



It's A Little Bit Bunny

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Category: Romance, M-m Romance

Description: For the past few months, Nikolai Lorenz' brain has been a weird place. Things got darker and heavier until the Big Sad drowned out everything that's good about his life. Not even hockey or puppies can lift his mood anymore and he knows he needs help. When his therapist suggests forest walks, he grudgingly follows his orders. He wants back on the roster—and fast. Hockey is the only thing he's good at and his life is even more empty without it. On his first outing he loses his way in the vast forests of the Fichtel Mountains. The old man who rescues him from having to kip under the stars is no other than the elusive Höimann, a dangerous creature lurking in the woods.

The young human wandering through his forest intrigues Jules so much the self-proclaimed hermit reveals himself and takes him back to his house. For two centuries humans have been too scared to approach him but this one? He treats him with kindness.

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One

Nikolai

It took it as a personal offence that fresh air and exercise actually helped with my depression.

My therapist had suggested forest walks, and I hated hated hated that they made me feel better.

The audacity!

I caught myself scowling at the forest as if I had beef with every single fir and laughed uncomfortably.

Someone explain to me how I got lost in a damned granite labyrinth in the middle of Germany, and how the fuck I ended up on this lonely forest path?

You are fucking useless, Nik. You can't even go on a walk in nature without messing things up.

I huffed derisively at myself again.

Come on, Lorenz. Get a grip on yourself. One minor inconvenience and you're being a whiny bitch again. Stop it.

It was about time I got better, too.

My brain has been in a weird place for the last couple of months. My life grew darker and darker until the Big Sad drowned out every good thing in my life.

When not even the dogs I occasionally ran into on my way to the rink could lift my mood anymore, I knew I needed help.

Like any good hockey player, I'd told my coach, and he had answered.

Jerke had stared at me impassively for a long moment, then the man went into emergency mode.

Within a few minutes, he had arranged an appointment at a local hospital. He took me off game duty but still wanted me to be there for training.

“Physical exercise is the most important thing you can do when you are depressed. And we have to maintain your routine, son. We're in this together.” He had gripped my shoulder and squeezed it. “We need you, Nikolai.” Not ‘Lorenz’ like he usually called me.

Nikolai. Son.

Before I had gone to see him, I wasn't sure if it was the right move. But my gruff coach acting as if my mental health was the most important thing to him already made me feel marginally better.

The hospital set me up with a neuropsychiatrist: Doktor Theodor Schmidt.

A low snort escaped me. I'd expected an older man, maybe tall, lean, and with white hair. Instead, Schmidt turned out to be a Badger hybrid with a colourful mohawk and eighteen visible piercings who wore round glasses.

Not my type, but pretty cute.

Halfway into our first session he scheduled me in for more tests and gave me a piece of paper filled with tree outlines.

“What’s that? Colouring in for adults?”

He grinned at me and nodded.

He gave me an outdoor challenge. I despised him—only a little—for guessing that gamification was the way to motivate me to do almost anything.

Except for guitar lessons. My mother had tried to get me to play. But hockey had always won. The sound and feel of the ice under my blades, my team, the fans, the happiness that came with the sport... Hockey was my first love.

I stomped down the forest trail as if it had personally wronged me. It felt like the entire world hated me which probably explained the extent of my mindfuck.

You’re suicidal, Nik, admit it.

But three weeks into their emergency plan I was sure that wasn’t the case. I didn’t want to die. I just needed help to get out of that dark place.

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I wanted to get back on the team as soon as possible, so I vowed to be the best depressed person ever. I'd win this fucking challenge and excel at therapy. Schmidt would have no other choice but to give me the all-clear soon.

Jerke still expected me at practice so at least I got a bit of a hockey fix.

Fuck, I miss competing.

I was there at every game they played in Veitsreuth. Watching from the stands hurt like crazy, and watching them on TV was even worse. I hated having to sit alone in my tiny flat with a bottle of water and a healthy snack and watch the rare moments when Arne's calm held back the team. He hardly ever got penalties and liked his game clean. Bo and I? We fought dirty when we had to. They needed me.

Focus on your challenge. You'll be back on the ice in no time.

After my appointment, I'd pinned the piece of paper from Dr Schmidt to my fridge and bought a packet of coloured pencils so I could colour in the leaves as I completed them. At the same time, I'd picked up one of these colouring books for adults, too.

I'll be so fucking zen in no time.

Then I'd sat down at my laptop and did a search on KrakenMaps. I'd flagged everything that looked remotely interesting, which was about everywhere in the Fichtel Mountains.

Every weekend, I'd vowed, I would go on an adventure. No matter how shitty I was

feeling, or how tempting holing up in my apartment on the edge of Veitsreuth's court garden sounded, I would go.

Today was my first outing. I'd picked the granite labyrinth, which, in all honesty, didn't live up to its name.

Unless you're smaller than a fox, I suppose.

I walked around, following the path. The walls were so low, I could see the middle of the labyrinth. But I still had to walk through it to get there. I was a little offended that I found a parallel between this place and my life.

I could sort of see the goal but insignificant obstacles stood between me and my happiness. Like me feeling like a burden to everyone around me, and the loneliness that plagued me. Feeling lonely in a rink full of thousands of people and as a member of an amazing hockey team was one of the shittiest things I had experienced in my life.

I still nurtured the childish hope that I would find something in these woods, perhaps even myself.

Again, I stopped and turned on the spot. There were no markers on the trees that indicated a path I could follow, no signs pointing back to the labyrinth, the car park, a village...anything.

I had spaced out only for a moment as I entered the forest behind the granite blocks and somehow found myself on this lonely path.

That was over an hour ago.

And what had begun as a pretty Saturday afternoon had turned dark and gloomy.

There's a storm brewing.

I needed to find my way back, and fast. If growing up near the Alps had taught me anything, it was that you didn't want to be outside on a mountain range in a storm.

Yet, even turning around immediately hadn't helped. I must have zoned out for longer than I realised and somehow lost my way.

Perhaps I can find shelter.

The state usually built huts in the forest so people could seek shelter in storms. I wasn't too worried about freezing. It was May, and as a professional athlete, I should have enough strength to survive one night outdoors.

On autopilot, I checked my phone.

Wasn't it Einstein who said that doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results was the definition of insanity?

I huffed at myself. For the last hour, I had gotten no signal. It was as if this neck of the woods didn't exist.

Damn. What if I had had an accident, and this was a figment of my imagination?

I stopped and crouched down in the middle of the path to give myself some space to think. My water bottle was empty, and I had no food on me. The latter didn't worry me, but I should try to find a water source.

Straightening, I peered up at the skies. Dark grey clouds hung like a heavy blanket over the forest.

And I better find it and shelter fast before darkness falls and all hell breaks loose.

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Two

Jules

I watched the human wandering through my forest for the better part of an hour. The human had golden hair peeking out from under his yellow and blue cap, broad shoulders, and a narrow waist. Such an elegant thing he was. He kept himself upright, graceful despite his cursing, and he was dignified even as he held his phone in the air and turned on the spot, trying to get a signal.

Not in these parts of the woods, little human.

I supposed he wasn't exactly small. He was burly and handsome. But what did I know about their kind? Like my fellow monsters, humans steered clear of me. I had given up trying to make them see sense about two hundred years ago. They wanted to vilify me? Fine. Nothing I could do or say would ever change their minds.

My life was more peaceful when I kept to myself. Compared to me, they were like children, anyway. Yet, I couldn't ignore the creature straying so far off the beaten path. The skies spoke of an oncoming storm, and my land was not designed to lead him back to the exit. He might get hurt out there, or worse. He wouldn't be the first one.

The land here was rough. Deep ravines cut through my forest, invisible until the last moment. At their bottoms, heavy rocks lay scattered on the forest floor.

The Höimann got another one.

That was what they said when one of them lay broken down there, on the rocks. Humans looked so tiny in death.

I can't let this one walk to his doom.

I chose a form that I hoped wouldn't intimidate him too much and ventured out of the trees.

"Good afternoon. Are you lost?"

"Holy fucking shit, man!" The human spun on the spot and wheezed as if his heart was about to give out. "What the fuck is wrong with you? You fucking scared me half to death." He clutched at his muscular chest, the breath still rasping in and out.

It sounded like he had just climaxed, and my weak flesh stirred with interest. I despised my body for reacting to it. Deciding to ignore my cock pressing against the long buckskin trousers, I made a show of leaning heavily on my walking stick. Hopefully, I would appear less imposing then.

"I'm sorry for scaring you." I was. Despite the fear these creatures had for me, I didn't like being constantly met with terror. After three centuries, it got a little old.

Back when I had left my mother's castle people had begun to attribute lost children to me. The old hermit who wandered the woods seemed like the only sensible option, of course. It got to a point where they ran away in terror whenever they spotted me.

It was a unique opportunity for me to have a conversation with one of them. This human, at least, didn't seem scared of me at all.

He calmed down and inspected me thoroughly, his cheeks reddening under the dark blond stubble. He seemed flustered at having cursed so much in front of me. Did

humans have different ways of communicating with each other? Depending on what? Age? Gender? Familiarity?

Colour me intrigued.

Perhaps I should have chosen a younger face, someone closer to his age. But over all those years this disguise had become my favourite; I felt safe wearing it.

You are too vain, Jules.

“Are you lost?”

You know perfectly well that he is. You’ve been watching him for an hour.

“Yeah, I am.” The human glanced up at the sky. “I don’t know what happened, but I was in that dumb granite maze and then, all of a sudden, I found myself stuck in the middle of this forest. And there are no fuck—no signs, I mean.”

“No, there aren’t,” I agreed.

“I’m Nikolai.”

My eyes dropped to the hand he extended. It was broad and strong, with smooth skin and short, clean nails.

Mine perpetually bore the appearance of digging in the earth, a consequence of my frequent forays in search of roots and mushrooms. I took it, a little self conscious and uncertain of how to proceed.

“Jules.”

I reciprocated the intensity of his squeeze, feeling the strength in his grip. Warmth and comfort radiated from his touch. The intense fluttering in my chest left me breathless, and I rubbed my fingers over my breastbone to steady myself.

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What is this feeling?

Three

Nikolai

It was sheer luck that I stumbled upon a total daddy in the middle of the forest. His unkempt hair and beard were grey but bright, beautiful green eyes sparkled in the middle of that tangled mess.

After a trim and a shave, he would be a gorgeous silver fox. As much as I'd tried to prepare myself mentally for a night spent in the forest, I preferred this outcome. And this outlook.

Damn, those eyes!

Perhaps she could help me find the way back.

Probably not before the storm hits.

"Nikolai?" A tentative voice pulled me out of my head. It was much softer than it had any right to be.

"What? Oh, sorry." I'd completely spaced out on the man beside me.

"I can't get you to the labyrinth before the storm will be upon us. But my house is close by. You can wait there for it to pass, and then I will help you find the way

back.”

“Okay, that sounds good. Thank you.” It sounded so weird, following this guy anywhere, but I was stuck between a rock and a hard place.

“It’s not far. Come on.”

He set off down a side path. I could not imagine that there was a house hidden anywhere in these dense woods, or that I would ever find the way out of this forest without his help.

After about a ten-minute walk the trees thinned, during which the threatening thunder over our heads got so loud that I was desperate to get inside. A gasp of shock escaped me when I first saw the house. I’d expected a wooden hut, a bit like the house Nate and Vee lived in. But a lot smaller and less well maintained, perhaps. I hadn’t expected this.

Amanorrose before us, made from white sandstone and living trees. It looked more like an enchanted castle than a forest hut.

Who the fuck lives there? Sleeping Beauty?

Blueberries, wild garlic, and plants I didn’t recognise covered the ground around it like a living carpet. And there were birds everywhere. The longer you looked, the more you spotted.

“This is your house?” Turning around to look at the old man, I stopped dead.

He looked not only years, but decades younger, like he was way closer to my age now.

What the fuck is going on?

“Hang on, what happened to your beard?” I asked weakly.

Four

Jules

Ohno.

With Nikolai near and being weirdly...fascinated with the young human, I hadn't paid much attention to my mask.

“I am sorry,” I breathed, prepared to watch him lose his composure and run away in terror. The way he stared at me reminded me of a bunny frozen before the snake.

The human—Nikolai—took a few deep breaths.

“We should get inside before we get drenched.” He gave me a small smile that I tried to imitate. Only now, after he mentioned it, did I hear the soft pitter-patter of the first raindrops on the canopy of leaves over our heads.

“Yes.” I led the way to my front door, only remembering my manners just as I was about to let him into the entrance hall. “Are you scared of animals? My pet, he can be a bit much. He gets very excited.”

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“Never met a dog I didn’t like.” There was that half-smile again, the one that made my stomach swoop. Barnabas wasn’t even remotely close to being a dog, but it would be fine, I hoped.

I called Barnabas after I had closed the door behind us. It took only a few seconds for his mismatched feet to scramble down the stairs.

“Holy shit.” The human gasped before dropping to his knees. Seeing him there unearthed an unexpected but burning desire for him to repeat that for me.

