to me. You don't even have to fuck me, if you don't want to. It just makes you immune to my seed's heat. That's all." I thought that'd reassure her. It's not strictly true. At least, it ties me to her, and I intend to make the rest true. Even so, the crease between her brows deepens.

"Oh."

"If you don't want to—"

Her small hand darts out and grips my thigh making me smother a groan. "I want to!"

Thank the Mother.

I lead her out of the car, putting my arm around her, conscious of the chill in the air. Omeika snuggles against me gratefully, and that makes my heart do a happy little rumble inside my chest.

I've told the driver to wait further down the slope. No need for him to get a look at her beauty. Today, that's for me alone. As soon as I give him the signal, he drives off to wait for my call to collect us.

Now it's just us, alone on the mountainside.

My heart beats faster.

Will she really go through with this?

Can I?

I must be crazy. Except, I'm crazy with longing for her. So this is the logical way out. It's just possible this might work.

We come to where a tiny stream of water trickles between clumps of moss. I stop her. She watches me stoop down and collect some of the mud from the stream with my hand. I mash it into a finer paste with my great paws and warm it with my breath.

"Undress." My voice is rough. It hardly feels under my control.

Omeika peels off her jacket and top and her wide dark nipples pebble in the cool air. She shimmies out of her leggings and a moment later she's naked, save for the socks she had on for the flight.

When she bends to take those off too, I stop her.

"Earth Mother will understand if you leave your socks on. Can't have you catching your chill."

She spreads her arms wide, then shivers and hugs them close to her body again. "Ready."

Gently, reverently, I spread the mud from my birthplace across her forehead, her cheeks. I paint two tiny patches over her breasts and one over her heart.

My breath hitches when her nipples stiffen further at my touch.

I swallow and glance down at her belly. Her wide hips and generous thighs. To the smooth mound between them.

Earth Mother, have mercy on me.

The smear of mud below her navel is done with a shaking hand.

When I dip my thumb into the secret place between her thighs, I groan.

Omeika's eyelids flutter closed for half a moment. But she holds still, letting me perform the ritual.

Pulling my erect cock from my trousers, I rub a tiny amount of liquid onto the pad of my thumb.

Somehow I manage not to spill everywhere. Just the sight of her there, naked and lovely, and wearing my marks threatens to undo me. The brush of my finger over the head of my cock is bliss.

With a trembling hand, I reach between her legs again and apply the last of the mud mixed with my seed.

Omeika gasps.

I catch her up when her knees wobble and hold her against my chest. Then I whisper the words to activate the magic. "Earth Mother, bless this fertile ground."

Omeika shudders. The goose pimples that had spread across her skin recede a little. "Oh, I feel warmer."

I nod. "It will raise your internal temperature a little. And protect you. It's still too cold for you out here dressed like that. Let's get you warm."

"Oh, that's it?"

"It is finished."

She blinks up at me. "Don't you want to fuck me?"

I press my eyes closed and lower my forehead against hers for a moment. "It's killing me not to. But not here. The frenzy

will start soon, and I want you to tie me up the first time.”



SIXTEEN

Omeika

“Wait. You’re serious? You really want me to tie you up?”

Dine bundles me back into my clothes and into his car. Then he hands me a big black bag. I feel the weight of it as soon as I take the handles from him. When I look inside, I see chains and leather.

“I have had a set of special cuffs custom-made. You need to be in control at all times. I don’t want there to be any chance that I—” He breaks off and I see him swallow. Then he runs a large palm over his face. “A troll in rut is dangerous.”

I cuff him, binding his hands behind him so he’s forced to sit awkwardly. He insists, though. When he’s like this, I don’t like to argue.

There’s no doubt he’s in pain on the drive. He hardly looks at me. His jaw is tight and every muscle seems strained. The longer it goes on, the more I worry about him.

“Is there anything I can do to help?”

“Need your hands. Your hands on me.”

He does seem to relax a little when I put my hand on his thigh.

By the time we make it to his apartment in Hella, he’s shaking.

I mop his brow with the shirt he discarded, hating the way the tendons in his neck stand out. The way he groans and buckles forward in pain at the slightest bump in the road.

“Baby, you’re doing so good. Not much longer now.”

He staggers from the car, and I fish for the keys in his pocket when he leads me to the door. The driver takes off hastily as soon as we are out. I wonder if I should be more scared to be alone with Dine in this state. I’m not, though. Only excited.

The place is beautiful. His apartment here in Hella is designed in the same sort of modern minimalist style as his apartment in Heartstone. It's softened by touches of fabric with lush blankets, cushions, and rugs everywhere. The floor to ceiling windows look out onto a dramatic view of the sunset peeking beneath gray clouds.

No time to admire the view, though. Dine stumbles to a large bedroom, so I follow. The bed has been custom-made for him. It's huge! Much bigger than even a king-sized bed. The solid metal frame looks just perfect for tying up a bulky troll.

The cuffs have a chain that I fasten on the bedhead. It is just the right length to have him spread out under me, sprawled across the bed with his hands bound to either corner.

He watches me with hungry eyes while I untie the cuffs and fix them to the bed instead of behind him.

The sight of him there does all sorts of bad things to me, including flooding my pussy with moisture. I shiver. I gotta remember to take this slow for him.

It's hard to believe this is his first time. He's so strong and confident in everything else.

I should take my time and make sure this is a moment he'll remember.

I still hurry out of my dress and shoes, and crawl back onto the bed in just my red lace teddy.

Hisonidine's chest is bare. When I crawl between his legs and run my hands up his taut belly and muscled pecs, they radiate heat. I sigh and the answering groan from Dine vibrates through my fingers.

This is going to be harder than I thought.

With eager hands, I rub down again until I can hook my fingertips beneath the fabric of his trousers. I've seen his cock before, of course. But when I release him, I'm still struck by just how thick and hard he is. It's not like a human man's cock. There are hard nodes over the top of the shaft in clusters. They're not as hard as stone, but they are harder than the sleeve of skin on his shaft. Either trolls have no pubic hair, or

Hisonidine takes great care removing his. I'd believe it. He's very careful about a lot of things.

All of it makes my mouth water.

Dipping my head, I grip the base of his cock and lick up the shaft to the tip. The chains clank when Dine goes rigid. He lets out a long groan. "Are you trying to kill me, woman?"

I laugh. "Just getting you all warmed up."

He pulls against the restraints to lift his head and look down at me with a fierce glare I suspect is mostly play. "I have been all warmed up, as you say, for days. Weeks! It's you I'm worried about. I want that luscious pussy dripping if you're even going to think about mounting me."

"Well in that case..." I release his cock and climb over him. When I climb past his cock, over his stomach, and right up to hover above his mouth, I see understanding dawn in his expression. "Maybe this is more to your liking."

The noise he makes when I lower my pussy onto his mouth is like a starved man finally being fed. Everything else is pretty muffled, because I don't hold back.

I'm pretty sure he says, "Much better."

I don't know, though, because the second I get close enough, the need overtakes me. All this buildup. The anticipation. Having him tied up here, as if this is somehow about my pleasure and not his. I kinda lose my head.

I grind my pussy on his face and he devours me. I'm aching and tingling and sizzling all at once, and close to my first orgasm in moments. My legs shake. I'm that wound up. My movements are not as smooth and controlled as I'd like either.

I'm still painted in the mud from the stream, which feels good. I'd like to be painted with his come. To smell of him, to belong to him. The vision is so powerful I run my hands up my body, rubbing the mud into my belly and breasts as if it was his come.

I come then. My pussy clenches; I gasp and grab the bedframe as my body convulses. Dine murmurs something beneath me and I lift myself up enough for him to speak.

“Father’s fury, woman. Have mercy on me. I need you on my cock. Can you take it?”

I nod and gather my wits to maneuver myself until I’m lining up his cock with my cunt. I’m wet. That was never going to be a problem. He’s so large I can’t kneel. I have to squat over him to get enough height. With one hand on his belly, I rub the tip of his cock through my slick cunt.

Dine curses. “Fuuuck! Are you sure?”

He’s warm and hard, and his thick erection feels so good through my slippery folds I can’t wait to feel him inside me. “God yes. I want this so much, baby.”

Dine sets his jaw. He watches me gradually lower and take the head of his cock inside me.

I moan. The stretch feels good.

He’s holding rigidly still. I can feel his tension in every pore.

I slide down further and release him, so I can plant both my hands on his body and rock my hips. He slides deeper, filling me up, stretching me more. I gasp at the burn.

“You don’t. Have to.” He speaks through gritted teeth. If a troll could sweat, he’d be sweating now, judging by the look on his face.

I let out my breath and focus on releasing my muscles, taking him all the way.

Dine’s mouth falls open when I grind my clit against him with a laugh of triumph. The laugh dies on my lips, replaced by a gasp as pleasure shoots through me. My eyes just about roll back in my head and I roll my hips again to appreciate just how big and hard and glorious he is. “Mmm, baby, why’d you make me wait so long for this?”

Dine is still staring at me. It takes him a moment. When he finally speaks, his voice is raw with emotion. “I-I don’t know.

Earth Mother, you are magnificent.”

He watches me avidly as I rock and grind and ride him.

It’s so good. So good! But I’m here to blow *his* mind, so I change my motion. Lifting my ass, I bounce on his cock until the slapping sound fills the room.

His big booming groan is almost as hot as the look of rapture on his face. My cunt squeezes. I huff out a breath as I get closer to coming again.

Dine pulls against the restraints. His hips lift to meet me and we’re working in time, chasing a moment I want to reach together. I hold my orgasm back, watching his face, waiting for him.

The feeling from earlier is back, stronger this time. The feeling of wanting to possess and be possessed. Wanting this to be as real as it feels to me right now. “God, you feel good, baby.”

Dine’s eyes snap open and he thrusts up into me powerfully.

“You feel so good. How could you ever doubt it?”

He grunts. His brow furrows. “I should never have doubted you, gem. Never.”

I want to say more. I want to tell him how I’m feeling. For real. But not now. I can’t now. I can’t find the words. Instead, I fall back on dirty talk that doesn’t feel like enough. “You going to fill me up, baby? Are you ready?”

Dine groans. “What if it didn’t work? What if I hurt you?”

In answer, I bring one hand to my clit and rub. Pleasure intensifies. “Baby, it has to have worked. You feel so good, I’m sure.”

I’m so close. Dine speeds up. My movements are wild and abandoned. My breasts bounce. My hand rubbing circles on my clit adds to the wet, erotic noises.