“Hi, baby. Oh my God, who’s a good boy,” Nikolai crooned, petting a wriggling Barnabas between his little antlers. My Wolpertinger was blissed out with joy, grunting and huffing when Nikolai scratched his wing bases next.

I think I’d enjoy being called a “good boy” too.

“He’s so adorable, Jules.” The equally adorable human raised his eyes, his face falling for a moment before he caught himself. “It’s kinda weird to see a different face every time I look at you.” His nose scrunched up and I stared and stared. If I committed his expression to memory and hoped I would never forget it.

“Everything all right?” Nikolai asked me. “Do I have dirt on my nose?” He raised a hand and rubbed its tip. It curved up a bit. “Himmelfahrtsnase,” that’s what they called it. I suppressed a chuckle. It felt like I had ascended to heaven. This beautiful creature in my home was treating me as an equal not like an abomination.

You’re staring and haven’t said a word in a minute, Jules!

“Yes, of course.” I cleared my throat. “Can I offer you something to eat or drink? It will be some time before we can go back out there.”

“All right, buddy.” With one last pat on Barnabas’ back, he rose to his feet. “I’d love something to drink, thanks. I finished my bottle over an hour ago.”

“The kitchen is through here.” I led him down a hallway to the east wing. “Are you sure you don’t want anything to eat? You must be hungry.”

A sturdy human like you.

Five

Nikolai

Without this wild beard and somehow at least fifty years younger, Jules had gone from daddy to twink.

Can’t say I hate it, though.

He wore an old-fashioned linen shirt and long leather trousers that looked buttery soft. Under the lacing at the shirt neck, I spotted lean muscles fuzzed with chest hair the same dark ginger colour as the hair on his head. No longer grizzled and grey, it gleamed like polished copper in the soft lamp light.

I marvelled for a moment at the beauty he’d hidden under that shaggy beard. Jules appeared elegant, like a royal trying to blend in with the peasants, but his high cheekbones and regal aura betrayed him even in the humblest of clothes.

“I made stew today. I craved something more grounding and substantial on a storm day. Would you like some?”

Fuck yes, I'd like some.

What's wrong with you, Nik? Stop it!

"Yes, uh, that sounds lovely, thank you."

"Beer, wine, water? I also have elderflower sirup..."

I hardly ever had alcohol anymore. "Did you make the sirup yourself? Homemade is my favourite."

"I did." Jules gave me a shy smile.

"Then I'd love to try it."

His smile widened as he poured some sirup from a glass bottle into a jug and added plenty of water to make it less sweet.

"Drink. You must be thirsty after walking around for so long. You can have more. I have plenty in my root cellar."

You have no idea how thirsty I am.

With the state of my mental health I hadn't felt anything remotely like arousal for ages. Until now.

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I tried not to let my indulgent grin. Everything in me itched to give into him. He was stupidly pretty.

“I’m parched. Thanks, Jules.”

He got a glass of wine for himself. We clinked our glasses together and drank. It was delicious. Then my eyes fell on the blood red liquid Jules sipped.

Hang on...is that blood. Shit, is he a vampire?

That would explain a lot.

“This is the sweet berry wine I make every summer.” He handed me his glass. “Take a sip. It would be a shame if I only made it for myself. It’s good.”

Without overthinking it, I accepted the goblet and drank.

Whatever it takes for him to smile like that again.

“Wow, that’s fucking fantastic! You made this?”

“I did.” He inhaled, and then gave me another of his cautious smiles.

“You’re great at this.” Grinning, I took another sip, then contemplated it. “Sorry, I...”

He waved me off. “Keep it. I’ll get another glass for myself.”

We toasted each other before Jules busied himself with a pot on the stove. I couldn't quite see what he was doing, but within minutes he ladled thick stew into two bowls.

It was steaming hot and smelled fantastic.

"I hope this is to your liking, Nikolai."

You are to my liking.

"I'm sure it is. It smells delicious. Mmh," I hummed around a mouthful. "Tastes great, too. I'm starving."

In no time I cleared my bowl and inhaled two thick slices of the bread that I assumed Jules had also made himself.

Of course he made it. Where would he get it out here?

There wasn't exactly a grocery shop around the corner.

"Wow, that was amazing."

"Would you like some more stew? A big guy like you has got to eat."

I looked up at him, one eyebrow cocked, and found him blushing a deep crimson.

"I did not mean to say that aloud," he choked out.

Pressing my lips together, I nodded.

Yeah, a big guy like me loves to eat.

“I’d love a second helping,” I told him, still fighting the urge to laugh. “But only if you have enough.”

“Plenty,” Jules muttered as he got up, collected my bowl made from brown ceramic, and ladled more stew into it.

“Thank you.”

He stopped next to me for a moment, his green eyes flitting over my face and his finely cut cheeks still flushed.

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Gorgeous.

“You’re welcome.” He gulped before he sat back down and poured himself another glass of wine.

Now that my hunger wasn’t painful anymore, I savoured the second helping of the stew. It was rich and delicious, with a creamy sauce, plenty of root vegetables, and pieces of meat I couldn’t quite identify.

“They are mushrooms,” Jules told me when I inquired. “I don’t hunt in spring.”

I had a fleeting vision of him dressed in a green suit hunting game with his bow and arrow.

You’re thinking of Robin Hood, asshole.

Well at least I didn’t think of Robin Hood’s...damn.

“It’s so tasty.”

Which is exactly what you might say about Robin’s asshole. My inner monologue was having a field day.

“I’m glad you like it.”

You are not helping, pretty boy.

We finished our meal in silence, or near silence as rain lashed the windows and the wind rattled the shutters.

“I’m glad you’re safe here,” Jules told me in a quiet voice when he saw me looking out into the darkness. “I would have hated for you to get hurt.”

“Do people sometimes get hurt on your land?” I asked to gloss over how touched I was by his words.

“Occasionally. The ravines are dangerous at night.”

For a moment I was tempted to ask for details, but I didn’t want to know what he had seen.

Maybe one day.

After dinner, Jules started clearing the table, and I got up to help him. I was a bit taller than him now, and I liked moving around the spacious kitchen with him. Domestic bliss...I’d missed it. I hadn’t dated in a little over a year, and even then it had mainly been guys who wanted to score with a hockey player once, or if I was lucky, twice.

They hadn’t stayed around long enough to wash the dishes with me afterwards.

The old fashioned wrought-iron clock on the kitchen wall told me it was almost nine.

Does time pass differently in Jules’ forest?

Or had I underestimated the time I had spent trying to find my way back?

And, unusual for Upper Franconia, the storm hadn’t died down yet. I didn’t care

much. Jules made me feel safe. His house was like a safe harbour in the raging sea.

“You can’t take me back to the labyrinth tonight, can you?”

Jules looked over from where he was drying his hands on a dish towel.

“I’m sorry. I thought the storm would have blown itself out by now,” he murmured, giving me a sad smile.

“It’s okay. Well, uh, do you think I can kip on your couch?”

“Certainly, Nikolai. Or you could stay in my guest room.”

“Oh, right.”

He owns a manor, of course he has a guest room.

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“Follow me, please.” Jules gave me a cute grin, took a candle holder, and led me back to the entrance hall and up the stairs. Barnabas snoozed in a basket on the upper landing, his little paws twitching in his sleep.

“He’s so sweet,” I whispered, looking around at Jules and found him watching me with an almost wistful expression on his face.

“He is,” he agreed. “I don’t know what I would do without him.”

I watched the Wolpertinger for another moment, then followed him down the right side of the hallway.

“You can stay in this room.” Jules pushed open the door, and I gasped.

“Wow.” Large rain-lashed windows looked out onto the forest, a raging wind visible in the whipping of tree branches. The wall to the left harboured a huge, comfortable four poster bed with fluffy bedding in earthy colours. Polished wooden tables flanked it. “If this is your guest room, how awesome is your actual bedroom?” Crap, I’d spoken without thinking and felt my cheeks flush. “Sorry.” I ran a hand over my neck. “I only meant it because it’s such a gorgeous space.”

“Oh, don’t apologise. You can see my room in the morning,” Jules replied with a laugh, and I stared. This was the first time he appeared entirely at ease in my company. I liked that. “But you must be tired now. Better go to sleep so you are well rested in the morning.”

“Yeah.” I yawned. A bone-deep tiredness suddenly weighed on me. How had I not

noticed how exhausted I was?

“I will show you the bathroom. You can leave your clothes on the floor. I will wash them for you.”

“Oh, that’s not—” I began but he waved me off.

“It’s no trouble for me. I have a few robes. Perhaps you want to take one of them? Will you be cold during the night? I can give you one of my nightshirts...”

He broke off and gave me an insecure smile.

“I’ll be fine. I usually sleep in underwear. I run hot at night.”

Jules made a small squeak.

“Good. I will place your clean clothes in front of your door later.”

“Thank you, Jules. For everything.”

“Oh.” A soft pink tinge spread over his cheeks “You are welcome, Nikolai. Gute Nacht.”

“Gute Nacht, Jules. Traum schön.”

Oh my God.

My mum used to say that to me when I was a child.

What’s wrong with you, Nik?

“Du auch,” Jules said.

Six

Jules

My insides were in turmoil when I left Nikolai to his own devices. I'd shown him the bathroom and where to put his clothes so I could wash and dry them.

He is naked.

That thought looped in my head as I waited in my room for him to finish showering, bundle up in one of the dressing gowns I owned, and turn in for the night.

I also felt a little bit bad that I had used my powers to keep the storm around longer than usual. It wasn't something I did often, but the idea of parting ways with the beautiful human so soon had tortured me.

A certain sadness surrounded him like a cloud. It spoke to me and drew me in. If I was less civilised, I might keep him. Without my help he would never find the way back. But just because I had been born to a monster didn't make me one.

The memories of the humans my mother had imprisoned in her castle still haunted me three centuries after I had left her court. How they had all forgotten about their lives, their families, and the people they loved because she craved them.

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This part of my power had always scared me. Maybe that was why I had instilled fear in all the humans I met before. If they didn't get close to me, I wouldn't be tempted to own them.

And yet, I had made the young human stay. Was I better, ultimately, than my mother?

Yes! You did not bewitch him. You are not her.

With a sigh, I poured myself a glass of water from the jug on my desk, thankful for my inner voice. No, I wasn't like her. In the morning, I would take him back to the passage that came out near the granite labyrinth.

Nikolai turned off the shower. It was an odd feeling to have another person in the house when it was normally just Barnabas and me.

But I couldn't pretend to hate having him here. Not that I was scared when it was only the two of us, yet Nikolai's presence still comforted me.

Dreams plagued me in the night. Dreams of her, fair and beautiful with blonde hair, cold blue eyes, and porcelain skin. She had never relayed to me who my father had been. Perhaps, he had been another unfortunate soul who had perished inside her castle walls.

In my dream, I gazed into the mirror and saw her looking back at me. "I knew it, Julius. You are my son after all. What a pretty plaything you chose." Nikolai appeared behind her, unreachable to me inside the mirror.

“Don’t touch him!” I yelled, reaching out, fully expecting to meet no resistance. But my fists only met with the cool, smooth glass surface.

My mother gave me a small smirk as she caressed his stubbly cheek, then trailed her fingers over his lips.

“Nikolai! Let him go!” I hammered on the mirror until long cracks appeared in the glass, distorting both of them horribly. She stared at me as she kissed him.

I woke, gasping and shaking, and sat bolt upright in bed. Morning wasn’t far away.

I got up and stumbled across the room to my desk and spilled some water on my chest when my fingers fumbled with the glass.

It wasn’t real. It was a dream. He is safe in the guest room.

My mother had many faults; sentimentality wasn’t one of them. In three hundred years she had never tried to make contact. In her eyes, I was weak for not following in her footsteps—a weakling and a fool. But at least she left me to myself.

She lived in her moor, and I had my forest, where Nikolai was protected by my magic.

Not wanting to risk another nightmare, I took fresh clothes to the bathroom, washed, and dressed. In the kitchen, I brewed fresh coffee and made pancake batter.

It was seven by the time I was done with breakfast and heard footsteps on the stairs.

My heart squeezed in my chest.

By my trees, I love this. But he will be gone in a few hours. How cruel can this world

be?

Seven

Nikolai

I woke up well rested and looked out over the forest. The tree leaves gleamed in the early morning sun. As promised, Jules had left my freshly washed and dried clothes by the door of the guestroom. Odd. I hadn't seen a washer and dryer anywhere, and the room I had spent the night in had no electric outlets.

How did he do that?

The imprint of a tiny body on the neatly folded hoodie told me that Barnabas must have spent at least part of his night sleeping on my clothes.

So fucking cute, both of them.

Once I got dressed, I headed out and was intercepted by Barnabas, asking for pets. It was only when the scent wafting from the ground floor reached where I crouched next to the Wolpertinger's basket that I hurried downstairs.

I found Jules in the kitchen, a stack of pancakes on a plate next to him.

"Good morning."

"Nikolai," he greeted me, a soft pink blush spreading across his cheeks. "Did you sleep well?"

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I stepped nearer, yawning and stretching my arms up over my head. “I did, thank you. I can’t remember the last time I had such a good night’s sleep.”

It was the truth. I usually woke up exhausted, feeling as if I hadn’t slept at all.

Jules’ eyes tracked down my body. I extended my stretch a bit, making sure that my shirt rode up.

Enjoy the show, baby boy.

“Are you hungry?” He picked up the plate of pancakes and offered them to me.

“Yeah, I’m starving. I’ll go wash my hands real quick. Barney wanted a scratch.”

“Every morning,” Jules told me as his teeth worried his bottom lip in an attempt to hide his smile.

God, he’s so fucking cute.

I had a heavenly smelling pancake on my plate by the time I joined him at the table.

“Thank you, Jules. Seriously, that’s so kind of you. I would have been okay with a cup of coffee.”

“Oh, it’s nothing. You are my guest. I...is it not normal to feed your guests? Did I get this wrong? I’m not used to human customs, I—”

“Jules, hey.” I reached out and rested my hand on his for a moment. “You’re fine, okay? I appreciate it so much. I only meant that I didn’t want to cause any trouble for you.”

“You cause me no trouble, Nikolai,” he breathed.

I licked my lips. Damn, I wanted to do something stupid—like lean in and kiss him.

“You know I was prepared to fast. This is so much better.”

Steer the conversation back to safer ground.

“If I hadn’t found you in the forest?”

“Yeah. I was going to find water and shelter for the night. That was my plan.”

“It’s a good plan. A small stream runs through the woods, not far from where we met. And along its bed you can find plenty of dry spots to spend a night.” He tilted his head toward me. “You might have been cold, though.”

“I’m definitely glad I ran into you. That bed in your guest room is fantastic.” I took another pancake and spooned a thick layer of yellow jam onto it.

Five more pancakes later—and with a guilty conscience under my belt—I capitulated.

“I wished I had room for more,” I told Jules and leaned back in my chair to give my stomach more space. “But I think I’ve reached my limit.”

Eight

Jules

Without this sporty zipper jacket, I could see Nikolai's burly build, his broad shoulders and deep chest, strong arms, and a narrow waist. The play of his muscles under the tanned skin fascinated me.

I doubted that all humans were this gorgeous, but this one? I could look at him forever and never tire of his beauty.

"Thanks for the pancakes, Jules. They were delicious." He smacked his lips. "Did you make that jam, by the way?"

"I did. It's one of the last jars of plum jam I made last year. It was a good year for plums."

"Oh, I'm sorry I ate so much of it. I usually don't." He patted his flat stomach. "But it was so delicious. Reminds me of the jam my mum makes." Nikolai gave me a half smile that made my stomach swoop.

You can have all the jam in my cellar if I get your smiles in return.

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“Can I ask you something?”

“Uh, yes, of course.” I hoped my thoughts hadn’t shown on my face.

“What do you do? Are you living off-grid here? Or homesteading?”

Oh.

I needed more time to think so I picked up my cup and drank from my coffee. What good would it do if I lied to him?

Nothing, I decided.

“Well, a bit of both. This house is not hooked up to the grid in any way.”

Electricity doesn’t work too well around my magic.

“Yeah, I noticed that I didn’t get any signal before my battery died. So no computer, no internet? Nothing?”

“I wouldn’t say ‘nothing’. I simply don’t need or use technology.”

“Indoor plumbing, though.”

Nikolai gave me a cheeky grin across the table. He looked like a piece of art the way he lounged on his chair with one leg propped up on the seat, his arm slung around the knee.

“Invention of the century.”

He coughed.

“As you might have noticed, I am ageless,” I said before I could think it through again. A part of me wanted him to know what I was. Maybe to drive him away from me? “I’m of Elven blood.”

Save yourself while you can. Don’t let the Höimann get you.

“I had an idea, yeah. The clean and dry clothes and you heating food without a fire were a bit of a giveaway.”

“You’re not scared?”

He cocked a dark blond eyebrow at me. “Should I be?”

“No,” I huffed. “I would never harm you.”

Flustered Nikolai was a beautiful sight. The bridge of his nose reddened, and he fiddled with his T-shirt, smoothing it out and plastering the fabric to his chest repeatedly.

“So, you are magical? And you are old, and live here in your enchanted castle in the woods with your Wolpertinger,” he summed up what I had told him. “What do you do all day besides making jam and cooking for lost wanderers?”

You are the first one I brought back here.

“I collect and grow food. I brew and distill. I occasionally spin and weave, tan leather, and sew clothes. I go hunting and fishing and take care of my forest. And I

read, draw, and paint,” I told him, ticking them all off on my fingers.

“Wow, that sounds pretty amazing.”

“I like my life.” He returned my smile. “What about you? What do you do day in and day out?”

“I play hockey for a living.”

In the hundred years since hockey had been established, I had never once seen a game. All I knew was that they wore ice skates and had sticks to hit a little rubber disk back and forth.

“Sounds a lot less impressive compared to what you get up to.”

“No, it doesn’t. I just don’t know or understand much about it,” I said in a low voice.

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“Well, to tell you the truth: I haven’t been playing a lot lately. I had some stuff going on and needed to get better first.” He blushed again and fiddled with a thin leather band on his wrist I hadn’t previously noticed. “Sorry, not trying to dump my trauma on you.”

“Nikolai?”

“Mm?”

“Please stop apologising to me. You are not a burden.”

I didn’t know what made me say it.

Not the urge to see him cry.

“Sorry,” he sniffed, then chuckled through the tears when he heard himself apologise yet again. “Man, I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I’ve been a burden on everyone lately. You, too. I mean you had to rescue me because I was too dumb to find the way back.”

“No.” He flinched at the finality in my voice. “You couldn’t have found a way out of my forest. You shouldn’t even have been able to find a way in. I made it so I wouldn’t get surprise visitors.” It was my turn to blush. “You are not dumb or wrong. It was nice to have you around,” I muttered as I finished the cold dregs of my coffee.

“Thanks, Jules.”

I got up, and he did, too. He was half a head taller than me today, I noted.

“I guess it’s time to take you back to the labyrinth.”

“That’s the plan.” His gaze dropped to my lips as if he was going to kiss me. “I’ll go and get my stuff real quick.”

“Do you still want to see the rest of the house?” I asked, clutching at straws.

“You need to give me a proper tour next time.”

Nine

Nikolai

Jules’ facefell.

Don’t you see that I’ll never leave if you take me to your bedroom now?

“Next time, okay?” I needed to hear him say it.

“Yes, of course, Nikolai. Next time.”

I dashed back up to the guest room, grabbed my jacket and dead phone, and met Jules and an excited Barnabas by the door. As much as Jules had insisted it was no trouble for him, I didn’t want to overstay my welcome.

We walked for almost half an hour until Jules stopped in a spot in the middle of the woods that looked exactly like the rest of what we’d seen.

He hadn’t said a single word since we left his house.

“This is it,” he said, so downcast it hurt my heart to look at him.

“Okay. Thanks for bringing me back, Jules.”

“Sure.” He stared down at his boots. “Will you be back?” he asked in such a quiet voice I could have pretended not to hear him.

“If you want me to, yes.”

Jules swallowed hard, then nodded. First slowly, then it was so pronounced that his hair rippled like the wind tearing through the firs.

“I know it’s not my place to ask you to do that. Do I want you to come back anyway? Yes,” he answered his own question.

Stop being this cute, Jules. Please. You are a hot homesteader living in a castle. I’m a depressed mess who hits a rubber puck and other players for a living. Don’t get my hopes up, please.

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“I can’t be back during the week, but on the weekend, if you like, I...” My voice trailed off.

“I would like that very much, Nikolai.”

It was weirdly sexy to hear him use my full name. Most people called me Nik or one of the fifteen nicknames my teammates and our fans had for me.

“Same,” I mumbled.

“You need to go through the archway.” Jules pointed to a spot behind me. I turned, expecting to see nothing but the forest.

“What the fuck? Where did that come from?”

“It’s a glamour, an enchantment,” he explained when he spotted my puzzled face. “Only I can lift it and let people through. See? You could never have found a way back.”

My curiosity got the better of me. “How did I get through if it’s enchanted? Or does it only work from this side?”

“I don’t know.” Jules shrugged apologetically. “It happens sometimes, but I haven’t been able to figure out what makes the people who end up in my forest different from the ones who don’t.”

“Maybe it’s a glitch in the glamour,” I suggested.

“It could be that. Every power has its limits, I suppose. You will be able to find it in the future, though, now that I have revealed its location to you.”

“Oh, that’s good.” I hummed. “Thanks for saving me, Jules.”

His bright smile lit up the morning.

“Thank you for being my guest, Nikolai. It was very special to have a friend in my home.”

Friendzoned by the hot hermit. Story of my life.

“It was my pleasure.”

God, the pleasure I want to share with you, pretty boy.

“Will I see you again next weekend?” Jules asked once more, and I nodded.

“Then I will be waiting for your return.”

Am I reading too much into this, or does it sound like he wants more than friendship?

There was only one way to find out. As I walked back to my car on the other side of the arch, I vowed to visit him next week. It might come to nothing, but I had to find out if he was interested in me.

At least then I’ll know.

Ten

Jules

I missed Nikolaï from the moment he stepped through the arch between my forest and the labyrinth.

He probably only said he would be back so I would help him. He had every right. Who in their right mind trusts the Höimann?

Yet a seed of hope took hold in my soul. It spread its roots through my body as I deep cleaned my house and stocked up on whatever food I could find.

The week crept by and flew past at the same time. One moment it was Monday afternoon and the weekend seemed ages away, the next it was Thursday afternoon, and I harvested rhubarb with Barnabas to make a pie for my guest.

Time is an illusion.

All week, I made mental notes of what I wanted to show him: my orchard, the chickens, my greenhouse, the fish pond with the water lilies that would start blooming pink in a few short weeks. My bedroom.

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Every time I thought about the promise I made, my heart swelled with excitement, constricting my airways.

What if he didn't mean what you think he meant?

"What then, Barnabas?" I cut a few more rhubarb stalks, removed the large leaves and added the stalks to my basket.

My pet looked over from where he sniffed an interesting patch of earth, cocking his antlered head at me.

"You're right. Then I will at least know. No, let me get a few more. Nobody likes a dry rhubarb pie."

He turned his focus back on the earth before him, digging with his front paws and pulling out a fat worm.

"Good boy," I said and reminisced about Nikolai calling him that last weekend.

"I just want to be called a good boy, too. Is that too much to ask?"

Barnabas huffed, half the worm dangling from his mouth.

"Right? It's a reasonable wish to have for a four-hundred-thirty-three-year old."

Eleven

Nikolai

Back in Veitsreuth, I wasn't sure anymore that my mind hadn't been playing tricks on me.

It had felt real. But what if my brain had invented Jules as some sort of trauma relief?

Your brain is like that.

It would make sense, too. Jules had been too cute, too perfect, and too kind to me to be real.

To take my mind off him, I threw myself into training. I still wasn't on the roster, but that didn't mean I couldn't be my best.

I destroyed myself at the gym when I wasn't on the ice or taking walks in the court gardens, which sort of passed as a forest. Well, it did for me, and I loved colouring in another of the tree outlines on the workout tracker Dr Schmidt had given me. My brain saw right through his scheme, but it still worked every time. The buzz I got when I managed to keep my streak was a little embarrassing.

I also picked up a book, a queer romance book with an interspecies love story, from the Little Free Library we had at the rink. Ollie was such a caring person. I bet he left it in there. Leave it to him to send treats for the team and stock our free library. Damn. It felt like it had been ages since I'd hung out with Bo and Ollie or any of my teammates.

Two days before the game, I had another appointment with my neuropsychiatrist. For the entire bike ride through the city on my way there, I contemplated telling him about Jules. But in the end, I chickened out.

I didn't want him to think I was so desperate that I'd invented an imaginary friend.

"Hello, Mr Lorenz," he said and invited me into his office. "Please take a seat."

"Thank you."

Schmidt settled in his blue office chair, leaned back, and smiled at me.

"How have you been?"

A reluctant grin spread on my face. I tried to stop it but couldn't. Not that I thought he'd take me less seriously if I grinned, but a persistent voice in my head kept telling me that I was depressed and depressed people didn't smile.

When I'd said the same thing on the phone to my mother she had called me out on my ableist bullshit.

My grin widened.

I love my mum.

"I've actually been doing pretty well."

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I filled Dr Schmidt in about the little things I'd been doing.

"I bought myself one of these zen colouring books. I don't have a lot of time to sit and colour, but I like it." My cheeks heated. But, fuck, if I couldn't tell my therapist, I couldn't tell anyone.

"I'm glad to hear that. I think having a hobby is something you could profit from. Maybe you can think of something else that interests you? Something you've been wanting to try for a while but never got around to doing?"

"Well, I've been reading, and I like watching those pottery videos on Kraken..."

"Good. Maybe don't buy a kiln just yet, but I'm sure you could find a pottery class in Veitsreuth. Just an idea," he hedged.

"I'll look into it, yeah. I don't have a lot of time, though."

"That's the second time you've mentioned that. Perhaps it isn't so much about having time but making the time to do something for yourself that isn't part of your work."

Ouch.

"Yeah, maybe you're right. I also wanted to show you this." I pulled out my phone and opened my photo app. I held it up so he could see the picture I'd taken before I left for the appointment.