Dine’s muscles bulge. His cock throbs inside me. There’s a creaking, wrenching sound, and the cuffs around his wrists

snap.

The second he's free, his large hands land on my ass. He squeezes me. Lifts me, guides me over his cock until we're both gasping for air.

I give up moving and let him hold me in the air while he thrusts up into me. I rub my clit, and the orgasm blooms just at the edge of my consciousness.

Then Dine pulls me down over him. He fills me until I think he's speared through my cervix and into my womb.

I come, shuddering, laughing, and gushing around him. His follows with a shout.

When I blink the black away from my vision, I look down to see him gazing at me with pure adoration. "Omeika. Omeika. My precious one. You are worth more than any treasure."

Unexpectedly, my eyes fill with tears and I choke them down.

The words I want to say to him still stick in my throat.

What if I'm just like Kirsten, after all? Just another deluded girl about to have her heart broken. He still hasn't said he loves me. Never called me his mate.

I've never been a coward in all my life. I'm not about to start now.

I'm just going to lay my head on his broad chest and listen to his heartbeat to see if it's going crazy like mine. Just for a moment. Then I'll find the strength I need.

I clear my throat. "Dine, there's something I need to tell you."



SEVENTEEN

Hisondine

My heart just about stops thumping when she mumbles those words into my chest. What could it possibly be? Nothing good, that's for certain.

Here I've gone and lost my heart like a fucking fool. She's about to pour icy water over it and watch it crack.

"I don't want to be your escort anymore."

Can I blame her?

I let my cock shrink and slip from her perfect pussy. I told her she could back out at any time. I just wish she'd done it before I'd had her. Now I know what it feels like to have her little cunt locked around me. To have her in my arms, coming apart under my touch. Now that she's worn my homesoil on her skin and taken my seed into her body, there's no one else for me.

I gently roll us to the side and deposit her on the mattress. Then I sit. "I will get you a cool cloth to clean up. Do you need me to get you some ice? Some water? Are you sore?"

She sits and her hand on my arm makes me turn to look at her. Instead of disdain or fear, I see concern.

"Something else? Was it worse than I thought?" I thought she'd enjoyed it. At least part of it. Perhaps I was so wrapped up in my own pleasure I didn't notice her suffering. Father's fury, how could I fail her like that? I know I broke my chains. The custom-made steel chains I was guaranteed could hold me. I thought her cries were ecstasy, but were they pain?

She shakes her head. "Dine, did you hear me? I don't want to be your escort. I want more. It's OK if you don't want that. I just had to tell you the truth."

I stare at her. More? She wants *more*? Does that mean—"You want *more*?" My heart is no longer frozen. It's thudding a million miles a minute as I dare to hope.

“I want you. I want us. I want this to be real. Because for me it is. But that means you have to stop paying me, because I need you to know that I’d see you anyway.”

I grab her and pull her into my lap before she can finish. Omeika laughs and wraps her arms and legs around me as I fall back onto the bed with a thud. “Woman, that’s twice you nearly killed me today. I thought you didn’t want to see me again. I thought I’d hurt you!”

She squeezes me tighter. “No. Not at all.” She wriggles. “In fact, I’m pretty sure I’ll be ready for round two if you give me a few minutes.”

I groan. I should tell her about the rest. About how she’s technically my mate. Only I’m too astonished at my good fortune to press my luck. I won’t scare her off now. One step at a time. “No more until you have rested. Now tell me what you want to eat; I will get it for you. Anything you want. I’ll have it brought.”

Though I’m already hard again and dripping steaming droplets from the tip of my cock, I fetch a cloth and clean her off. I can’t help pausing as I do, admiring the sight of my red come leaking from her pink folds. It might be one of the most perfect things I’ve ever seen. I have to stop myself from returning to her and pushing it back inside her with my thumb.

I can’t do anything to jeopardize this. I’m fucking lucky a creature like her ever looked twice at me. I can’t believe she’d even consider spending time with me when I’m not paying her. It feels like a dream.

I want to hold back as long as I can from taking her again so I can make sure it’s as good for her as it can be. I only hope she can last through the rut. I’ll need to come over and over, until morning when the rut will ease. But it doesn’t have to be inside her little body. I can hold back.

Maybe—just maybe if I treat her like the gem she is, she might one day consider being my mate. So I order a case of champagne, expensive cheeses, cakes and delicacies from the finest bakers in the city. I order fresh fruit and enough flowers

to fill the apartment, even though we'll leave for Heartstone in a day or so. It doesn't matter.

Nothing matters except keeping her happy. Every minute of every day for as long as I have the chance.



Wednesday evening, I rub my hands over my face trying to get my tired eyes to focus on one more page of this bloody exchange contract so I can get this finished. I'm already later than I meant to be. Omeika will be waiting for me to take her out for the fancy dinner I have booked tonight.

I can't believe her small body accepted me at all, let alone multiple times that evening. I lost count. Then again the next day. By the end she was sore. I know she was. She wouldn't admit it until I pushed her, though. Even then it was with a laugh rather than accusation.

She's a fucking miracle. My *kuna*. I just need to figure out how to let her know what I've done.

In my guilt, I might have gone overboard and reserved a table at the seven best restaurants in Heartstone to celebrate. I didn't realize how terrifying it would be to take this step. I never even hoped she would agree to be mine for real. Now that she has, I'm in awe. I can't help thinking any moment she'll come to her senses. Now I'm not paying, I have absolutely no hold on her and that frightens me. The only thing keeping me sane is the way she looks at me like she means every word.

Finally finishing the page, I close the file and lock my screen. I stand and stretch, groaning at stiff joints my stressed mind has hardened more than usual. A tap at my door makes me look up.

Bubbrur walks through the door, looking a little anxious and holding out some papers to me. "Good evening, sir. Are you on your way home? I was hoping to catch you. I just need you to check these before you go."

I scowl. “Can’t they wait until tomorrow? I’m already late.”

He grimaces. “I’m afraid not, sir. The bid is due in today. I’ve already requested an extension until nine p.m. to have time to finish everything.”

I sigh. My unexpected trip to Iceland held things up here. Now, my staff is working overtime to compensate. It’s not their fault I can’t seem to concentrate lately on anything except Omeika.

Holding out my hand, I take the documents and sit down again. “Thank you. I’ll finish these and bring them to you on my way out. And I want you to take some flex time this week.”

He blinks at me. “Are you sure?”

I huff. “Yes, I’m sure. You’ve worked too much overtime. Don’t think I don’t know. It’s my fault everything has been such a rush.”

“Ah... thank you, sir.” He shifts nervously.

I wave him away. “Go on. Go get a piece of cake from the bakery down the street and charge it on the company account. I’ll get these done as soon as I can.” Gnomes are suckers for sweets.

It only takes me half an hour to check through the documents and sign them. When I collect my bag, page Thrubbne to bring the car around, and walk out past Bubbrur’s desk, he’s not there. I hope that means he took himself out for something to eat. He’s been looking a little thin and worn around the edges lately. I should take better care of my people.

When I collect Omeika and she slips into my car next to me, placing her little hand on my thigh, all the worries burn off in the flare of heat and comfort just seeing her gives me. She smiles and makes small talk all the way to the restaurant, not fazed by how quiet I am when I just want to bask in her presence.

She’s written a new chapter of her monster encyclopedia about kraken and how they identify their fated mates. I’m

impressed all over again at the scope of her project and her drive to systematically catalog all the useful lore we should all share. It's astounding no one has thought to do something like this before. We all need to share this world.

As we walk from the car to the restaurant, she slips her little hand in mine. Despite the fact she could do a hundred times better than me, I don't let that bother me when everyone turns to look. I even find myself smiling when I notice the waitress's eyes widen as we walk in. I tell myself she's just amazed at Omeika's beauty, which very well could be true. In fact the smile she gives us after the first moment of shock might very well prove it.



EIGHTEEN

Omeika

I stare at the email in disbelief.

Dear Ms. Thornton,

We regret to inform you that your position at Heartstone State Library has been terminated due to a finding of inappropriate conduct.

Your final shift was September 3rd. You will be compensated for any outstanding leave entitlements and will receive a final pay on September 9.

Due to the nature of your termination, you are not entitled to a reference. Your case has already been subject to a review. As such, there is no recourse for appeal.

Any personal belongings can be collected by appointment after hours.

Sincerely,

Harold Burbank

Department of Media and Information Technology

I never actually thought they'd fire me. All over such a petty disagreement.

What do I do now? I can't go back to Monstrous Deals and pick up another client. Dine would hate it. But now he's not paying me and I've got no income from the library. I'm in trouble. Not even a reference.

Yet, I hate to ask Dine for support. I don't want him to think that's all this is to me. I've only just convinced him I'm really into him and not the money.

My worry is interrupted with a phone call.

I look down at my screen, hoping against hope it's Nina saying there's been some kind of mistake.

Nope. It's my mom. But I've been avoiding her calls for a week now, trying to work out how I tell her I'm dating an ex-client.

Pasting a smile on my face so she can hear it in my voice, I answer. "Hi, Ma. You caught me just as I was about to go out. How are you?" I'm not going anywhere, but at least that gives me an excuse if I need to end the call quickly. Yeah. I'm a terrible daughter.

"Oh, are you? Where are you going?"

I should have known I'd never fool her. "How's Auntie? Did you see her this week?"

Ma makes a low little hum in the back of her throat. "That's what I'm calling about. Did you know the council's trying to close down Copper Row? They're just gonna kick out all those people who've been running a business there for years, just for some new motorway they want to build straight through it. It'll cut the heart out of Little Scacliffe I can't even."

"Oh, shit!"

"Omeika Thornton! You watch your mouth."

"Sorry, Ma."

"Hmmp. We're going to fight them. We just need the legal fees. I want you to ring round everyone you know and ask them for help. We're doing a fundraiser and all the businesses on the street are putting something in as a prize. Do you know anyone who could donate? Any of your big shot clients?"

"That's a great idea. But actually I was going to tell you, I'm not taking clients anymore. Don't worry, though. I still have some contacts. Tell Auntie I'll do whatever I can."

"I know you will, baby. Listen, is everything OK? Alaya said you've been having some trouble at the library."

I suppress a sigh. The last thing Ma and Auntie need is to worry about me right now. "It's fine, Ma. It's no big deal. Let me get off the phone and I'll start making those calls, OK?"