“You’ve been going on daily walks?”

“Yeah, I have.” I rubbed a hand over my nape. “Even on the days when I didn’t feel like it. You know, I can see through your scheme there but skipping a day isn’t an option for my brain.”

“Gamification. It works.” Schmidt grinned. “So do daily walks. It sucks but that’s just how it is.”

I snorted at his words. “It totally sucks. Like, I find it offensive how great I feel when I walk in the forest. I was never an outdoorsy person, but the other day I bought a pair of fucking hiking boots?!”

Schmidt chuckled. Then he gave me a list with three appointments for the tests he had scheduled for me.

“Each will take about an hour. Do you think you could organise it so you won’t have anything strenuous going on at work afterwards? These tests can be quite taxing.”

“Oh, yeah, sure thing.”

Should I be nervous?

“Great, I’ll see you next week.”

I took my leave. I grabbed a second workout tracker on my way out the door. I wanted to keep colouring in those damned trees.

On Wednesday and Thursday my walks were hasty turns around the court gardens right after getting up. With the games in the evening, I had no time for longer strolls, but if I squinted I could pretend Jules was waiting under one of the archways in the

ancient stone walls that crossed through the garden.

Never tell anyone you're imagining this, Nikolai. They'll think you've lost your marbles.

On Saturday morning, I threw a few things into a backpack and got in my car. I hadn't managed to convince myself that it had all been a dream. A sliver of doubt and hope mingled in my heart.

He has to be real. I can't meet a sexy hermit twink daddy in the forest and have it all be a dream.

Lifewascruel, but not like that. Please.

Well, if it was a dream, you'll see in a couple of minutes.

I had a vague idea where the arch was. If Jules was real, I should be able to find it again, shouldn't I?

Twelve

Jules

AllthroughFridayIbusied myself with the last preparations. I tried not to imagine how I would feel if Saturday passed without Nikolai showing up. Yet before my inner eye, I saw myself sitting alone at the kitchen table, eating a lonely slice of the pie.

He will come. He promised.

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But what was a human promise worth? I didn't know their kind well enough to say, and also... who could blame a human for lying to someone likeme?

I wouldn't be surprised if Nikolai stayed away from the old man who had changed before his eyes until he resembledthis.

I was a youngling in Elven years and more than a head shorter than my old man mask; I was tiny compared to him. A sapling next to a grown tree. I supposed Nikolai wasn't old in human years but in the prime of his young adulthood.

My beautiful human. I hope I get to see your face again.

Sleep didn't come easy that night. I laid awake for hours, hoping and praying—although no gods existed that I believed in—to the trees I'd known for all my life to bring him back to me.

Eventually, I fell into a restless sleep.

I woke bleary-eyed and brewed some coffee. I hadn't told Nikolai that I went to the human world a few times a year, heavily disguised, to stock up on the things I could not make myself. Like coffee. A wanderer had once left a metal jug of the beverage behind in his terror, and I had been hooked on the drink ever since.

I baked the rhubarb pie, loving the homey smell that filled my kitchen. If he didn't come, at least I would have pie. And because it was still so early, I whipped up a batch of cookies, too.

At barely ten, a deep thrumming ran through my forest.

No. That can't be.

But how could it not? My forest never lied.

I hurried to the front door, wrenched my boots on, and grabbed my coat. Two minutes later, I was out the door and shrugging into the sleeves of my coat as I walked across the yard.

I spotted him near the arch.

Tall and broad-shouldered, his golden hair gleamed in the morning sun.

He wore another zipper jacket over a shirt that hugged his muscular chest like a second skin.

"Jules!" he called as soon as he saw me. He raised a hand, relief showing on his handsome face.

Thirteen

Nikolai

"You came back." A cautious smile spread over Jules' face.

"Well, I said I would."

Didn't he want me to?

"I'm so glad."

“You are?”

“Yes, Nikolai. There is so much I want to show you. And it was nice to have a conversation with someone who can reply.”

Oh, sweet baby boy.

“I’m sure it can get pretty lonely out here.”

“Sometimes, yes. Come.”

He gestured to the path he’d come down, and we walked back to his house.

It was a lovely walk and felt much shorter than the last time. The fragrant forest air cleared my mind, and I felt lighter here. Sunlight dappled the path ahead of us. When it hit Jules’ red gold hair just right it shimmered.

It’s beautiful.

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“I’ve been thinking a lot about what you told me,” I admitted after a while.

“About what exactly?” He stepped over roots as if he knew exactly where they were, his heavy boots barely made a sound on the needle strewn floor. Not once did he stumble—unlike me.

“How you live your life and do so much yourself. I’m probably romanticising it, but it sounds like such a good way of living.”

Head tilted at me, Jules stopped.

“What?” I squirmed a little under his scrutiny.

“You live a good life yourself, don’t you? You have a job you like, your mother, your friends, and supermarkets...”

I chuckled. “Well, if you put it like that.”

“My life is good, yes. I love living in symbiosis with my forest. I protect it, and it keeps me safe and alive in return.”

“What exactly are you, Jules?” I asked in a whisper. I hoped he wouldn’t be angry or offended by my question.

“I suppose you would call me a forest god,” he said simply. “I am the, for lack of a better term, heart and soul of this forest. The shepherd.”

Don't fucking faint, Nik.

The cute ginger I'd been dreaming—and wanking—about was a freaking god?

“Okay.”

“My answer surprises you,” he stated.

“Yes, no. I don't know. Okay, yeah, it does surprise me a bit. I knew you were magical; we've established that.” I shrugged. “But agod? I mean, I have zero doubt about it, but it's not something I would have expected. Meeting an actual god.” I suddenly felt super aware of how rude I sounded. “Don't get me wrong, please.”

Please don't hurt me.

“It makes perfect sense. You are so gorgeous and regal, like, I believe you are a god, but—”

“Nikolai?” He interrupted me with a little laugh. “It's okay. I didn't tell you to intimidate you. You asked, and I didn't want to lie. I'm bad at it, and it doesn't make sense to me at all. And I did not want to lie to you.”

“Yeah, same.” I huffed. I had always sucked at lying. It made me feel like shit. I ended up spilling all the beans literally two minutes later. It ate me alive.

“I told you I am of Elven blood,” Jules explained, inviting me to keep walking. “In terms of my people, I am a sapling. In terms of your kind I would be considered a young man, like yourself, maybe.”

Oh wow, okay. He could live for what, sixteen hundred years, then?

That's a bummer.

He'd still be young and hot, and I would be old and grey and wilt away without him caring too much.

"I see." What else could I say?

He heaved a sigh.

"I would like to show you my home, unless you are too tired and would prefer to sit down somewhere."

"What? It's barely half ten in the morning. No, I'd like to see whatever you want to share with me."

Let me have this silly hope that you and I could be more than friends for another couple of hours.

Although... even that might be a stretch. Why would a mighty creature like him even bother with a friendlike me?

I wasn't so sure about that when a giddy Jules dragged me around his homestead by the sleeve. He gave me 'Look at my pretty pebbles' vibes.

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He's like a cute, century-old penguin.

"Here's my chicken coop. Do you want to meet them?"

"You have chickens? Oh my god, yes! I love birds of all shapes and sizes."

Jules paused with his hand on the door in the fence around the chicken pen. "That is so sweet." He pursed his lips as if to stop himself from smiling but failed, giving me the cutest pouting grin. One that could bring me to my knees.

I didn't know why I reacted to Jules the way I did. I'd felt an instant connection to him, and not out of sympathy.

God, I wish it were just sympathy. Thoughts of him had surfaced so much over the past week, it had been disconcerting.

"Come in, they don't bite."

I flinched when his voice pulled me back into the moment. He held the door open for me, and I joined him in the pen.

Eight fat chickens surrounded us, clucking and cooing.

"You can give them a few of these if you like." With a timid smile, he offered me an old-fashioned metal pot filled with grain.

Shy Jules is so sweet.

“Here, hold your hand out to them. They are gentle.” He crouched low, and I joined him, taken by his smile and the way the sun shining through the canopy of leaves glinted on his hair. He was so soft and delicate compared to me. There was no gentleness in my life. I worked hard and played harder. As one of the two enforcers on our team, I couldn’t afford to show any weakness.

That was until you lost your footing.

“Okay.”

I can try to be gentle for you, Jules.

I took a handful of grains and offered them to the chickens. Their happy clucking made my heart squeeze in my chest.

“Yes, that’s it, Nikolai. They won’t peck you.” Jules’ voice was a soft caress in the clearing.

“These are Cassiopeia and Lyra.” He indicated first a red and green, then a chocolate brown chicken.

“She’s so pretty. Aren’t you, Lyra?” The bird cooed and took some grains from me.

“Hecate, and this is Mania.” Jules rested his hand on my forearm. “Go slow. She’s a bit shy.” I didn’t hear the rest of his chickens’ names. His touch sparked feelings in me I’d never felt before.

Is this his magic?

Fourteen

Jules

Arushof something powerful rippled through me when I took hold of Nikolai's arm. It reverberated in my head, and I couldn't let go of him.

What is happening?

Tearing my hand away, I rose to my feet. "I wanted to show you my pond. Would you like to see it?"

Nikolai's warm brown eyes met mine, then one corner of his mouth curled up in a smile. "Anything, Jules."

My bed chamber?

"Oh, wow, this is beautiful." He slowed down as we approached the pond.

"When it is warm enough, I sometimes bathe in it. I know every fish, every water snail, and every frog."

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“I’m not a friend of critters, to be honest.”

I turned and took him in, from his veiny hands, one holding his hooded jacket, to those warm brown eyes. I lingered on how his hair gleamed when the sunlight hit it just right. Like spun gold.

A masterpiece.

“They are gentle, too, like the chickens. The water lilies will be blooming soon. Then it’s even more beautiful.”

His gaze left the pond and landed on me.

“Maybe I can think of them as water chickens.” He gave me a small wink. “I’d love to see the lilies, too. You know,” Nikolai said as we walked through my garden to the back of my house, “I was never an outdoorsy person. I spent all my time at the rink, in school, or in the gym. It’s growing on me.”

He stopped by a raised bed and brushed his fingers over a row of Swiss chard.

I spent all my time outside.

First, the promise of adventures had been what lured me. Small Julius with rosy cheeks and copper hair who had discovered the world around the castle with wonder in his eyes. The older I got the more I understood what was happening inside the castle. Why my mother had so many different servants, and how they were serving the Elven Queen.

As her son, she had expected me to continue in her footsteps.

I had barely been of age when the first human fell for me. Even now, the memory made my skin crawl. He had been a beautiful one—barely past boyhood—with hair like ebony and large blue eyes. That had been before I understood my magic, and what I could do to their kind.

Watching him wilt away had been the most horrifying experience of my life. When I managed to get him out of the castle and back to his old home, he had been a shadow of his former self.

Friedrich...

‘The Elven Queen got him,’ the people whispered.

No, I wanted to tell them. Not the queen, the prince. And the prince will hate himself for this for the rest of his life.

After that, the outside had been my safe place. Away from my mother in her castle and her human toys.

I stayed away from the paths the humans used. Learning to master my own magic was hard. But I found I could manipulate my appearance. I chose the old man as my usual disguise and kept those powers on a leash like the dangerous beast they were.

Accidents and chance fed into the narrative of the dangerous Höimann. And I embraced it. My forest and its animals were everything I needed.

Until they weren’t. Until the mask I had worn for so long felt like a prison more than an escape. Until I spotted this wondrous man with golden hair on the forest path and my vanity got the better of me.

“Jules?” A tentative voice pulled me out of my head and plunged me back into the present. The soft scent of decay mixed with new life was suddenly strong in my nose, and I smelt a trace of him in the air. A clean and spicy scent. The most beautiful thing ever.

“Forgive me, I got lost in thought for a moment.”

Fifteen

Nikolai

“When I was a small child, we had a garden. I only know from pictures, but my mum and I grew vegetables there.”

Why are you telling him this?

“I feel like it made me happy.”

“A garden can be a happy place,” Jules agreed. “It is mine.”

“We stopped when we moved to the city so I could be closer to the rink. After that we only had a flat and a little balcony.”

“You can garden with me, if you want.” The beautiful man blushed crimson. I liked how he sometimes spoke without thinking and then blushed.

He’s so fucking cute.

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“You know I’d never thought I would say this to anyone...but I’d love to garden with you.”

I’d love to do anything with you, Jules: worship you, service you, and be on my knees for you. Whatever you want from me, you can have it.

“Wonderful. I will be seeing you back here, then?”

“Yes, you will. I won’t be able to come for the next two or three weekends, though. I’m sorry.”

“Oh, okay. I understand of course.”

“Wish I could come see you, but we have games away. I’m still not playing, but my coach asked me to come to the next one with the team. I want to be there with them.”

“Oh, yes. I think I would want that, too.” Jules’ face softened with an understanding smile.

“But I promise I’ll be back the weekend after. If that’s okay with you, that is.”

Maybe he doesn’t want me to—

“That would be lovely, Nikolai. I will try to think about the things we can do in the garden when you are back.”

He walked me to the archway, and I was this close to hugging him goodbye.

“Bye, Jules. I’ll see you soon.”

“Goodbye. I’m looking forward to it.”

“Bye, Barney.” I bent down to scratch his Wolpertinger’s wing bases. “Take good care of your dad, okay?” The little hare-like creature huffed and nudged my hand with his head.

Jules gave me a curious look when I rose to my feet.

“Goodbye Nikolai.”

“Bye.” I hesitated for another moment, desperate for a hug. But why would this powerful creature be interested in hugging me at all?

I turned and left through the arch. After a few metres I turned back. He stood there, watching me go with both hands in his pockets, and looked downcast.

Sixteen

Nikolai

Life kept me away from Jules for the next month.

I travelled to the next game with the team. They played the Rimborg Ravens.

We had only just arrived at the rink in Rimborg when Jerke held me back.

“Lorenz? I want you to get changed and join the team for training.”

Fuck yes!

I'd been prepared to hang out on the bench. In record time I had changed, taped my stick, and sharpened my blades.

I could have cried when Bo beamed at the sight of me.

“Dammit, it’s good to have you back, Kleiner.” We chased each other up the rink, passing a puck between us. Arne soon joined us, trying to block our path. He stole my puck and passed it to Nate, who accepted it easily, and dodged Luis, our rookie, and took his shot. Guns barely deflected it. Then our centre was back. He passed to Max, who feigned a shot, passed back and—“YES!” A beaming Decks hugged Max and Arne to celebrate his goal, and Bo and I joined the group hug.

God, it’s so good to be back.

Bo and I doubled down on them. We’d always been a great team.

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Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:40 am

Jerke smirked at me when I left the ice, drenched in sweat but grinning madly.

“Lorenz?”

“Yes, Coach?”

“Are you ready for some ice time tonight, son?”

“Yes! Of course I am.”

“Good.” He contemplated me for a moment. “It was good to see you play today.”

“It felt good.”

Like it did before the depression hit me.

Coach Jerke seemed to know what was on my mind. “We’ll get there again. I believe in you.”

“Thanks, Coach.” I choked on the words, turned, and followed the rest of the team into the locker room.

I’d almost forgotten how fucking good it felt to have a stadium full of fans cheering you on. Or how fantastic winning felt, and how much it turned me on.

I was glad to have my own room for the night. Jules was on my mind when I stood in the shower, rivulets of hot water running down my body. I squeezed some body wash

out of the bottle and spread it all over my length.

Fuck.

I shut my eyes and leaned my forehead against the cool tiles and angled my body so the water wouldn't wash away the foam.

I fucked my slippery fist. God. The lewd sounds of my hand flying up and down my cock made me even harder.

I thought of Jules' lean chest peeking out from the laces of his tunic and the strawberry red freckles dotting his skin. I bet his nipples were the same colour...

"Fuuuck," I groaned, hips snapping forward as my climax rammed into me. My cum splattered on the tiles. I stroked myself through it, breathing hard.

You're fucking starved, Nik.

I wasn't proud that I'd wanked to the thought of Jules. But after this dry spell, I had to take whatever got me going. Once I'd rinsed off, I cleaned the wall and turned off the water.

I pulled on a pair of boxers—dick-to-hotel-sheets contact was the worst—and collapsed into bed.

God, I'm wiped.

I started the recording of the storm I listened to every night on Kraken Video and fell asleep almost immediately.

It reminded me of the summer storm raging in Jules' forest, and how safe I had felt in

his home.

The summer storm video was what saved my ass over the next couple of weeks. Dr Schmidt hadn't exaggerated. The testing he put me through was one of the most taxing and difficult things I had ever done in my entire life. They made me revisit my childhood and made me talk about my father when all I had ever done was suppress every last memory of that man for the past twenty-odd years.

They made me dig through my school years and through all the painful shit I had ever experienced. I hated the part that tested my intelligence. I wasn't dumb, I knew that. But the anxiety I had answering the questions was out of this world. What if they tell you there is nothing wrong with your brain, and you're just bananas?

It took them a week to finalise my results, and it was one of Dr Schmidt's colleagues who gave me the news.

"Mr Lorenz, it was pretty clear. We can say with certainty that you have ADHD." All the tension left my body. And only afterwards, as relief flooded me, did I realise how much I had feared that it was all just in my head.

"Okay, I don't know if I should be happy or sad now." It was the truth. I didn't know how to react. All of me was strangely numb, as if I was watching as a bystander.

"That is completely normal. We experience that a lot with late diagnosed patients. It will take some time for you to wrap your head around everything. Take your time, Mr. Lorenz." She gave me a kind smile.

"What does that mean for my job?"

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:40 am

“You play professional hockey, right?” The therapist asked me, checking a note she had made on my file. “Yes, I play for the Pumas.”

“My professional suggestion, although I am not your coach of course, would be to go back to your routine as soon as possible. It can be helpful to have a break, especially when you are dealing with what you’ve been going through. But we recommend structure. And from what I can guess there are very few jobs that provide a stable schedule the way professional sports do.”

“So you think I’m cleared to play again?”

“As I said, I am not your coach. I can only draw from my experience in working with neurodivergent patients for the past fifteen years.”

“Yes, then give me that, please,” I asked her impatiently. At first, yes, it had been a relief not having to do anything, not having to perform. But fuck, I needed to play again so badly.

“From experience and my personal opinion as a therapist, I would say yes. I think it would do you good to have that rhythm in your life again. If you feel ready, that is.” Her kind smile reminded me of my mum, even though we weren’t that far apart in age.

“Thank you.”

She nodded.

“All the best to you, Mr Lorenz. Perhaps I’ll come and watch one of your games.”

I grabbed my bag and got to my feet. “If you ever need tickets, let me know. If you’re allowed to accept that.”

“Oh, no. It’s fine.” She chuckled as she put all the papers into one neat pile. “Perhaps I’ll bring Dr Schmidt along. I bet he’s never been to a game either.”

“Enjoy your first hockey experience, then.” I grinned at her “I hope we win when you come to watch us play.”

“With you back on the team, I’m sure you will.”

I didn’t go back home after the appointment but went to a fast food place around the corner from the hospital. I ordered myself the largest coffee they had on their menu and hid in one of the booths. The tests and that appointment had robbed me of all my feelings.

For the better part of half an hour, I wondered if I should get in my car and drive out to the labyrinth. Perhaps being with Jules would help me fill the emptiness inside me. You’re fucking selfish!

If I couldn’t understand my feelings, how could I expect Jules to handle them with me? It wasn’t that I didn’t want to burden him with my problems. First I had to wrap my head around them, see a bit clearer.

I only wanted to go back once I wasn’t an emotional mess anymore.

I miss him but don’t want him to have to pick up my pieces.

Jerke wasn’t ready to have me back on the roster yet, but we agreed that I would train

as if I was going to play the next game. And it helped, as it always had done. The exertion kept the intrusive thoughts at bay.

You'll have to look at them eventually, Nik.

I went on daily walks and searched for pottery classes in Veitsreuth. And before I went to sleep at night I listened to the summer storm on my phone, pretending I was back in Jules' house, safe and sound, while the world outside the windows ended and was reborn.

Seventeen

Jules

How had I been okay with living on my own for centuries but now pined for a human man I had met only twice?

A few times in the weeks Nikolai didn't return to my forest I considered travelling to Veitsreuth to find him.

That is madness, Jules. How do you expect to find him in the middle of thousands of humans?

But he had told me about his job as a hockey player. I was sure people could direct me to where I would be able to find him. But I had Barnabas and the chickens to care for. I couldn't abandon them.

I had to wait, stay put, and hope that he had meant it when he said he would come back.

I busied myself in the garden. I planted seeds and cleared out my root cellar for the

new harvest. And in one week where the weather was kind to me, I visited every part of my forest. I talked to my trees. I reinforced the magic boundary that protected us from the outside world.

The boundary that made people—what had Nikolai called it?—space out. Only I had designed it to turn them away from my land, not to keep walking. For the umpteenth time I wondered what made Nikolai so different from all the others before him. Was he meant to find me? No. I had found him, hadn't I?

Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:40 am

“Why then does it feel as if it is the other way around, Barnabas?”

That day in the forest I had been found. I had wandered the darkness, and I hadn’t even realised it until the sun peeked through the clouds again. Until my wondrous human with the golden hair brought the light back into my life.

“I miss him.” I stroked my hand over the thick trunk of an oak tree. I had seen her grow from a tiny acorn. I had cared for her and kept her safe so she could become this beautiful strong version of herself—so she could become what she had always been intended to be.

Being with Nikolai felt a lot like that. The version of me I was when he was around was who I was supposed to be. A gentle shiver ran through the tree under my touch. She shook her leaves and a few rained down on me as a gift from my old friend.

The person I was with Nikolai was the best version of me. It scared me how much I craved his presence, and how much I wanted to protect him. I knew I would turn the earth upside down to keep him safe.

That was the week my dreams started again. Dreams of her, beautiful and terrible at once. My mother, with her golden hair so much like Nikolai’s, and that terrifyingly beautiful face. In the dreams—the same one I’d had when he’d stayed at my house—she tried to take him away from me.

‘Oh, what a nice plaything you found for yourself, Julius. A pretty human toy. I knew you would in the end.’

My mother came up to where I stood and caressed my cheek. Her ice cold touch made me shiver.

“There is no escaping destiny, Julius. And I appreciate seeing that you’ve come to your senses, my child. I had almost lost hope for you. You don’t know how happy it makes your mother’s heart to see you with your own human.”

She scrutinised me and pinched my cheek. I stood rooted to the spot unable to even lift a finger. I had to watch my mother glide over to where Nikolai cowered in fear. My mother evoked that reaction in humans.

“You will do nicely in my collection, human.”

“He is mine!”

His eyes met mine behind my mother’s back. He looked angry and confused, not scared anymore.

“I think the human disagrees, Julius.” My mother gave a tinkling laugh. ‘You’ll come with me, won’t you?’

I knew it was her magic that made him rise to his feet and place his hand in hers, but that didn’t stop a dangerous snarl from escaping me.

“Leave him alone! This human is mine. I claim him as mine!”

I changed. My body grew without my direction and something burst out of the top of my head. It weighed me down. My spine arched and my legs? They changed, too.

I looked down, almost toppling over when the things on top of my head dragged my head down. My trousers were gone.

By my forest, what is happening?

I didn't have normal legs anymore, either. I had split hooves and furry legs like a stag.

Is this my mother's magic at work?

It took me only a moment to get used to the weight on my head, and then I was no longer rooted to the spot. I could move. When I looked up at my mother and Nikolai, something I had never seen there was etched on her face. Pure terror. Bunny's face only showed awe and wonder.

"How did you do that?" my mother whispered.

"I don't know. You tell me."

The laugh that burst out of me was terrifying and monstrous. Nikolai shuddered as goosebumps raced down his body.

I took a step towards them, my lips pulling into a dangerous snarl when her hand let go of him.

"Go! You have no power here! This is my forest and my human. Don't ever return."

The rest of the dream made me ashamed. I woke drenched in sweat and other bodily fluids. When I threw back the duvet, I found my normal legs. My head felt strangely light without the weight of the antlers. It was as if they were meant to be there and had not been a figment of my imagination.

Shame flooded me when images of Nikolai's beautiful body writhing on top of me surfaced in my mind.

I stood up and tried not to get the evidence of my release on the carpet, as I crossed my room and into the hallway beyond to rinse in the shower.

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This had been another human invention I had come across, and my house had delivered. I didn't quite know how it worked, even after living in it for nearly three hundred years. An idea took hold in my mind, and my house grew whatever I needed.

Occasionally traces of human life made their way into my neck of the woods. A brochure on human food, a catalogue, or in some cases, even clothes and brightly coloured items that floated down the little stream that ran through my land.

I had to make sure to keep up with human inventions. My mother never had. She viewed human customs as beneath her. I wondered how she satisfied her craving for pretty humans in this day and age.

I was sure that if I had kept Nikolai, his family, friends, or employers would have raised hell to find him again. Not that they could have if I hadn't allowed it.

Maybe that's how she does it.

A look out on the forest told me morning was only an hour away. I decided to stay up.

I could do with a cup of coffee.

The chickens wouldn't complain if I let them out earlier. They hated staying in their coop longer than necessary.

And maybe I would visit my friend, the old oak, again. The last time I visited, I sat in the shadow of her branches, with my back against her trunk and told her what had

happened with that wondrous human man.

You shouldn't go into detail about tonight's dream, Jules.

I shivered as I put on fresh clothes, a linen tunic, and trousers made from stag hide.

Is that why they draw me in like that?

I had always been fascinated with stags. The one that had given me the hide for this pair of trousers had been badly hurt by something, perhaps a wolf or some more dangerous creature that dwelled in the forest, when I found him. He would've died a terrible, painful death. As merciful as killing him had been, it had broken me to see him sink to the ground with my arrow in his heart. That I was able to put him out of his misery had been my only consolation.

The poor thing. He had been in the prime of his years. I still remembered a silent vigil I had held for him to help his soul find peace. I wanted to think that every animal that died in my forest never left. That their souls still roamed the land where they had been so happy.