“I’ll send you the link. I’m trying to work out what company is responsible for this plan. Auntie thinks it’s Monolith Solutions. They’re the same group that runs the other toll roads in Heartstone. I’ve heard the CEO is a troll. I mean what do you expect, really?”

“It’s not them,” I blurt.

“Huh?”

“It’s not Monolith Solutions, Mama. I know it’s not.”

“Oh, you just know. What makes you so sure?”

I silently roll my eyes. “Just trust me. It’s not them. I’ll see if I can find out who it is. Leave it with me, OK?”

We end the call. My stomach is churning. I’m 99 percent sure it’s not Hisondine’s company. He would never be so callous, would he? Even if he doesn’t know about the connection.

Flicking up a Google search, I enter some search terms and start to read. It doesn’t take me long to confirm I was right. It wasn’t Dine. In fact, it’s a company with a name that looks strangely familiar. Gruffio Bros. Gruffio, like *Antonio Gruffio*?

Bringing up their website only takes a couple of extra clicks and finding a portrait of the owners makes me seethe. Antonio Gruffio and his two brothers smile big fake smiles at the camera, their filed down horns hidden beneath their curls.

That sly bastard! Why do I feel like there’s more behind this than simple coincidence?

That’s ridiculous, though. How would Antonio know Satin Styles is connected to me? Wouldn’t he be more interested in going after Dine’s company anyway?

I try to put it out of my mind. I make the phone calls I promised I’d make and I end up getting a donation of a harbor cruise and a night’s stay in an inner city hotel to add to the fundraiser. By the time I’m getting ready for my dinner date with Dine, I’m feeling a little better.

It makes me mad, though, that people still have such a bad impression of Dine. Even after we’ve been dating—fake and

otherwise—for weeks. I’ve seen him smile more in public and talk to his staff warmly instead of grunting at them. I just wish it wasn’t so hard for other people to see beneath the rough exterior to the softhearted guy hidden there.

Tonight he’s taking me to Las Tres Vientos, the most well renowned Mexican place in Heartstone. I’m surprised he chose it. It’s not as fancy as the other places he’s taken me recently. Not that I mind. I love Las Tres Vientos. I’ve only ever eaten there once before with some of the girls from Monstrous Deals. We waited four months to get a reservation, though. I know Dine only made this booking last week. I’m not surprised he got it, though. Not after Thicket.

He’s as appreciative as ever when I slide into his car next to him. His large hand lands on my thigh and his gaze roves over my curves in the slinky gold dress I chose for tonight. It never gets old. I love the way he devours me with his eyes, knowing he will devour me later with that wide mouth and generous tongue. Just the thought makes me squirm.

He gives me a look that says he knows exactly what I’m thinking about because he’s thinking it, too.

I stretch across and place a lingering kiss on his cheek. His low chuckle tells me he also knows my game.

“You should know better than to think I have any restraint in this car when it comes to you,” he says to me. His dark, delicious voice promises he’s barely leashed. “Or anywhere for that matter.”

“Mmm. What makes you think I want you with any restraint left?”

He sighs. “Omeika. That’s not sensible. I thought you were sensible.”

Despite how wonderful our first time was, and all the times after, Dine has never once fucked me without holding back. He’s always so careful. Always insists I’m on top. He even wanted to use the cuffs again. When that didn’t work the look on his face was like he’d committed some crime. I think he

still doesn't trust he won't hurt me somehow. Which is ridiculous.

"Dinner first, my gem. I want to savor tonight. I have to go away next week for work, so it could be days before I get to hold you again."

"Oh, really? When will you get back? There's actually something next weekend I wanted to invite you to." I've been tossing up whether to invite Dine to dinner with my family for a little while. Talking to Ma this afternoon decided me. I want them to get to know him. I know it could take them a little while to get used to me having a monster boyfriend, but I think with time they will. They're so important to me I want Dine to know them.

"I will be back on Sunday. What did you have in mind?"

"Perfect. I want to introduce you to my family."

Dine blinks. "Y-you do?"

Once again, I'm reminded just how little he knows his own value. "Of course. Don't you want to meet them?"

"Very much but, Omeika, are you sure?"

"I'm sure."

"Then I would be honored."

He's quiet for a while as we drive. Traffic is busy, so we're moving slowly. I just lean my head on his side and relax into his presence for a moment. "Did you have a busy day?"

"No worse than usual. And you? Did you hear from the library? Are you able to return to work?"

A nasty jolt of awareness travels through me at the reminder. I still haven't really worked out what I'm going to do. "I heard, but it wasn't good news."

Dine doesn't say anything. It takes me a moment to be ready, to be truthful.

"I was fired." I sigh. "Turns out they didn't believe the library should be a place of learning." It makes me mad thinking about it. And now those kids will probably have to

rely on all sorts of misinformation and porn to learn, and lord knows that's not healthy.

“Outrageous! Will you fight it?”

I shake my head. “No point. Even if I win my job back, I’ll never be allowed to do the things I believe in. I can’t do that. I guess I’ll have to look for a new job. I don’t know what, though.”

“You don’t have to. Not if you don’t want to. I would support you.”

“No. That’s very kind, but I can’t have you giving me money. That’s too much like sex work, and we’re past that.”

“It isn’t,” he grumbles.

I take his big hand between my two smaller ones and kiss it. “No, Dine. Not now. Let me find a job and support myself. You can still pay for the fancy dinners, though, if you insist.”

He huffs, but I see the soft smile when he looks down at me. “You can’t stop me from doing at least that much.”

Dinner is amazing. The restaurant is buzzing with people and, instead of a private booth or dining room, this time we’re in the middle of the busy main room, surrounded by other tables and laughter and music. I sit tucked against Dine’s side in the brightly painted booth. He wraps one muscled arm around me and stuffs entire tacos into his mouth like canapes; I struggle to eat mine neatly.

I’m licking the salt from the rim of my second margarita when his phone rings.

Dine scowls down at it. “Forgive me. It’s Bubbrur.”

I smile. “That’s OK. I don’t mind. Answer.”

As soon as he does, his frown lines deepen. It’s clearly not good news.



NINETEEN

Hisondine

“We didn’t win the contract, sir.” Bubbrur’s voice is tinged with the usual layers of guilt and angst. The guy really needs a holiday.

“Who did?”

“I’m still looking into it—”

“Well fucking find o—” Omeika’s small hand on my thigh and the frown between her brows makes me pause and take a deep breath. “Please find out. I need to know why they’ve passed us over this time.”

“Yes, sir.” Bubbrur hangs up and I turn back to Omeika.

“Sorry.”

“Is everything OK?”

I sigh. “I was hoping to win the contract for the motorway expansion. I thought it was a sure thing. I run all the toll roads. But it seems that my bid wasn’t good enough.”

She rubs my thigh and, of course, my whole body lights up with a completely different flame. “That sucks. Will it cause problems?”

“It might. The new road is going to be connected to the M3. At the very least construction is going to disrupt traffic and lose me income.” I scowl. “I bet they didn’t go for mine because some bastard came up with a cheaper option which doesn’t involve a flyover. They’ll have to cut right through Little Scacliffe to do that, though.”

Omeika’s eyes widen. “Copper Street? That’s where my auntie’s salon is. I know who got that contract, baby, but you’re not going to like it.”

I stare at her. “You do?”

She nods grimly. “You um... you remember the client I was on a date with when you charged in and stole me?”

I growl. “Can’t fucking steal what doesn’t belong to someone.”

She laughs and her hand slides higher up my thigh. “Mmm, true. But you remember him? Antonio Gruffio?”

I grunt. “Smug little goat.”

“I think you mean satyr.”

“Whatever. I was right, though. Wasn’t I? He’s going to demolish that whole street and for what? To save a few dollars when there’s a better solution.”

She nods. “My auntie and my ma are trying to raise the funds to fight it in court, but they’re still a long way off.”

I grin. “That I can help with. But—” I’m cut off when my phone rings again. Thinking it will be a simple case of telling my assistant I already know who’s won the bid, I answer.

“Yes. Go ahead. You’re too slow, though. I already have the information.”

“Oh... err. Great.”

I go to hang up when he stops me.

“Sir, there’s just one more thing.”

“What is it?” The waitress at the next table turns at my rough bark. I moderate my tone. “What is it?”

“I’m afraid you probably need to look at the news.”

“The news? Can it wait?”

“I’m afraid not, sir. And um, I just want you to know it wasn’t me.” He hangs up before I can ask him to explain himself. With a sigh, I bring up my news app and the third story in the Heartstone Press instantly has my core boiling.

Heartstone engineering mogul accused of bullying staff.

The worst part is my boiling core isn’t hot enough to dull the sting that this is uncomfortably close to the truth. Haven’t I been working them all too hard recently? It’s also true I sometimes have trouble controlling my trollish temper.

Omeika peers over my shoulder and lets out an angry huff. “That’s bullshit!”

“Is it?” I think about Bubbrur’s reaction and the way he ended the call before I even looked at the news.

“Baby.” Omeika’s deep brown eyes search mine. “You’re not going to listen to them are you?”

“What if they’re right? I pay much higher than the award and retention still isn’t as good as I’d like.”

She gives me a little smile. “Well you are sometimes grumpy, but grumpy and bullying aren’t the same things. You treat your staff fairly, don’t you?”

I put aside my tablet and focus on what she’s saying. I’ve never dismissed a staff member without cause. I always compensate them when I ask longer hours or extra duties from them. But I do wonder if I could do better. “Maybe.”

“You could always hire someone to look into it for you. Do it internally.”

“That’s not a bad idea. In fact that’s an excellent idea. Doesn’t win me the contract for the motorway, but it might help repair my reputation.”

“Well, let’s see. If we can make a case against demolishing Little Scacliffe then you might end up with the contract anyway.”

I smile at her. “How do you always make everything seem so simple? Like things are just certain to work out all right?”

“Do I? I hope so, because you always make me feel as if they will.”

I let out another long sigh. “Did I spoil tonight? I wanted to make it special.”

“Of course not.”

Something occurs to me, though, and much as I hate it, I know it will appeal to Omeika. “There’s somewhere else I’d like to take you, when you’re finished here.”

“Home?” She gives me an exaggerated waggle of her eyebrows.

I laugh. “Naturally, but somewhere else first.”

“Well then lead on. I’m ready. I always like it when you plan surprises.”