Before I went downstairs, I made a detour to my library. If Nikolai ever returned, I had to bring him here. Perhaps he would like to see my most treasured possessions: my books.

I headed straight for the history section. In this world, lore and history often blended. I took two thick volumes of local history from the shelf, then went over to the hundreds of books filled with local lore. I had collected these books over the past three centuries. These were my favourites. I had an entire section filled with books about the Höimann whose mask I had been only too happy to wear.

Until Nikolai came into your life, at least.

But those weren't what I was looking for. Today, I was looking for stags, and how they appeared in the lore. As much as I thought the dream had been a figment of my imagination, my dreams usually bore a shred of truth.

I thumbed through the books and picked a few I thought might hold the answers I needed.

I had always thought my father had been a human, but what if he wasn't? What if the stag was the missing piece?

As if in a trance I took them outside and a couple of minutes later I found myself in the clearing that was overshadowed by my favourite oak.

I sat down on the stump of a pine I had to cut down after a storm and opened my book. It was strange how the forest around me stayed the same while my perception of my life changed with every page I read.

"Cernunnos! Barnabas, that's it!" I called as I got up from my perch. I strolled across the little clearing she overshadowed, the old leather bound book in hand. "The Celtic God of the forest. His animal is a stag and also a couple of others. But Barnabas, it fits."

I didn't want or need to know how my mother had managed to seduce an ancient forest god, but it would explain a lot about me.

Like how I had always felt the pull of the forest, how I understood the language of the trees, and how the animals found me. My magic.

"What else can I do?" I asked no one in particular. The old oak creaked. "Yes, yes of course I will find out over time. I bet all the answers I need are already hidden in my library."

A sassy beech tree who was growing in the oak's shadow ruffled its leaves.

“Yes, I know I don't need them all. I have been perfectly alright not knowing who my father is. But maybe I want some answers.”

The most pressing one was if I had the ability to shift into a stag. But if I shifted, could I shift back? What if I got stuck as a stag forever?

“What would happen to Bunny? No, I cannot try. Not before I know if he will return to me.”

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The oak bowed her branches.

He will come, the wind seemed to whisper.

Eighteen

Nikolai

I had an appointment with Dr Schmidt to go over my test results a couple of days after the game.

“Mr Lorenz, good to see you.” He held out his furry hand. I shook it.

“Hi, Dr Schmidt.”

“Please.” I took the visitor’s chair across the desk from him, feeling like a pupil in the headmaster’s office rather than a functioning adult.

You didn’t do anything wrong. Chill the fuck out!

I’d always felt like that, and it drove me nuts. I always imagined I was one meeting away from being called out for being a clever imposter who’d tricked his way into wherever he was.

And after over twenty years of me feeling wrong they finally tell me I have a weird brain. Great! Thanks!

Over the past couple of days doubt had crept in. How could they be so sure it was ADHD? Maybe I just sucked.

“So, my colleague already informed you about your diagnosis.”

You have a vivid imagination, and you’re an excellent trickster.

“Yeah...” I hedged.

“The results were so clear we might call this a high score, not that I would have expected anything less from you after what you told me about your career progression.” Schmidt winked at me and righted his round spectacles.

“Yeah, your colleague told me. I still haven’t wrapped my head around it.”

“It will take a while for you to come to terms with it. We often observe similar struggles in late-diagnosed adults.”

“Struggles? What struggles?” I snapped sarcastically. “You mean the fact that my brain is fucked up? Nothing changed and my life just fucking broke! I’m still training every day, and when I have a day off, I still head to the gym. Hell, I even started doing yoga!”

“I understand that you’re upset, Mr Lorenz.”

“I’m not upset!” I barked, breathing like a bull. “I’m—” But I didn’t even know what I felt. My insides were in turmoil, my emotions an unidentifiable mass in my chest.

“It’s okay. You have every right to be angry or confused.”

Both. I was both. And sad. And scared.

Shit, I hadn't even realised I'd jumped to my feet with my fists balled. Then the fog lifted, and I flopped back into the chair. Hiding my face in my hands, I tried to calm myself with the breathing technique Søren had taught us.

Schmidt didn't speak until I eventually looked up. An understanding smile sat on his lips, exposing his sharp canines.

“Unfortunately, I can't tell you what changed. We've observed that adults sometimes lose their ability to mask. You told me about your dating history. It might have been that or something else. A change in diet or exercise routine, a move, or simply the moment when you couldn't hide that part of you anymore.”

“So what do I do now?”

My neuropsychiatrist spent the next ten minutes explaining my “brain differences”, as he called it, then gave me my options.

“The medication we can offer you isn't a cure all, but it can help you cope better. We recommend ongoing therapy, and keep those forest walks up. They seem to do you good. Maybe find a hobby...”

Don't blush, Nik!

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“I enjoy the walks, yes. I...” Could I tell him? Anything I said was confidential. “I, uh, met someone actually.”

“Oh?” Schmidt’s smile widened.

“Yeah, he lives with his pet on a homestead. We met on one of my walks and became...friends.”

Great, now I’m blushing.

“That’s good to hear. You need friends.”

“It’s been nice to talk to someone who’s not on my team. I mean, I love them like brothers. But it’s still work, you know?”

My doctor nodded.

“Jules, that’s his name. He has chickens and everything. He invited me to garden with him.”

“I’m sure that would be great to compensate for your demanding job. I saw you play on the weekend. You’re back on the roster?”

“Not officially, no. Coach asked me if I wanted ice time.”

“And you said you did?”

“Yeah.” I gave him a reluctant grin. “I missed it. The team seemed happy to have me with them, too.”

“How did that feel?”

“Fantastic. But also... I feel like I let them down, you know? Like I’m weak or something.”

“I can see why your brain would tell you that, but I disagree. Admitting that you needed help, and then asking for it takes a lot of strength, Mr Lorenz. Don’t you think you’re actually doing something for your team trying to get better?”

He’s got a point there.

“If you put it like that...”

“I’d like to see you again in a week or two. Sleep on it and see if you’d like to try the medication. And keep up the walks, Mr Lorenz, will you?”

“I will.”

It’s not like I want to stay away from Jules anyway.

We fixed an appointment for the week after next and said goodbye.

Jerke put me on the roster for the next game in Veitsreuth, and I spent the next few days training hard. We lost against the Füchse thanks to Chase Harper, who hammered four goals past Guns. But not even that could put a damper on my mood.

Harper was the only player who managed to get under Guns’ skin. Our usually stoic goalie lost his temper with him every single time.

Saturday morning, I got up early, hopped in my car, and drove back to the granite labyrinth.

Back to Jules...

The more I visited him, the easier it got to find the arch. It was as if his forest wanted me back with its keeper. Maybe it noticed the changes about him like I did.

Barely twenty minutes after I went through the arch, Jules came up the path. He walked with a spring in his step, his eyes shone, and his hair gleamed even more than when I'd first met him. It was quite beautiful to watch him blossom.

"Nikolai," Jules called. He hesitated as he came closer, as if he wasn't sure if I was real or just a dream. "You are back."

"I told you I would be," I muttered, having no idea what to do with my hands.

How could I tell him that I had spent the past three weeks pining for him? That I had managed to go for daily walks instead of hanging around in my flat drained after training because the small wooded park behind my house reminded me of him, and I could pretend he was waiting for me behind the next corner?

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Source Creation Date: July 9, 2025, 8:40 am

Like a child with his imaginary friend.

I stuffed my hands into my shorts' pockets and pushed one of the pebbles at my feet across the forest path.

"I didn't think you meant it," he told me in a low voice.

My eyes snapped up to his. They were mossy green with flecks of gold, like sunlight peeking through a canopy of leaves; they were eyes to get lost in.

"I wanted to..." I trailed off, biting my lip hard.

You can't tell him you wanted to see him again.

Jules gave me a shy smile. "Me, too."

In silence, he led me down the winding forest path until we arrived at his home.

"Barnabas will be happy to see you."

"Me, too." I repeated his words, shooting him a sideways grin. His Wolpertinger had taken to me, and I to him.

"And so am I. It's...nice...to have a guest."

I was sure he'd been about to say something else.

“You don’t have a lot of people who come to your house? You said you didn’t like surprise visitors.”

“No,” Jules huffed. “There are not a lot of people who—well, come in, please.” He flung the door wide and let me enter ahead of him. The house still took my breath away.

Creatures had been a part of my reality since I had been a child, but magic had not.

“I fucking love your place. It’s so gorgeous,” I blurted out before I could stop myself. Then I blushed, feeling like a silly fanboy in his idol’s house as I gaped at the bright white stone walls held together by winding trees and by the magic of the man next to me.

“I’m glad you like it.” Tearing my eyes away from the grandeur of the room, I met Jules’ again.

I want to get lost in them.

Nineteen

Jules

Nikolai was back with me. I couldn’t believe it. But if I was indeed dreaming, I never wanted to wake up.

“You asked me to see the rest of my house, but we never got past the garden. I thought we could start with a tour today.”

“Oh, that’s a fantastic idea, Jules! Yeah, I’d love to see the rest of your house.”

No matter how brash I felt, starting in my bedroom wasn't something I would do.
"Good. How about I show you my library first?"

"You have a library?" The human snorted.

"I am 433 years old, Nikolai. Of course I have a library." I returned his grin, already feeling a lot more at ease in his presence than I had expected. Knowing that he wasn't scared of me made me happier than I would ever confess.

And his smiles...they made me float upstairs to my attic where the library was located. It was a large two-story space with lamps dotted all over the room and tall wooden shelves lining every available wall.

Most of it the house had supplied, growing more bookshelves as I needed them. And ladders. I loved my bookshelf ladders, maybe a bit too much.

"Wow, Jules. This place is gorgeous." Nikolai took a few steps into the middle of the room and turned in place to take it all in. "Have you read all these books?"

"I wouldn't say all of them. But most. A century can get pretty long when you're alone."

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I wanted to take the words back as soon as they had slipped out of my mouth. Then I wouldn't have had to see Nikolai's expression drop.

Does he feel sorry for me?

"I can't even imagine how lonely that must have been." He looked away and let his eyes sweep over my library again. "It sucks that nobody saw you for the amazing person you are. You didn't deserve to be alone all those years."

"They were scared of me, and I can't blame them." I pushed my hands into my pockets and leaned back against the large desk by the window.

"Well, I fucking blame them." Nikolai spun again, eyebrows drawn in and a fierce expression on his face. "They fucking vilified you, Jules. Just because they didn't understand you, or because you looked different. You're not a monster."

I am not so sure of that, Bunny.

"People have come a long way, Nikolai. Maybe you are right. But I can't go back in time and make them see. I was quite alright here in my forest. I shaped it, and it shaped me. It's a beautiful synergy, and I am thankful for being part of it."

The fight went out of him, and his shoulders dropped away from his ears.

"I appreciate your indignation on my behalf though. And your friendship. I must say it is wonderful to have someone in my life who listens, someone from the outside."

“You know, Jules, for the past couple of weeks I wasn’t sure if I had made you up. A bit like an imaginary friend, you know? I’m glad you found me in the forest.”

I didn’t know how, but I was sure he wasn’t just talking about finding him on that path in the woods.

“So am I.”

He took a few more steps into the room, clearly interested in my books.

“Feel free to look around. If you see anything that interests you, you can borrow it.”

“I can’t remember the last time I read a physical book.” He gave me a reluctant grin. “I do better with e-readers.”

“What is that?” I perched on the tabletop, letting my feet dangle in the air.

“Electronic readers. You can put hundreds or thousands of books on one and read them. Saves space, you know?”

“Oh yes, I can see how that would be useful. I guess not every person has this much room at their disposal?”

“Nope.” He popped the ‘p’ and sauntered across the library to the shelf that held my local lore collection. “I love how you’ve catalogued them—and the ladders. So fancy.” The grin he threw me over his shoulder made my stomach drop as if I’d missed a step on the stairs.

You beautiful human.

“I live in a pretty tiny apartment. It’s one large room with a bathroom and a kitchen. I

have a small bookshelf, but that's all."

He took one of the books from the shelf but kept his finger in the vacant space so he could find it again. I watched him turn the book around, read the cover, and replace it on the shelf.

"Those sound pretty cool. I used to love these stories, but it's quite wild to see how the stories people made up differ from reality, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is, especially in times when we relied on oral stories."

Nikolai grinned but didn't reply. He pulled out another book from one shelf higher up, inspected it, and then looked back up at me.

"Is this a book about you?"

He held up the book so I could see the cover. "Because that bloke on the cover, he looks exactly like you did when I first met you."

"Yes, there are a few of these books." My cheeks heated, and I wished I still wore the same grizzled beard as the Höimann on the book cover. It would have hidden my blush.

"Oh my God, Jules! You're famous!" His grin turned cheeky. I couldn't remember the last time someone had teased me good naturedly. Maybe nobody had ever done that? The last time I had been around other people had been at court. As the Elven Queen's son, people had either been intimidated or fascinated by me. There had been no space for friendly teasing.

Can you miss something you never had?

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At the look on my face, Nikolai's face fell.

"Did I say something wrong? It was a dumb joke, I'm sorry."