Just like that I’ve paid and we’re walking from the restaurant hand in hand. I’m not angry. I’m hardly even thinking about the news article, or the failed bid, or any of it. I’m sweating, but it’s only because of my ridiculous distaste for heights.



The clock tower is a new build. My company developed the design to look classic, but it was only finished two years ago. And I’m fairly certain I still have the code to get access.

Omeika shivers a little in the cool night breeze and huddles closer against my side as I trawl through my tablet for the document where I keep a record of these things.

“Found it.” I enter the five-digit code and a little beep from the lock lets me know they haven’t changed it.

The staircase is wide enough to be comfortable for my broad shoulders—a benefit of troll construction. It winds all the way around the insides of the building until it comes out at the top, allowing the clock to be serviced or the time changed. By the fourth set of stairs, Omeika holds onto my arm with a laugh. “I would not have worn these heels if I’d known we were walking up all these stairs!”

I frown. Scooping her up takes hardly any effort, and having her in my arms as I climb the remaining stairs is reward in itself. She throws her arms as far around my neck as she can stretch and grins at me. “I forgot that having an incredibly strong handsome troll boyfriend means I never need to worry about footwear again.”

And yes, I puff out my chest at the praise. “That’s right. I will buy you a pair of every ridiculous designer stilettos you

like and when your feet get sore, I will carry you everywhere.”

She sighs and rests her head against my chest. “Ah, designer shoes. Now you’re talking my love language.”

If she hears the way my heart pounds in my chest at the word love, she must write it off as the effects of carrying her up the five remaining flights of stairs. It isn’t, though. That costs me hardly any effort at all. Instead, by the time we’re at the top, I could practically be floating, and I’m very reluctant to set her down to open the door.

It’s colder on the roof of the tower than it was on the street. I remove my jacket and drape it around Omeika’s shoulders, though it swamps her. I’m reminded of the first time we met. How beautiful she looked even soaked by the rain and scowling. How she made me feel something other than the beast most people see when they look at me.

My gem sees instantly why I brought her up here. “Oh, it’s beautiful.”

I swallow down my fear and follow her to the railing of the balustrade. At least this one is solid metal. I place one hand on either side of her and grip it tightly.

Omeika leans her head back on my chest to smile up at me. “I’m going to miss you when you go away. I don’t know what I’ll do without one of your big warm hugs when I’m out on a cold night, or without you spoiling me. I think I’ve gotten too used to it.”

I want to tell her she should. That nothing will stop me spoiling her for the rest of my life as long as she’ll let me. I want to tell her the truth that’s been burning a hole through my gut since that night on the mountainside. But she still isn’t ready. She isn’t even ready to let me support her financially. If I tell her now, she might run. I can’t have that.

“I will send you presents every day,” I tell her instead.

Omeika laughs. “You know I don’t care about that. I’m only teasing. It’s you I’ll miss.”

“And I’ll miss you, too, my heart.” For a moment I’m balancing on the edge. The words felt so natural. I couldn’t

keep them back. Have I gone too far?

She only sighs. “Now this is savoring. This view is even better than the one from the West Boulevard Hotel.”

I bury my face in her hair and growl. “This view is not what I want to savor.”

“Mmm, what was it you wanted to savor, baby?” She arches her back, pushing that rounded backside against me, teasing me, tempting me.

Though it is an effort, I release the railing and place my hands on her hips, pulling her against me. Omeika sighs and melts into me. Now the height and the drop are forgotten.

My hands slide lower and I tug at the fabric of her dress beneath the jacket. She doesn't stop me. Instead, she places her small hand over my larger one and guides it higher until she can push it beneath the hem of the dress and over her pussy.

I groan when I encounter nothing but slick, warm heat. “No underwear?”

She chuckles. “This dress is too tight for underwear. Disappointed?”

“Fuck no.” I slip my fingers deeper, coating them with her moisture. Earth Mother, she's delicious. Soaked and ready at a touch.

I draw them back and forward over the swelling nub of her clit. Omeika gasps and clutches at me, spreading her legs wider and allowing me access.

“Oh God, baby, just like that. Right there.”

I'm breathing harder. My cock throbs in my pants, though I'm hardly conscious of the moment it hardened.

Her pleasure is everything.

She rides my fingers, gasping and moaning as she grows closer to orgasm. “Please, baby. Let me come on your cock.”

I grunt. “This isn't about me.”

“It is. It’s about us. That means it’s about you, too.”

I can’t resist her. I can never resist her. What she wants becomes my compulsion.

With shaking hands, I unfasten my pants and take out my cock.

As I touch the swollen, hot tip to her slick pussy lips she sighs. “Yes, please, baby. Give it to me right here. For everyone to see if they knew to look.”

I slide home to those words from her. Her body stretches effortlessly to take me.

When I’m fully seated, I let loose a long groan. Being inside her is something I will never take for granted, no matter how many times I’m blessed.

“Do you know how fucking perfect it feels being inside you?” I growl into her ear.

“I think I can imagine from the way it feels having you here.” Her voice is breathy. Her cunt clenches around me.

With one hand, I lift her up so I don’t have to bend so far. With the other, I grip the railing. I’ve never dared to take her so impulsively, without first preparing her. Or in a position where she has so little control over how much of me she takes. I could not stop if the Earth Mother commanded it. Her sweet body sucks me in, holds me tight, and gives me more pleasure than I could have ever imagined.

I can’t help thrusting inside her. In and out, feeling every stroke, every slap of our bodies meeting. I’m going too fast. I’m being too rough with her. I can’t help it.

Pressure mounts. Omeika moans my name.

I should last longer. Should give her pleasure over and over.

When she begins to come, I feel my own orgasm threatening. Then my goddess commands me, “Come with me, baby. Come for me.”

With a roar, I erupt. My seed spills into her, overflows, and drips down her leg. Hot and steaming, glowing slightly in the dim light.

Thank the Mother for the ritual.

Omeika shudders around me as the last of her pleasure fades. I set her gently on her feet. Regretfully, I pull from her body. I give her pussy one last tender caress. “Is it bad that I like the thought of leaving you with a part of me still inside you?”

She turns and tilts her face up for a kiss. “No, baby. Or if it is, I’m bad, too. Cause that’s just what I was thinking.”



TWENTY

Omeika

“Is it true, Meika? Did you really quit?” Tori’s big brown eyes grow wide and she leans across the table waiting for my answer. Cameron rests the tray on the table and offloads the new round of drinks. Then she sits next to Tori.

It’s Wednesday night and I’m out with a couple of the girls from Monstrous Deals. It’s been a while since we all caught up, and I have so much tea to spill.

“Maybe. I hope so.”

Tori grins at me and raises her glass. “Here’s to true love! Where’s *my* big rich monster, huh?”

I cast a guilty glance over at Kirsten sitting in the corner nursing her cocktail and not saying much. At least she agreed to come out.

“I’m not sure we can call it true love yet.” I’m still grinning into my cosmopolitan, unable to help myself. “Not yet, anyway.”

“Come on. Tell us everything.” Cameron rests her elbows on the table and her chin in her hands. “What kind of monster? He is a monster, right? God, how could you go back to human guys after MD?”

We all nod. Even Kirsten. She sighs. “Trust me. Don’t bother.”

“Not good?” I ask her.

She shakes her head and her blonde bangs fall into her eyes. She brushes them away. “I mean, when you’re used to being knotted or eaten out for hours, what chance is there that they’ll compare?”

I reach across and squeeze her hand. “You wanna talk about something else?”

She shakes her head. “No. I want you to tell us all about your gorgeous new guy, and then I want another drink!” She

lifts her glass and drains the last of her cocktail.

“That’s the spirit!” Tori is already up to get her one.

“Well, he’s a troll.”

“Oooh, I heard they’re very well endowed.” Cameron waggles her eyebrows at me.

I grin. “True.”

“But don’t they have like fiery come?”

“Also true.”

She gapes at me.

“Um.... Omeika. Does that mean you can’t actually fuck?”

I shake my head. “There’s a ritual—”

“Oh, oh! I’ve heard about that, too,” Cameron jumps in. “Did you guys do the ritual? The mating ritual? Meika, are you his mate?”

I frown. “Mating ritual? He never said anything about mates. Just that it would stop me getting burned.”

“No, I’m pretty sure it’s a mating ritual.”

Tori returns with another tray of drinks. “What’s going on?”

Kirsten smirks at me. “Pretty sure Omeika just found out she’s mated to a troll!”

“I—” My phone rings at that exact moment, right when I want to ask Cameron about her source. I’d love for it to be true. Isn’t that exactly what I’ve been dreaming of? But until I hear it from Dine’s mouth, I won’t let myself believe it.

I glance down and see it’s Sofia. What could she be calling me about? She knows I’m not taking new jobs. Maybe she needs help with something in the office or the bar. I did say I’d be interested in helping out if she needed someone. “Hello?”

“Meika! Is now a good time to talk? I have a job offer, and I know you said you weren’t taking any more clients, but I have a feeling about this one.”

I'm surprised. Sofia's a clairvoyant. When she says she has a feeling, she usually has a pretty good idea what's going to happen. A new client doesn't make sense, though.

"You have a feeling? For me?"

She's never been able to see anything in the future for me. We've spoken about it dozens of times, but the visions are haphazard. They only come when she's not looking for them.

"I do! It's a little different from normal. I can't explain it, but I definitely think you should consider taking this booking."

"What is it?" I can't help being curious after that introduction.

"It's a lunch date. Tomorrow. A charity cruise raising funds for Hearts in Action."

That sounds innocent enough. "And nothing after?"

"Nothing after. Just a social appearance. And the client is someone you've seen before."

My stomach sinks into my expensive heels. "Who?"

"Antonio Gruffio."

I'm forcing down bile just thinking about it. I'm not even sure why. I don't have actual proof he's doing anything other than trying to run his business, I guess. He wasn't that bad when I went on the date with him, but all I can remember is wishing I was with Dine instead. Yet, this might be the perfect opportunity to ask him about what's going on. To find out if everything with the motorway and my auntie's salon is really just a coincidence. It would make me feel a lot better knowing he's not out for revenge. Surely he wouldn't have requested me if he was. "Can I have a little while to think about it?"

"Of course. Just let me know by ten tomorrow, OK?"

"Yeah, no problem." I hang up and stare for a moment at my black screen.

"You alright, Meika?" Tori's hand on my arm jolts me from my thoughts.

"Yeah. Just an unexpected booking."

Her brows furrow. “But I thought you quit.”

“So did I. Except Sofia says she has a feeling.”

Her eyes widen. “Oh! A feeling! But what about your man?”

“I know. I can’t decide what to do.” The solution is obvious. I’ll ask Dine.

As soon as it occurs to me, I relax again. I pull up my messages and send one to him, hoping he sees it in time. I know he said he’s a few hours behind and he has meetings back to back this evening, but surely he can spare the time to message.

Omeika: Hey, if you see this can you give me a call? I need to ask you about something xx

I stash my phone in my purse and refocus on the girls. I’ll leave it in his hands. If he thinks I should do it, I’ll go. Since Sofia has a feeling, I’m sure things will work themselves out how they’re supposed to.



TWENTY ONE

Hisondine

I press the tips of my fingers to my brow, trying to massage out the headache bugging me for the last few hours. I'm finally finished with the last of my meetings, but now it's the middle of the night back home. Omeika is surely asleep. I don't want to call and risk disturbing her if she is.

I'm dying to talk to her, though. There's nothing that cools my core like hearing her voice at the end of a long, tiring day. I decide to lie down and rest my eyes for a few hours, then try again once it's morning in Heartstone.

I feel like I've barely shut my eyes when I open them to find I've overslept. A glance at my tablet tells me it's almost nine-thirty back home. I struggle to sit and blink at the screen in the dim light of my hotel room. Then I spot her messages.

Omeika: Hey, if you see this can you give me a call? I need to ask you about something xx

Omeika: I got a request for a new booking. I wasn't going to take it, but it's Antonio. Pls call me. I'm not sure what to do

Omeika: Sofia says she has a feeling

Omeika: what if this is the way we solve the issue with the motorway bid?

Omeika: I'm going to go. It's only lunch. Nothing else. If you see this before 10, call me and I can cancel.

I don't like this. I don't like it one bit. That little goat is up to something, I feel it in my molten core.

I check the time again. Nine thirty-seven.

I dial her number. She doesn't answer.

I let out an angry roar and try again. Still nothing.

Searching for my things and shoving them into my bag, I dial Bubbrur. I only just remember to take a breath and not bite his head off when he answers.

“Good morning, sir. How is the weather in London?”

“Miserable. Isn't it always? I need your help with something, please.”

I can practically hear the astonishment in his silence, reminding me once again why I need Omeika. It's only since she's come into my life that I've even thought to use a word like please when I'm asking Bubbrur for something.

“Yes sir. What can I help with?”

“I need you to track Omeika's phone again. Do whatever you did last time. I need to know where she is, and then I need you to make sure she's safe until I get there. I don't care what you have to do. Legal or illegal. I will wear the consequences. Just do it.”

“Sir, do you have a reason to believe she's in danger?”

“Yes. No. I don't know yet. I just can't risk it. I'm on my way home. Get someone to cancel my day if you have time, but the other task gets priority, you understand?”

“Yes, sir. Of course.”

“Thank you, Bubbrur. I know I can count on you.” I hang up and pray to the Earth Mother he doesn't let me down. He never has before.

I snatch my wallet from the table and stuff it into my bag and dial reception. “I need a car to the airport as soon as possible.”

“Certainly, sir. Is everything OK? Everything was to your satisfaction?”

“Yes. Something's come up. I'm leaving today. Can you arrange it?”

“Of course. Leave it with me.”

On the way to meet my private jet, I call Omeika again. Still nothing.

The lava in my core is boiling so violently by the time I get to the airport I can hardly talk to the staff there. I somehow get

on board my jet without killing anyone and pace restlessly until I get a message to say they've located a pilot.

Just as we're about to leave, Bubbrur calls. "Sir, she's out on the harbor. I can't be sure, but it looks like a private vessel."

"Then why won't she answer her phone?"

"I'm not certain. It could be reception out there isn't great. It might not be anything to worry about."

"She said she was going on a date with Antonio Gruffio. I trust that little turd as much as I'd trust Hvannadalshnukur to be clear of snow. He's up to something."

"Shall I see if I can find out where he is?"

"Yes. Excellent. And call Monstrous Deals. See if they know."

"Yes, sir. I'll take care of it."

I'm forced to switch on airline mode and sit as the jet gets ready for takeoff. I'm still stewing hours after takeoff. The only good part of this is I'll know for sure there's something wrong if I land and she still hasn't called. There's no way she'd leave my messages unanswered for hours unless she had no choice.



As soon as I switch on my tablet, I get a call from Bubbrur. "Mr. Gruffio was definitely at the harbor today. The dock authorities say he went out in his private yacht. And Monstrous Deals say Omeika went out on a job. They won't tell me with who. Though they agreed to speak with you when you land if she hasn't contacted them to check out of the job."

"Fine. Anything else?"

"I've hired three jet skis and a speedboat, sir. They're docked by the east pier."

"Bubbrur, you're Mother's soil. There is a very large bonus in this for you if I find her safe. When. When I find her

safe.” Fuck I hope I’m wrong.

“Thank you, sir. I’m glad to help.”

Thrubne is already waiting for me when I step out of the airport. As soon as I slide into the big leather seat, I tell her to head straight for the east pier. Then I call Monstrous Deals.

“Welcome to Monstrous Deals. How can we help make your dreams come true?” The warm voice of the human female I’ve come to recognize answers almost immediately.

“You can start by sending your security team to go find Omeika,” I snap.

“Mr. Hisondine?”

“Yes. Who else?”

“I’m very sorry, sir. I know your assistant called earlier, but for privacy reasons, I can’t discuss our workers’ location or safety with clients.”

“I’m not just a fucking client. I’m her mate!” I’ve never said it aloud before. It feels so right I can’t even remember why.

On the other end of the call, the woman sucks in a breath. “I... would know if you were lying. But I had a feeling. There’s something I’m not seeing.”

“What are you talking about?” I growl.

“Mr. Hisondine, we take the security of our workers very seriously, but Omeika’s on an approved booking, and we have no reason to believe she’s in danger.”

“Then you’re wrong! Come or don’t come. But I will find her. And if I find out you had a hand in putting her into danger, you’ll find me relentless in pursuing revenge.”

I hang up before she can argue. There’s nothing she’s going to say to change my mind. As usual, I’m on my own. Even other monsters believe most of the superstition about trolls.

We’re closing in on the east pier, but traffic is congested. I had to close a lane on the fucking M2 today for roadwork,

didn't I?

As the car slows, a huge, furry tan and gray shape darts past the window at eye level. If I didn't know better, I'd have said it was a shifted werewolf. Moments later, a huge winged shape in the sky has me squinting through the glass. It's too big to be a bird. Damned if it doesn't look like a gargoyle. Only it's the middle of the day.

When we stop by the pier, though, I find both monsters waiting for me. As I step from my Hummer, the werewolf sits up straighter, his intelligent blue eyes assessing me. The gargoyle jumps down from a nearby car and folds his wings behind his back. He holds out his left hand—the one not crisscrossed by a network of scars. “William du Busson at your service, and this is Maurice Wells. Sofia sent us to help you make sure Omeika is safe with her apologies. Omeika checked in to update her booking an hour ago. According to the app, she's safe and sound on board the cruise with her current client.”

I scowl. “There is almost no one I'd trust less than that arrogant little goat. This will be just another move against me.”

William and Maurice look at each other. Maurice whines and licks his long tongue over his sharp teeth.

William looks back to me with a shrug. “I understand, brother. My mate also worked for Monstrous Deals up until recently. And it's true. Sometimes jobs do go badly. But Sofia screens clients very carefully. What makes you think this guy is up to no good?”

I grunt. “Gut feeling.” It's true. I don't have a better reason, other than the look of pure hatred on his face the last time I saw Antonio, or that he's made a bid deliberately undercutting mine on this motorway contract, and he's looking to move into transport, which has never been part of his business portfolio.

William nods. “Let's go check on her, then. But bear in mind that you could be wrong.”

“I’m not wrong.” I fold my arms across my broad chest. These guys are big, but neither of them would be a match for me in a fight. I hope they don’t try to fight me, though. Together they’d certainly slow me down.

To my surprise, William grins. “Then we’re right behind you. Have you got a vessel? I’m strong, but I’d not like to try to lift you.”

The werewolf barks out a wolfish laugh and I shake my head. “It won’t come to that. My assistant hired some jet skis and a speed boat. Damned if I know how to drive them, though.”

“I can help with that, sir.” Thrubne pokes her knobbly gray head out of the driver’s side of my car with a grin. “Got my license last year, in case you ever expanded your garage.

I stare at her. “You never told me.”

She shrugs. “There was never a chance, but I’ve been hoping. Driving a speedboat is even more fun than a motorbike.”

I blink in astonishment. “Motorbike?”

“Yes, sir. They’re great fun. Now should we go? I thought you wanted to save your mate!”

William spreads his huge leathery wings and leaps into the air. “I’ll follow from above.”

Maurice and I leap onto the back of the boat behind a grinning Thrubne, nearly capsizing the damn thing. As we take off, I grip the rail and hold on for dear life. If there’s one thing trolls hate almost as much as heights, it’s deep water.

If I fall in, I’ll sink straight to the bottom and it’ll take a crane to lift me out again. Wisely I decide not to fall in and pray Thrubne’s as good as she says.



TWENTY TWO

Omeika

It's getting late.

I smother a yawn when Antonio insists on making one last round of the party with me on his arm. People are everywhere—mostly human—and I still haven't found a chance to have a private word with him.

Instead of being able to ask him about the bid and the motorway, I've been forced to bite my tongue and smile and agree when he boasts to everyone about how good we look together. He's still a paying customer and I don't want to let Sofia down.

"You look tired, bella. Would you like me to take you back to the pier now? Have you got a ride home? Will I escort you?"

"Oh that's OK. I'll get an Uber from the pier. I hope you had a nice time."

"Wonderful. Thank you. You look just beautiful as always. I knew I wouldn't be disappointed when Miss Sofia told me you'd agreed to my booking."

I smile again, though my cheeks feel tight, as if I'm straining the muscles.

I reach into my purse and fumble for my phone. When I can't find it, I open the bag to stare down into the empty pocket where it should be.

"Ah!" Antonio holds it out to me. "Forgive me. You dropped this earlier and I had been meaning to return it."

I take it, feeling strange about the exchange, but unsure why. This whole day has been strange. Antonio said nothing about our last date and I didn't bring it up, wanting to stay in his good books and not make things awkward. Now this.