"No, don't apologise. It's just... nobody has ever teased me. And maybe that is stupid of me to admit. But it felt...nice. Being teased by a friend." My voice shook with emotion.

"Oh, Jules. I'm so sorry."

"It's okay, Bunny. Please don't worry about me."

"Did you just call me Bunny?" Nikolai blurted out into the moment of silence.

Twenty

Nikolai

Jules blushed crimson, which was still the oddest fucking thing in the world. A magical creature, older than many trees in the forest around me, blushed because he called me Bunny.

"The first time we met, and you saw that I had changed, you looked like a bunny before a snake. So that's what I've been calling you in my mind, Bunny."

Laughter bubbled out of my mouth, and once it started, I couldn't keep it contained.

Jules regarded me with curiosity as I wheezed and snorted and tears leaked out from under my eyelids.

“Sorry,” I cried, hiccupping slightly to get myself back under control. “But, Jules...Bunny?” My renewed laughter echoed in the library, and I was sure this ancient creature had no idea what to do with an ignorant human like me.

“I apologise if you don’t like that name. I thought it was nice to have a name for you that isn’t your own. Isn’t that something humans do for their...friends? Forgive me if I got that custom wrong.”

“Oh Jules, I’m so sorry.” Wiping my wet cheeks on my shirt, I finally managed to get a grip on myself. He looked downcast. “Hey, that’s not what I meant.”

I strode over to where he perched on his desk. I barely resisted the urge to hug him. Instead, I evaluated the solid wood desk, decided it looked sturdy enough for both of us, and sat next to him.

“I wasn’t laughing at you, Jules.”

He gave me a doubting look, his mouth in a pout.

God, he is so pretty.

I wanted to lean in and kiss that pout off his face.

“Listen, Jules. My team has about 20 different nicknames for me, ranging from ‘German Thor’ to ‘Frosty Fortress’.” A tiny grin tugged on his lips. Good. “You got that right, okay? Friends have nicknames for each other, yes. ‘Bunny’ just wasn’t a nickname I expected to be called.” His face dropped to my mouth when I bit my lip to stop my grin.

“I had a few tests scheduled.” No idea why I told him this, but it felt relevant. These emotional outbursts, like tears or laughter when they seemed inappropriate, had been an ADHD trait I found during my research. I wanted to explain it to him so he could understand me better.

“Tests?” His voice was wooden, maybe even a little scared. “With a doctor? Are you sick, Nikolai?”

The thing lacing his voice was definitely fear.

Oh, Jules.

“No, I’m not. I told you when we first met that I was going through some shit.” Jules nodded. “I have been seeing a doctor, but he is a doctor for my brain, basically.”

“You’ve been seeing a therapist?” Of course he knew that word. He lives in a forest, Nik, not under a rock.

“Yes, my doctor is a neuropsychiatrist. He can prescribe medication and everything. And he guessed what was up with me and scheduled me for some tests. I have ADHD.”

Jules tilted his head to the side, his gleaming ginger hair falling over his shoulder.

“I am sorry, I don’t know what that is. Can you explain it to me? Science was never a topic I was too interested in.” His rueful smile warmed me to the core. Even if Jules and I would never be more than friends, I counted myself very fortunate to have him in my life.

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“My doctor calls it a brain difference. It means that certain processes in my brain work differently than they do in someone who is neurotypical. Sorry.” I chuckled. “I’ve learned all this new vocabulary. It feels like I have unlocked a new language, and now I can’t stop speaking it. So there is a way the brain typically works, and then there are other ways. Like mine.”

“So, your brain is different. Different is good.” Jules smiled at me.

“Well, it makes shit really fucking difficult at times. But I’m slowly coming to terms with it. I’ve had a pretty weird month, Jules. That’s why I couldn’t be back, you know?” I rang my hands, trying to find the words to explain. Jules didn’t press the matter. He sat next to me and waited until I was ready to put my thoughts out into the space between us.

“It’s so strange to find out that you have lived twenty-eight years of your life without knowing there’s something different about you. I mean, I knew there was something wrong with me. But I didn’t know what it was.”

I fidgeted on the spot, something I had learned to stop doing when teachers told me off for bouncing my leg and spinning my pens. I had only remembered that when Dr Schmidt’s colleague asked me what I remembered from my early childhood. Since then I found myself fidgeting non-stop. It helped relieve the pressure in my head and quieted my thoughts. I couldn’t believe I had made myself not do it for two decades.

“I’m still not sure it has sunk in. I guess it will take some more time to come to terms with it. But I needed some space to process. I’m glad I’m here now, though.”

“So am I, Bunny.” He smiled at me. Knowing that he simply accepted that I was different made the whole thing a little more bearable. I was also thankful that he didn’t try to invalidate my feelings. My mum—bless her cottons—had immediately tried to tell me there was nothing wrong with me.

“Sometimes, I react in a way that doesn’t make sense to others. I remember when my grandmother died, and I started to laugh. Not because it was funny. But because my confusing feelings around losing her overwhelmed me.”

Jules reached out and took hold of my hand. Looking down, I realised I had fiddled with my cuticle. A drop of blood bloomed on my skin.

“Don’t hurt yourself,” he murmured, then let go again.

“Yeah, thanks.” It took me a moment to find my composure again. “So when I started laughing, it wasn’t that I was making fun of you, okay? I need you to know that.”

Again, he listened and gave me space to find my way through this conversation.

“It was unexpected. And a little bit funny.”

“A little bitbunny,” Jules said with a wink, making me laugh.

“Yeah, that’s it. Damn, the last few weeks have been a little bitbunny.”

I got up from the table top.

“Come on, I wanna see the rest of the house.”

Jules got up too, straightening out his tunic and leading the way to the door.

“Follow me, Nikolai. There is plenty more to see.”

Twenty-one

Jules

Having made a mental list of things I wanted to show Nikolai when he next visited me helped. Being near him was strangely distracting. More than once I lost my train of thought because the sun shining through the windows glinted on his hair, or how his warm eyes lit up when I smiled at him.

Barnabas, who had been out in the garden to dig for worms, ventured inside to follow both of us around.

“Oh, hello, baby,” he crooned like he had done the first time he’d seen my pet. “I missed you, big boy. How have you been?” Nikolai hummed and tickled the bit of fur between Barnabas’ antlers. My Wolpertinger huffed happily, angling his head. “Hey, you want to lick my hand, sweetie?”

Don’t be jealous of your pet, Jules!

An image from that dream I’d had flashed before my eyes: Nikolai straddling my hips and bringing my hand up to his mouth so he could suck on my fingers.

A tiny gasp escaped my lips, low enough that his ears didn’t pick up on it. He’d looked so beautiful in his pleasure and had felt so good around me.

“Did you look out for your daddy? I bet he’s so happy he has you.” Bunny placed a tiny peck on Barnabas’ muzzle, and I almost fainted when I heard him call me Barnbas’ ‘daddy’ .

“Very happy,” I muttered. Nikolai looked up at me, lips pursed in a soft smile.

I wasn’t brave enough to take Bunny to my bedroom, and he didn’t ask to see it. Perhaps he sensed how much of a test it would’ve been for my self restraint and decided not to put me through it.

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I showed him the study I hardly ever used and another unused room full of spare furniture I'd collected over the centuries. That was back when I ventured out into the human world more frequently. Before it got so loud, so busy, and so overwhelming. I kept it in case my manor decided to grow another room for me.

"How about we go outside for a bit? It's such a nice day. We could take the cake I made. And maybe some coffee?"

"That's a great idea. Maybe we can say 'hi' to the chickens again?"

"Of course, Bunny."

"You really dig that nickname, don't you?" Chuckling, Nikolai followed me down the stairs to the entrance hall and into the kitchen.

"I do," I confirmed.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Nikolai asked me, leaning his hip against my kitchen counter.

"Yes, you could cut up the cake, if you want? The strawberries come from my garden."

I showed him the drawer with the knives and where to find the cake I had baked this morning.

"Oh my God, Jules! That smells fantastic!" Nikolai inhaled the scent of the fresh

strawberry cake and popped a few crumbs into his mouth. “Sorry, I can never resist.” He gave me a cheeky grin. I had only known Nikolai for a couple of weeks, but even I had noticed a change in him. When I had first met him he had been grumpy and downcast. These days he showed me a more relaxed version of himself. Had that been a mask, too? Or had his life changed enough to allow himself to be happier? I brewed coffee with the old-fashioned drip filter made from white porcelain I found next to a bin for recycled glass on one of my outings.

Barnabas always looked at me funny when I returned from one of my adventures into the outside world laden with spoils. I simply couldn’t resist urban foraging. Once the coffee was done, I poured it into the beat-up flask the wanderer left all those years ago. It kept my drinks warm for hours. This was especially handy in winter when I stayed outside in the forest for hours at a time, or when I cut firewood.

Nikolai grabbed the coffee, I carried the tray with the cake, plates, and forks as we made our way outside into my garden. Barnabas joined us but disappeared between the bushes, probably to hunt for bugs.

“Oh, wow!” Bunny put the plates and the tray down on a little wrought iron table next to my garden swing and cautiously sat down. I couldn’t quite remember why I hadn’t shown him this the last time.

“I love this, Jules.” He pushed himself back with his foot, still handling the swing as if it was going to break at any moment.

“It’s okay, Bunny, I built the swing myself. It can hold your weight.” It could probably also hold both of us while we engaged in frisky business, but I didn’t say that.

“You built that thing yourself? Wow, you’re so talented.” Nikolai looked at me as if I had hung the moon.

You are too vain for your own good, Jules.

Part of me wanted him never to stop looking at me like that. I wanted to be worshipped by this beautiful human.

This is dangerous, Jules. I knew I should tell him to go and never come back, but I couldn't. I couldn't go back to the old life I had led, to what I now knew had been emptiness and a bleak, lonely existence.

Twenty-two

Nikolai

Time slipped away like water that we tried to hold in our cupped hands. One minute, we sat down on the swing and had some of that delicious strawberry cake Jules had baked for us and that fantastic coffee I still didn't know how he could have, and the next minute the sun had set. With the darkness, fireflies rose out of the bushes. But it wasn't only their eerie green glow that illuminated the air around us. There were pink, white, blue, and yellow lights, smaller than my thumbnail. Fairies. They danced around us like moths around a flame.

Jules felt like that. I couldn't even try to explain how, but he glowed like a beacon in the dark. Perhaps it was his magic that made me certain I could look at him for all eternity and never tire of how beautiful he was.

"I've been alone for most of my life." He exhaled and swirled his glass of dark summer wine around. "One day I will tell you everything I have done. But for now, I need you to believe me it was for the best that I came here."

Oh Jules.

“Not for you, though.” It wasn’t a question.

His eyes met mine, colourful lights reflected in them.

“I don’t know.” The sadness in his voice was palpable.

“No, Jules. I’m sure it wasn’t the best for you. You’re amazing. You don’t deserve to be alone all the time.”

Jules’ eyes hung on mine for a long moment.

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Are you going to kiss me?

“Maybe, Bunny. But it was better for everybody else. I’m dangerous.”

Dangerous?

“I might just be a dumb jock, but I know that isn’t the truth. You’re a good person, Jules.”

“Oh, Nikolai. You are anything but a dumb jock.”

He gave me a soft smile and brushed my forearm with his fingertips.

What are we? Friends who like to make each other feel better? Because damn me, Jules! I don’t know if I only want to be your friend.

“Tell me about your life now, Nikolai.”

“What do you want to know? There isn’t a lot to say. I get up, I train, I destroy myself in the gym, and then I play hockey. Rinse and repeat.”

“Oh, I disagree. That was quite a bit to say.” When I looked back at Jules a cheeky half grin sat on his mouth. “So, you only live for your work, do you?”

Okay.

I had never looked at it like that.

“I suppose you could say that, yes.”

“Does it make you happy?” Jules tilted his head to the side, scrutinising me.

Shit, Jules. My eyes filled with tears. Not again.

“Please accept my apology, Bunny. I didn’t want to upset you.” Jules’ hand brushed my forearm again, only this time he didn’t take it away. He left it on my skin, and his touch sent sparks all through my body.

“It’s okay.” I brushed the tears away, sniffing under my breath. “I know you didn’t mean to make me cry. Shit.” I laughed when fresh tears spilled from under my lashes. “I don’t know why I am so weepy when I’m around you. I was always this tough guy, you know?”

Jules didn’t speak. He seemed intent to listen. I wouldn’t say my colleagues were shit at listening, but we never talked about feelings. You spoke to speak, not to be heard. We made dumb jokes. We teased each other. Or, we played cards or on our game consoles together.

I couldn’t remember the last time someone had asked me if I was happy. I couldn’t remember the last time someone actually cared to hear my answer. Jules did and knowing that made me feel like shit. Shit I didn’t want to look at closely, and shit I never felt before.

“I know you don’t know much about hockey, Jules. My role on the ice is to be tough. I need to be like a fortress, protecting our goal and my teammates. That is my job. I’m pretty good at it, and yes, it makes me happy. Am I happy? I don’t even know.”