I'm just about to unlock it to request an Uber and check my messages, when he takes my elbow. "This way, bella. My

yacht is here and I don't want to keep the captain waiting.”

Stashing my phone for now, I follow him to the deck where we're lowered onto his yacht. This vessel is just as fancy as the cruise ship that hosted the charity function. It's smaller, though. There's a main deck with fancy white loungers and a shade sail, and a main cabin with a kitchenette and dining table. Below there's probably bedrooms. Though thankfully, Antonio makes no move to show them to me.

“Would you like a drink?” He goes to a small bar fridge and gets out a bottle of champagne, popping it open before I've answered.

“Just a small glass. Thanks. Now it's just us, there was actually something I was hoping to ask you about.”

He hands me the champagne flute and sits opposite. Surprisingly, he doesn't have a glass of his own. I sip the wine distractedly. It's probably very good. I can't really taste it, though. My mouth is bitter with worry.

“Ask me anything, bella. We have plenty of time.”

This comment seems odd, but I brush it off, considering how best to word this. “It's actually related to your work.”

“Go on.” He leans back, stretching his arm out on the back of the sofa.

“Well, I noticed that your company won the bid to build the new motorway. There's no way you could have known this, but by a strange coincidence, I'm connected to that motorway in more than one way. You see, the section of Little Scacliffe you're proposing to demolish is where my auntie runs her salon.”

“Oh, I know.”

I blink. Somehow that wasn't the response I was expecting. I was leading up to telling him about Dine and ask if there was some kind of rivalry. “You did?”

“Oh yes. And I know that your troll lover has an interest in the motorway contract as well. In fact, that's why I chose that

project. You see, I needed to demonstrate to you why you made a mistake.”

“Antonio—”

“Hear me out. I could make all of this go away. Wouldn’t you like that? He can’t do that for you, can he?”

“In exchange for what?” I glare at him.

“For you. For us. For upgrading. It’s really not even a question, is it?”

My mouth drops open. Is he for real? “Never. I would never sell myself like that.”

He scoffs. “Well I think we both know that isn’t true. Is it really so different?”

“Yes! God, if you can’t see that, then you’re stupid.”

Instead of getting angry, Antonio just shrugs. “Perhaps you will feel differently in a few days. In any case, I’m not letting you go until you’ve had time to think properly about what I’m offering you. I outbid your troll. I outwitted him. And I will do so every time. I want you to remember that.”

He gets up and inclines his head to me as if anything he’s done so far demonstrates any kind of respect. Before I know it, he’s disappeared below deck and I’m alone, gazing in astonishment at the choppy waves of the harbor.

The boat has come to a complete stop now and it seems like Antonio’s plan is just to wait it out until I give in to him.

He might think I’m just going to sit here like a damsel in distress, but that’s never been me. I fish out my phone and blink down at it in surprise when I find no new messages. It’s been hours. I thought Dine would have seen my calls and texts by now. Then I spot the ‘no signal’ symbol at the top of the screen. Which is stupid. The harbor is right near the center of Heartstone. There’s no way reception’s that bad out here. I just knew Antonio was up to no good. When I open the case, I see straight away there’s no SIM.

Seething, I go to the door below deck and try the handle. Locked!

I'm just weighing up whether to search for a lifejacket or try finding the captain first when a dark shape above me blocks the stars. A moment later the roar of an engine over the waves has me rushing to the side of the vessel. "Hey! Hey! Can anyone hear me! I've been kidnapped. Please help!"

The dark shape grows larger. Two bat-like wings stretch out wider than any bat could ever stretch. There's a thud and a huge burly gargoyle lands on the deck beside me, alarmingly rocking the boat to and fro.

"Omeika? I'm William. I'm working for Monstrous Deals. Your mate is on his way and we'll have you safely off this boat in moments."

I gape at him. "Mate?"

He frowns. Before he can answer, Antonio bursts out of the little door and comes to a halt, staring at William. "Just how many monsters are you seeing, Omeika?"

"None of your damn business!" I fire back immediately.

Another crash rocks the boat again. I grab the handrail to steady myself and look up to see a furious Dine launch himself over the side of Antonio's yacht and straight at the satyr.

"I warned you!" he roars.

Antonio backs away quickly. He darts around furniture and across to the other side of the deck.

"I fucking warned you." Dine mows through chairs and sofas, tossing them over the edge, flinging glassware and fixtures around. "If you so much as touched a hair on her head —"

"Ah yes. Here come the threats." Antonio seems remarkably smug for someone dodging certain death with every swipe of Dine's long arm.

I hardly notice the huge shape of Maurice's shifted form vault over the handrail until a growl draws my attention. Maurice and William position themselves between Antonio, Dine and me, which is probably a very unwise choice. I'm about to tell them they shouldn't get in Dine's way when he's

like this when the air is split with what sounds like a hundred ear-piercing sirens and flashing lights almost blind me.

Maurice howls. William grimaces, and Antonio smirks.

Only Dine doesn't seem to notice at all. He takes the opportunity to charge straight at Antonio, lifting him by the collar to hold him against the wall of the cabin. "If you so much as touched a hair of my mate's head," he growls. "I'll make your death as slow and unpleasant as possible."

His words send a delightful shiver through me. Not that I want him to kill Antonio, but that word on his lips. I can hardly believe it's real.

Then things are happening far too quickly for me to put the pieces in logical order.

Maurice has shifted back to human form. Which means there's a very tall, very naked man running toward Dine and Antonio, trying to get Dine's attention. "We have to go. Let him go!"

Dine snarls and swipes at Maurice with a rocky fist. Maurice dodges and William leaps in, grabbing at Dine's other hand. Oh, this is not good. I know what I need to do, I just can't get to him. He needs to hear my voice and feel my hands on his body, but I can't reach.

I'm screaming over the shouts and the sirens, but he can't hear me. I can't hear myself.

Three police officers clamber over the railing and a bright white spotlight shines directly on Dine and Antonio. "Hands above your heads. Drop any weapons. Monster human violence bears a no tolerance policy. We are authorized to use whatever force is necessary to subdue supes who won't cooperate."

Maurice and William instantly lift their hands above their heads, stepping back. Antonio is pinned to the wall and can't move.

Only Dine seems not to have heard the order. Seems not to be aware of the bright spotlight, or the blaring sirens, or any of it.

I rush forward, rubbing my hands up his back as high as I can reach. “Let him go, baby. You have to let him go. It’s time to stop.”



TWENTY THREE

Hisondine

The softness in her tone is the first thing I'm consciously aware of through the fog of boiling rage that has hold of me. Then her small hands on my back and her scent.

With a massive effort, I focus on her words.

“Baby, let him go.”

I grunt and force my fingers open to release Antonio's neck. He gasps in air as he collapses to the floor of his ugly boat.

“Step back, ma'am.” An unfamiliar voice calls from behind Omeika. I spin; only then do I register there are seven sea patrol officers and two Anti-Supes Task Force guards either on deck or surrounding the vessel.

Antontio coughs weakly. I don't dare look around or I'll lose my cool again.

Very slowly, Omeika steps away from me and raises her hands in the air. Then I realize everyone is looking at me. Of course they are. Furniture and glassware lay smashed all over the deck of the yacht. Its owner is a crumpled mess behind me. I was moments away from crushing the life from him. Not that I regret it, but I know what it looks like. A troll on the rampage. The old stereotype. We can't control ourselves. We're dangerous.

“Don't make any sudden moves,” a female officer says. She has the largest weapon I've ever seen resting on her shoulders. I recognize the blaster. It's a cold water jet. Designed to spray icy cold water in a deluge over a boiling troll to freeze him in his tracks. Only, I've known them to be so cold the unfortunate troll ends up shattered.

I swallow. My core's not boiling anymore, but I'd still rather not risk it.

I spread my hands wide and gradually raise them above my head.

Then everything happens so fast my head spins. One of the ASTF officers fires a blast net, another grabs Omeika and hauls her away from me. She protests, but they ignore her.

I'm hot again instantly. "Don't touch her!" I struggle, but the net restricts my movements. I'm tangled.

"Baby, it's fine."

Clearly, it's not fine. She reaches for me, but a man with a short cropped buzz cut and an angry sneer grabs her around the shoulders and restrains her.

That's when I lose my shit.

The world turns into a vicious red blur. A voice roars in my ears, or maybe it's the sound of my core exploding from me in hot waves. I lash out. Someone to my left goes crashing over the side of the boat with a splash. There's a yelp and a bark, and a flash of tan and gray fur.

The zing of a taser makes my hair stand up on end.

A loud, high-pitched scream from Omeika cuts through everything and an icy blast of water hits me in the face. I stumble. I'm downed to one knee, my limbs stiff and unresponsive.

Then I realize it's because a werewolf and a gargoyle hang from each of my arms. So much for allies. A heavy chain is cuffed to each wrist and ankle. I'm bound. Someone is reading me my rights, such as they are. I ignore him.

Where's Omeika? Where's my mate? "Where is she?!"

A snarl from Maurice beside me catches me by surprise. "If you don't let his mate come to him, he'll probably break these chains or kill himself trying. And there are two witnesses here to give evidence about exactly why it happened."

I cringe. Yet I can hardly blame the werewolf for using the term I'm sure I threw around earlier. I just haven't had a chance to explain to Omeika.

A moment later, Omeika rushes forward and every rigid knotty surface softens as soon as her hands are on me. “Baby, are you OK? They have to take you in for questioning. Please, just go with them. I’m fine. OK? I’m fine. I will be there as soon as they let me see you again.”

I shake my head. “You don’t have to.”

“Shhh.” Already someone is trying to guide her away. “I want to.”

I’m hauled to my feet by the chains binding my arms behind me and no less than four officers tugging on it. “I’m sorry,” I whisper.

I wish I had time to say more. To explain about the ritual and why I never mentioned the mate claim until now. It’s only now I’m being torn away from her I realize how badly I’ve been in denial this whole time. I’ve been telling myself I could let her go if she didn’t want me. That I’d never force her to stay against her will.

I know now I’d do anything to keep her with me, including unlawful, unethical things.

Anything.

But if she’s gone before they release me, then it’ll be too late. She couldn’t possibly mean the things she said.

They use the life raft mechanism to lower me into the sea patrol vessel and the team of humans cart me off to shore like cargo. I’m too numb to resist. What’s the point? I’ll crack my shell if I struggle in the state I’m in. So I have to hang onto hope that if there’s one thing I know about Omeika Thornton is she doesn’t say something she doesn’t mean.

She doesn’t, though, does she? If that’s true, she’s meant every beautiful thing she’s ever said about me. Every time she ever called me handsome or told me she wanted my pleasure and my happiness.

She’s a fucking miracle and I pray to the Mother I get the chance to tell her that.



I pace behind the heavy metal and perspex door of my cell, fighting the urge to rip it from the hinges and crush anyone in my path as I find the most direct way of getting to Omeika. Only I can't help imagining how disappointed she'd be in me if I did it.

So I stay and I pace, and I curse and I snarl.

I do put a dent in the wall. OK, several dents. Doesn't do anything to make the place look any fucking uglier than when they put me in here. I suppose I'll send a donation to the mayor's office to compensate the council. If they ever let me out.

A bolt thunks and the door opens. An older officer enters. The spiked Anti-Supes Task Force badge is pinned to his neatly pressed uniform. His salt and pepper gray hair is neatly styled. He regards me carefully. Another man behind him steps into my vision holding the enormous blast gun ready. I sigh and pause my pacing to slowly spread my hands in front of me. "You can put that thing away."

The officer with the blast gun continues pointing it fixedly at my chest.

"I'm glad you seem to be a little more lucid," The older man says.

"You'll find me a lot more cooperative when I'm granted basic rights and if you tell me where my mate is."

He makes a low humming noise. "Mmm. My first duty is to ensure the safety of the other humans in Heartstone. That includes my fellow officers and the woman you're referring to. There's no official paperwork."

I clench my fist and breathe deep, willing my core to settle. "No. There hasn't been time. It's a delicate situation."

He lifts a brow. "I'll tell you what's delicate. Human flesh. Human bones. There's no way a beast like you mating a human should be legal."

“I—” Isn’t that the same thing I thought before I took her. How can I blame him? “She’s stronger than you think.” The words sound lame, even to my ears.

The man scoffs. “Then when we get her in here and take her statement, she’s going to say she consented to everything, is she?”

“Yes!”

“To being mated to an ugly creature like you?”

I growl. She consented to the ritual. But what about the mate bond? Fuck! I haven’t even explained it to her.

Just then a familiar voice in the corridor catches my attention. “No, you said if I came down here I could see him!”

“We need you to answer some questions first.”

Omeika rounds the corner, striding ahead of a harried young officer in her patent leather heels and a tight black business dress that still looks like every dirty dream I’ve ever had. “The hell with that.”

Her bright smile when she catches sight of me chases away my demons.

“Baby! I came as soon as I found out where they had you. Are you OK?”

“Forget me.” I ignore the two officers between us. My attention is completely on her. “Are you OK? Did they arrest Antonio?”

She sidesteps the guy with the blast gun, whose mouth drops open. The older officer half turns, still keeping his eye on me. “Miss, you can’t come in here. This troll is dangerous.”

Omeika just laughs. “He’s not dangerous to me. Only to anyone stupid enough to get in my way. Now are you going to be that person?”

“I thought I told you to get that statement.” The officer shouts down the corridor at his younger colleague.

“Sir, I tried, but...” He waves his arms to indicate my fierce and beautiful mate who walks up and lifts her arms until

I pull her up for a kiss.

The officer is sputtering some retort, but I can't focus on him. All I know is she's here in my arms and she doesn't seem mad at me at all.

"I'm sorry, baby. It was a bad idea to take that booking. I hope you know I only did it to get answers."

I nod. "I know. I'm sorry I wasn't here. I'm sorry it took so long for me to get to you."

"Thank goodness, you did come. Though I get the feeling it was all a big set up to trap you into getting arrested. I'm afraid we played right into it."

I scowl. I can't believe I was outwitted by that goat.

The third officer is back. "Um, sir. There's a woman on the phone. Says she's Mr. Hisondine's lawyer and she's filing a complaint against inhumane treatment and unlawful holding of a prisoner without due process."

"What!?"

I frown. I'd be surprised. I didn't get to contact my lawyer. I haven't been allowed a phone call. Omeika grins. "Sofia recommended someone."

Earth Mother's bounty, this woman is a miracle.

Less than an hour later, I've had all my belongings returned to me and we're leaving the ASTF station to get into the familiar car waiting for us. As soon as the door is closed, Omeika hikes up her tight skirt and slides into my lap.

Then she slaps me on the shoulder. "Mate! Mate! And you didn't tell me?"

I wince, unable to meet her gaze. "I'm sorry. I won't hold you to it if you don't want it."

"Don't want it? Are you kidding me?"

I look up into her beautiful brown eyes. "Then you'll consider it?"

“I’m only mad you didn’t tell me sooner! Don’t you know I’m crazy about you?”

I grin. “I didn’t let myself hope.”

“Well I am. And I’m going to show you just how much as soon as we get you home.”



TWENTY FOUR

Omeika

Dine's large hands linger at my hips and his hot breath fans the back of my neck as he follows close behind me into his apartment. "Would you like to lie down?" I ask him. "You must be tired."

"Only if you're on top of me," he growls. "I need to be inside that sweet little pussy."

Of course my core tightens and I shiver at his words. That's exactly what I want, too. It feels like it's been too long. I just feel bad because he's been locked up all night.

I turn and reach for the buttons of his torn shirt, pulling him as I walk backward into the bathroom. "Then let's get you out of these ruined clothes and all cleaned up."

He lets me undress him, bending to help when I can't reach to push the shirt off his broad shoulders. I run my palms down his front, appreciating every solid muscle and firm bulge. I love that the texture of his skin is like weathered rock. I love the way his body feels under my touch. And I love the blazing red eyes that devour me as I take my time with him.

When I've finally got him naked, I switch on the water. Then I give him a bit of a show as I undress. I slip my heels off one by one. I reach back and unzip my skirt oh so slowly.

He groans when the skirt slides down over my hips. I pause and give him a look.

"Fuck, woman. Would you hurry? I need to see that perfect body."

I just smile and continue my slow undressing. Next my top. Then the clasp of my bra.

I hold the cups over my breasts a few moments longer until he curses, then I let it fall to the tiles.

Dine steps forward, but I stop him with a single finger in the center of his chest. "In the shower, baby."

He groans, but follows my direction. He stands under the water spray, eyes fixed on me as I slip my panties over my hips and straighten.

Dine lets out a long, shaky breath. “My gorgeous mate. How did I ever get so lucky?”

I smile. “By being kind. By stopping to help when you saw me in trouble, even though you didn’t want to.”

He chuckles. “I didn’t. I knew as soon as I got close I was in trouble. Look at those wide hips, those full breasts. Fuck! I had no chance.”

I run my hands over my hips and up to pluck at my nipples. “Well I’m glad you did. Look how lucky I am.” I watch the water sluicing over broad muscled shoulders. Down a chest and belly I know I can sit on, squeeze, cover with kisses. Huge hands that could circle my neck or span the entire width of my tummy. He makes me feel safe. He makes me feel cared for. And not because I’m weak with him. No. It’s because with him around I’m stronger, warmer, more certain. A better version of myself.

I slide backward onto the bathroom counter, lifting myself onto the cool surface.

“What are you doing?” Dine growls.

In answer, I spread my legs. His complaint turns to a hum of approval.

“Well in that case, continue.”

Dine plants his hands on the shower screen and watches me push my fingers into my wet folds. I gasp, my legs twitch, and I laugh as I circle my already sensitive clit. I keep my movements slow, though I’m desperate to rub quick little swipes instead. I draw moisture from my entrance over the swollen nub and groan when the pleasure mounts.

Dine’s forehead thunks against the glass, but his blazing red eyes never leave me as I rub backward and forward, gradually increasing the speed.

I gasp when my pussy clenches. The sweetness draws my belly button in and makes my toes curl. I don't want to come right now, but the dance draws me into its rhythm and I'm hypnotized by the swelling length of his cock and the feel of my fingers coaxing and building the pressure.

"Want you on my cock," Dine growls.

I couldn't agree more.

Sliding off the counter, I join him in the shower. He spins me and pushes my hands onto the tiles in front of me. I arch my back, presenting my ass and pussy for him. He delves his fingers instantly into my swollen folds and I groan. "Yes, baby. I'm so wet for you. Fill me up."

Instead of giving me his cock like I want, he plunges a thick finger in first. It still stretches me. It's not the same, though, and pretty soon I'm aching for more.

He knows.

Dine pushes another finger into me, increasing the stretch and I gasp, spreading my legs wider. When he can't get enough, he lifts me with one hand and thrusts his fingers further and deeper until I'm speared by him.

I cry out, coming for the first time around his hand, shaking and clenching my fist against the wet tile at the intensity. Then he simply lifts me, positioning me above his massive cock, and lowers me onto it.

I let out a long wail. He doesn't stop. He lowers me until my pussy takes all of him. I don't have breath or words to do anything except cling to his firm hands around my thighs and let him move me.

With any other guy who was strong enough to do this, it would be about him using me for his pleasure. They would be using my body like a living sex toy, being raised and lowered like a flashlight over his cock.

Not my troll.

My sweet troll listens for my indrawn breath. He positions his hips so his giant cock spears me at just the right angle. He

uses every clench of my pussy as his direction, and he drives me to another orgasm even more intense than the first.

My body gushes around him. My belly clenches over and over. Pleasure isn't even enough to describe what his huge cock and his hard body does to me.

When it's over, he gives the first sign holding back this long wasn't easy on him. With a shaky breath and a low growl, he says, "Fuck I'd like to stay here forever."

"I'd like you here forever," I tell him.

He lifts me slowly. There's a slight tremble in his muscles that wasn't there before.

"You need to cum, baby."

He sighs. "I do. Can you take me?"

"Of course." I lean my head back against his solid chest. "Always."

He still lifts me off him. I'm sad at first, but then he turns me so he can enter me again. This time, I'm facing him, my legs flung around his waist. It's even more intense. Even deeper and more intimate.

"Baby, I'm so glad to be your mate."

Dine pauses. He presses his eyes closed for a minute and I can almost feel him struggling to keep control.

He grunts. "Not ready to stop."

I shake my head. "No. Me neither."

"Not ready to stop, but I'm going to come."

"Mmm, baby, I want that. I want you to fill me up."

He shudders. "Meika!"

"Go on, baby. Do it."

With a roar, he pushes into me deep, pinning me against the shower wall. The cool wet tiles feel amazing against my overheated skin. I moan. My body ripples with pleasure, but I don't come again.

Dine gives one final thrust and pauses, chest heaving and forehead bent. “Don’t want to leave you.”

“Then don’t.” I cup his face. “Stay.”

The shower water pounds down around us. Steam billows in great puffs as if it’s trying to hide us from the world.

“I thought trolls could choose to be hard or soft.”

He looks up. “We can. Well, sort of. Sometimes the compulsion to be hard around you is so strong I have to give into it.”

I laugh. “Then stay hard, baby. Stay here inside me.”

“You’d let me?”

I press a soft kiss to his open lips. “I’d let you do anything, baby. My body is yours. You know that.”

He sighs.

“Besides, why should the werewolves and gargoyles have all the fun after-cuddles? You might not have a knot, but you don’t need it. Your whole cock is like a knot.”

He grins and switches off the shower, then walks us to the bed. We’re both still dripping, but he lowers us to the bed anyway, ignoring the wet patches that form on the sheets. His apartment has five bedrooms, so I guess we can sleep in another one if wet sheets are a problem. That’s the good thing about billionaire boyfriends.

But it’s not the billionaire side of him I want so much it hurts. It’s the sweet monster who would crush anyone who harms me, but who touches me and loves me so tenderly no one will ever get close.

I sigh when his movement jostles me on his cock. My pussy gives a little tremble. Maybe I’ve got another one in me, after all.

He sees my smile as it creeps over my lips and shakes his head. “Omeika you will never stop amazing me. Will I make you come again?”

I nod. “Yes, please, baby. Yes, please.”



TWENTY FIVE

Omeika

Ma scoops another giant spoonful of slaw onto the plate and hands it to Dine with the brightest grin. “Eat up. Eat up. Big troll like you’s got to keep up his strength.”

“Ma, I’m not even sure if trolls can eat slaw.”

Dine grins and accepts the plate. “We can when it’s this good. Just hold the steak. Meat doesn’t agree with me.”

“More steak for me,” my cousin says, scooping a second onto his plate. Auntie scolds him, but he ignores her and takes an enormous bite.

It feels cozy having everyone here like this. Even though I was a little nervous my big grumpy troll might not fit in, he seems as comfortable here as I’ve ever seen him. I clearly had no reason to worry about Ma and Auntie. They’ve treated him like royalty ever since he showed them his plans for the motorway flyover. They’ve been like three peas in a pod, heads bowed over his tablet, talking about how he could set an exit ramp to direct more traffic into the district and what renovations the local shops need to make them more attractive to new businesses and customers.

I’m helping Ma with the dishes afterward when Dine ducks his head under the back door and holds out his tablet for me. “Baby, look at this. Guarantee this will make you smile.”

I take the tablet, which is open to the local news site Heartstone Herald. The headline reads:

*LOCAL ENTREPRENEUR UNDER INVESTIGATION
FOR FRAUD, CORRUPTION*

It only takes a scan of the first few lines before the smile curves my lips just as he predicted.

Antonio Gruffio, the CEO of Gruffio Bros and several other high profile businesses, has been arrested following an investigation into claims he bribed local authorities into

giving him illegal access to sensitive government files and employee records. Mr. Morrison, who has been linked to the charges of fraud and corruption, says the billionaire satyr first tried to bribe him to push for his bid to develop the motorway upgrade, before resorting to blackmail and threats. In the aftermath of the accusations, the local government has withdrawn support for the Gruffio Bros contract. Instead they've drawn on the expertise of established local entrepreneur, Hisondine of Monolith Solutions.

I smile up at Hisondine. “Then it’s confirmed? You’ve got the contract?”

He nods. “I just got the call.”

I wrap my arms as far around his solid waist as I can. “Oh, baby, that’s great news.” I let him go reluctantly. “I can’t believe how much Antonio thought he could get away with.”

“That guy is a real piece of work,” Ma says.

We nod.

“Well, that’s made me very happy. There’s only one thing that could make me happier.” Ma gives us a wicked grin.

I eye her cautiously. “What’s that?”

“When are you two going to make me a grandma, huh? Some grandbabies running around the place is just what I need.”

Dine shifts uncomfortably. “Mrs. Thornton—”

Ma hushes him. “I’m sure I told you to call me May.”

“Ah, May, I don’t even know if trolls and humans can have babies.”

I grin. “Well, actually. I’ve been doing some research.” I lift my finger at Ma before she can even start. “That does not mean I need to be getting pregnant right now, though. All I’m saying is, we can.”

“You’re sure?” Dine looks worried. I knew he would.

“There are three other documented cases that I could find. I bet there are more. And besides, the egg is actually quite

small. The baby does most of his growing once the egg is incubating in the soil. Only, I hate the idea of leaving my baby like that.”

He frowns. “Trolls don’t parent. We have to fend for ourselves as soon as we hatch. I did.”

I shake my head. “No baby of mine is fending for himself, no matter how strong and brave he is. Not happening.”

Ma makes a noise of agreement. “Nor my grandbaby, neither.” She folds her arms across her chest and looks at Dine.

He looks a little flustered, but recovers well. “Ah, I will have to look into other alternatives, then. If you’re saying it’s something you want.”

“Of course it is, baby. You’re going to make a great daddy.”

He stares at me. “I am?”

I laugh. “Of course. It’s a shame trolls only have boys. I can imagine you with a daughter. She’d have you wrapped around her little finger as soon as you saw her.”

He laughs, too, and shakes his head. “Just like her mother.”

My ma makes a noise of approval. “Yeah. He’s a keeper.”



I snuggle into Dine’s warm side and tuck my feet under the blanket on the custom-made seat in his private jet. Then I pull back the cover on the incubated glass case one more time to check the small black egg nestled inside.

Dine chuckles. “Does it look any different to how he looked two minutes ago?”

I laugh. “I know, I know, but I can’t help it, baby. I can’t believe we’re going to be parents.”

He shakes his head and tucks me closer with a large arm around me. “I can’t believe *I* will be a parent. You, however, will be perfect. This is going to be one very special, very lucky

troll. The first troll with two mothers: the Earth Mother and his biological mother.”

I grin.

Eventually, I convince myself to relax and pull out my phone to check my email. Still not over the luxury of flying like this.

I’m expecting to hear back from the Mayor’s office about the specifics of the grant I’ve been offered to finish my monster encyclopedia. Turns out not everyone thinks that supes should be ignored or caged.

What I find instead is an email from the department of Media and Information Technology.

Dear Ms Thornton,

Upon review, it seems that there are grounds to support your claim that you were unfairly dismissed. The department has conducted the requested audit of the files we received from your solicitor and we would like to offer you a new contract of employment and compensation for your losses.

It is our hope that this matter can be settled to our mutual satisfaction without the need for a court case. To this end, please contact us if you have any questions or concerns with this offer and we will do our best to negotiate terms which are to your satisfaction.

Regards,

Samira Tolburg

Team Leader, Department of Media and Information Technology

I blink. This is not what I was expecting. Even though Dine hired me an expensive lawyer and we’ve been pursuing this case for months, I expected to have to fight harder to even get compensation. I definitely wasn’t expecting them to offer me my job back.

A few months ago, before I met Dine and got serious about my book, I’d have jumped at the chance to go back to the library. Now...

“Good news?” The satisfaction in Dine’s low rumble is unmistakable.

I twist to look up at him. “Did you already know about this?”

He grins. “The lawyers called me yesterday to say they had good news, but I wanted you to get it in person. So to speak.”

I elbow him in the side, though that does nothing but leave me with a sore elbow. “Baby!” Then I frown. “I know you went to a lot of trouble and everything...”

“But?” He lifts a heavy brow.

“Well, don’t take this the wrong way, but I’m not sure if I want my old job back.”

Dine’s large hand traces patterns on my belly as he waits for me to continue.

“It’s just that I’m so busy with my book and soon we’ll have a little troll to take care of.”

“You know he can take care of himself.”

“Uh uh. We’re not even having that argument. Besides, don’t you want to spend time with him?”

He makes a low rumble deep in his chest. “Of course.”

“Then there’s all the other stuff. The reasons I got in trouble in the first place. I still believe in all that. And I’m not fool enough to think so much has changed that it wouldn’t happen again. Plus Sofia said if I’m looking for work she could use a consultant. Someone to see new workers and be there to talk to anyone wanting advice about tricky clients.”

Dine smiles. “You’d be very good at that. Is that what you want, then?”

I consider. “Is it bad that I’m looking forward to not working a nine to five for a while? Being a stay at home mom? It’s not that I won’t work. I will—”

He cuts in. “You do not have to justify anything to me. I will support you to do whatever makes you happy, because that makes me happy.”

“And I can always look for more library work when I get bored of all that.”

“Mmm. Or I’ll buy you a library for you to run and you can run all the classes you want, and all the teenagers in the city can come to put their feet on the furniture and talk too loudly and read books for the first time in their lives.”

I snort. “You are adorable, you know that?”

Dine scoffs. “I think it is you who is adorable, but it makes me happy to see you smile, so you can call me whatever you want.”

Tossing aside the blanket, I climb into his lap and take his face in my hands. “My adorable sweet-hearted grump. What makes you think you could stop me from calling you anything?”

Despite himself he laughs. Then he pulls me in with a firm hand on the back of my neck. “I don’t want to stop you. But perhaps I can distract you for a while.”

The kiss he gives me is commanding and teasing, and very, very distracting. When we break apart I’m tingling all over.

“Mmm. Yes, please. How much longer is this flight? I might need a little more distracting.”

Luckily, my big cinnamon roll knows exactly how to do it.



THE END

I hope you enjoyed *Treasured by the Troll*. [You can pre-order book 4, *Mastering the Minotaur* now](#)

Have you read the first book in the series, [Deal with a Demon](#)? Waiting for book 4? You can get a sneak peek on my [Patreon](#) where patrons get early access and bonus content including character art, future projects and previews.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ami Wright is a proud history nerd, foodie and tragic fan of trashy reality TV, smutty romance, good wine and too much cake. She loves heroes who burn, pine and (think they're going to) perish for wanting their women, and heroines of every description!

Ami lives in Australia with her partner (who disappointingly is not called Mr Wright) and their two small children. If she ever gets any spare time between writing smut, teaching and mothering, she reads, cooks, watches history documentaries and dreams of the days when international travel becomes a reality again!

You can find out more and connect with Ami at:

<http://linktr.ee/AmiWright>



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