Again, Jules didn’t speak. He plucked the empty wine glass from my hand and got up to refill it. I rested my head back on the swinging bench, enjoying the gentle swaying

motion. It was still balmy outside. I'd put my zipper hoodie on about an hour ago, but mainly to protect myself from being eaten by mosquitoes. It was a beautiful night, with the stars sparkling over our heads and a gentle breeze ruffling the leaves of the trees around us.

"Are you cold?" Jules asked as he handed me the half empty wine glass.

Or maybe it's half full.

"No, I'm great actually."

"You are," he agreed. I was glad he couldn't see me blush in the dark.

We stayed on the swing for way too long, talking about everything and nothing. For two people as different as Jules and me, it was strange how much we had in common and how much we had to talk about.

It made it easy to forget that he was hundreds of years old and what he had seen and heard. On that swing under the birch tree he was simply my Jules.

The night turned colder when midnight was only a faint idea in the past. The light turned greyer, drowning out all colour. That was when we made our way into the house. For a moment, I considered hugging him, maybe even giving him a kiss. But then that moment passed, and I found myself in Jules' beautiful guest room.

Barney followed me into the room, waited until I had taken my clothes off and slipped under the covers in only my boxer shorts. Then he hopped on the bed and curled up somewhere around my knees.

I was out within minutes and slept dreamlessly until the next morning.

Twenty-three

Jules

“Good morning, Nikolai,” I greeted him when he entered the kitchen the next morning. My Wolpertinger followed him, his little mismatched feet scrambling to keep up.

Barnabas had spent the night in Nikolai’s room. Jealousy bubbled in my stomach at the thought of my pet sharing his bed.

“Good morning, Jules.” Nikolai stretched his arms wide and yawned, causing his shirt to travel up and exposing his flat stomach.

His body intrigued me. More than I would ever let him know. After keeping away from humans for most of my life, I had forgotten how beautiful they were.

Bunny was tall and strong, but to me he was delicate.

I might prefer this body for now, but perhaps eventually he might enjoy another form. I could be anything he ever wanted.

“Sorry.” Nikolai yawned again and chuckled a little under his breath. “I don’t know what it is, but whenever I stay at your place, I sleep so well you could carry me away.”

My magic, Bunny.

I tried so hard to keep it in control around him. And I was sure I had not allowed him to become infatuated with me. Not like Friedrich. I hadn't known how to control my powers back then. But I had learned. Not only for them. For me. But my magic was interwoven with my forest. It pervaded my house and was bound to affect him too while he dwelled within the boundaries of my magic.

All those years ago when that human had fallen for me, being with me had made him sleepy. Humans had written fairy tales about my kind. Dornröschen. Only they had gotten the details wrong. The beauty didn't sleep; she was wide-awake. Everybody else, though? They fell into a deep slumber and eventually faded away.

I was confident that wasn't going to happen to Nikolai, though. I kept my magic on a leash like the wild beast it was. Even if I let my guard down around him a bit more, it wouldn't hurt him. I would hurt myself before I hurt him.

And in all the intervening years I had scoured all those books. In a few, there had been a mention of a way out. Not quite a cure, more like a chance: a mate bond, forged from love, blood, and magic. It was supposed to protect the human mate from the effects of my kind.

If I didn't want to spend eternity alone, I would have to find someone who would willingly enter into a bond with me.

I couldn't expect Nikolai to want that, though.

He would be tethered to life for as long as I lived unless destiny ripped us apart. If it did, the remaining mate would follow the other into the dark.

Why would he want that?

“Would you like a cup of coffee, Bunny?”

“Oh yeah, sure. That would be great.”

He folded his huge body into one of the dining chairs and rested his chin on his knee.

He’s so flexible.

“Can I offer you some breakfast, too? The chickens were so happy to see you, they surprised me with a large amount of eggs this morning.”

Nikolai threw his head back and burst into laughter.

“You think they laid all those eggs for me?” He giggled, and it was the most beautiful sound I had ever heard.

“Well, they never lay this many eggs when it’s only me here. I think they like you.”

“I have to make sure to bring them a treat next time if they’re being such good girls for me.” His cheeky wink made me blush, and I hastily turned away to grab the eggs from my kitchen counter countertop.

How was it that Bunny calling my pets ‘good boy’ and ‘good girl’ turned me into a desperate mess? I was desperate for him to call me that, too.

He’s your friend, Jules.

“Do you think we could spend some more time in the garden? I loved that so much yesterday.”

“Of course, Bunny.”

I led him to the small shed where I kept my seeds.

“We can plant a few more beans. What do you think?”

“Oh, yeah. Sounds like fun.” I picked one of the jars I had gotten from a recycling bin on the edge of the village behind the labyrinth.

“Where did you get these?” Nikolai gave me a conspiratorial grin.

“I sometimes venture out into the world,” I admitted.

“Ha, gotcha.” He bumped his elbow against mine. “I thought you did.”

“Yes?”

“Yeah. That or you’re the only person in Upper Franconia who grows their own coffee.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. We left the shed, and I picked one of the raised beds for the beans.

“If you ever need me to pick up anything for you, let me know, okay?”

“You would do that?”

“Of course I’d do that for you.” Bunny gave me a half smile.

Warmth spread through my body. I couldn’t remember the last time I had felt this happy to be alive.

Nikolai and I worked in near silence for a couple of hours, had lunch, and pottered around the garden some more. He helped me muck out the chicken coop, and it made me weirdly content to do mundane chores with him.

“I think I’ll have to leave soon,” Bunny told me when the afternoon sun slowly faded away. “Training starts at seven thirty tomorrow.”

“Oh, yes, of course. Come on, I’ll show you where you can wash your hands. Do you want me to walk with you to the archway?”

“Yeah, please. I think I could find it on my own but I’m not sure. Don’t want to get lost.”

No, I wouldn’t want that, either.

“I’ll be back next week, okay? I promise,” Nikolai said when we arrived at the crumbling stone arch. He smiled at me in that half smile my brain had filed away under his signature expressions.

“Good. I will see you then, Nikolai.”

“Bye, Jules.” He dug his bright white teeth into his bottom lip, giving me a cheeky smile that made my heart flutter like an excited bird. “Take care, okay?”

“You, too, Bunny.” I reached out to touch his shoulder but changed my mind at the last moment and waved awkwardly after him.

Twenty-four

Nikolai

IwasureJuleshadbeen about to hug me.

Fuck yes!

I turned back the way I had last time to wave at him.

“See you on Saturday!” I raised my hand at him.

“Yes! I’m looking forward to it!” he called back, beaming brighter than the sun.

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Trying my hardest not to skip, I jogged back to my car, the same bright smile on my face as on Jules’.

What a time to be alive!

It was hard to feel shitty about myself when a forest god looked at me like that.

As if he was a drug I’d gotten hooked on, I craved Jules’ company. Training and playing were the only two things that kept my thoughts away from him, so I threw myself into both.

By Tuesday morning I brimmed with energy, and I picked up my phone at six thirty to make a phone call.

“Nikolai? Is something wrong?” Bo sounded alert. I knew he always got up early.

“Hey, big guy. No, everything’s fine. Wanna go for a run with me?”

We’d done that a few times a month before my life got all fucked up. I missed it.

He chuckled. “Court garden in fifteen minutes?”

“I’ll be there.”

He hung up without another word. We didn’t need many words to understand each other, on or off the ice. I loved Bo. He’d always been like my brother from another mother.

You shouldn't have cut him out like that. Damn, you suck.

"Morgen, Kleiner." My Forest Troll teammate jogged up to where I waited by the gate, carrying a water bottle and wearing shorts and a functional shirt that exposed miles of green skin and bulging muscle. Damn, I wish I had his physique.

"Morgen." I rolled my eyes at him. "It's half a fucking foot, Persson."

Bo's grin widened until both his sharp fangs were on display. He straightened his spine to make himself even taller.

Asshole.

"Well, half a foot is half a foot. Shall we?"

"Yup."

We found our speed after a minute or two, seamlessly adapting to the other the way we did on the ice. It was rare to click with someone like that.

You shouldn't have taken it for granted.

"I missed this," Bo said after about five more minutes. Looking over, I caught his eye.

"Me, too. It's been a lot."

"I did not say it to make you feel like shit, Nik." Bo gave me an understanding smile.

"Yeah, I know, man. I haven't talked about it with the team yet. Feels a bit like coming out." I huffed as we jogged over a bridge.

“Not that you need to do that.”

“Nope, but I want to. I found out I have ADHD.”

“Oh, you do? That’s great.”

“You think so?” I huffed again.

“Yes, I do. Ollie and his brother have it, too. And my niece.”

“Are you serious?”

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We stopped for a drink and Bo nodded, then wiped the sweat off his face with his shirt.

Fuck me, that man's abs made everyone jealous.

"You've been working on that core strength, huh?"

He laughed. "Ollie started working out, too. I spend a lot of my free time in the gym these days. And he likes it." A faint blush tinged his cheeks.

"Bet he does." I nudged him with my elbow. "Need to look good for the wedding, too."

They'd get married at the end of our training camp in Scotland so they could go on a little honeymoon afterwards.

"Right. We're going to Scotland to get our wedding outfits sorted in two weeks."

We jogged on.

"Are you nervous?"

"Oh, no. Maybe a bit when I think about having to make sure I don't forget any lines I'm supposed to say, and I'm shit scared of losing the rings, but not of getting married. This is the man I want to spend my life with. I have no doubts." He smiled ahead, and I felt genuinely happy for him. And somehow I thought of Jules, who had taken up residence in my heart over the past couple of weeks.

Would he be interested in coming to the wedding with me?

“You two belong together. Anyone can see that.”

“Right?” Bo beamed at me.

We talked a bit more about the wedding, my diagnosis, and how I was coping. I went home with a much lighter heart.

The week flew by, though. Quality time with one of my closest friends and knowing I’d be back with Jules on Saturday to spend the night again helped me pull through.

There was one thing I couldn’t deny or ignore. My feelings for Jules were getting out of control.

The more I tried to convince myself that we were “just friends”, the more my brain obsessed over him.

This is getting ridiculous, Nik! You have to tell him.

But what if he didn’t feel the same and wouldn’t want to see me any more? Jules was my favourite coping mechanism.

Jules and fidget toys.

I’d ordered a ton of those online and was a little addicted, especially to a rainbow-coloured foam chicken.

He needs to know. You know that he likes you.

“Nikolai!” he called out as he walked up the path to the arch taking long strides.

My heart rate sped up at the sight of him.

God, you beautiful thing.

Then Jules stopped in his tracks. He stared at me as if I was a snack on two legs and was about to dig in.

Without any mental capacity to go shopping, I'd grabbed a few things from our merch shop.

A crop top and shorts.

Well, it is hot.

Judging by the bit of drool that glistened on his lips, Jules thought so, too.

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I admitted that it was a skimpy outfit for a gardening session, but it made me feel good in my body for the first time in months. The crop top showed off my bulging arms and emphasised my slim waist. Kicking all the processed food from my diet and destroying myself at the gym had come with an added bonus: I'd bulked up like crazy. I'd sized up on the shorts, but they were only just long enough to still be considered somewhat decent.

Twenty-five

Jules

I gaped at Nikolai as if I had never seen him before.

I hadn't. Not like this.

"I'm ready to dig in the earth. I'm a little scared of the worms, but thankfully, I've got you to protect me."

He put his hands on his hips, head cocked. I was tempted to do something recklessly stupid.

Nikolai wore tight shorts. On a smaller man they might have reached the top of the knee but on him they barely covered half of his thick thighs. He had paired it with a short top that ended at the bottom of his rib cage, exposing his midriff and heavily corded arms. A yellow and blue mountain lion head sat on his chest.

When he whipped off his hat that read 'RAWR' in yellow on blue, I noticed for the

first time how much his hair had grown in the weeks since I met him.

Nikolai extracted a blue hair tie from his pocket and used it to pile the longer strands into a high bun on top of his head.

“Ready when you are. I found this in our merch shop. A bit much?” He’d noticed me staring and pulled his top down, trying and failing to get it to cover more of his body.

“No. I like it.”

Too much, in fact.

“Yeah?”

“You look very nice, Bunny.”

Edible.

His lips pursed.

“Thank you, Jules. You look very nice, too.”

I wore trousers made from handwoven fabric and a matching loose-fitting tunic. My forest provided almost everything I needed—nettles to make fabric, animals, roots, and fruits to feed me and Barnabas— and a feeling of freedom. We kept each other alive.

“Thank you.” My cheeks warmed. “Do you want to get started? I spent the last couple of days building a new garden bed for you.”

“Seriously, Jules?” Nikolai’s lips stretched into a smile that warmed my heart.

“Yes.” I led the way over to the high bed I’d made from pinewood. “I thought you might like to have your own bed in my garden.”

What are you saying?!

Bunny’s smile turned radiant.

“I love that. Thank you. But you’ll help me plant it, right? I don’t want to mess up.”

“I’m sure you wouldn’t mess anything up, Nikolai. But if you want me to, I will help you. Of course I will.”

I might even charm the seedlings and make them grow faster for you.

“Thank you, Jules.” He reached out and squeezed my forearm. “Tell me what to do.”

“First of all, don’t be scared of the critters. They will not hurt you.”

His laugh made me feel so alive I very nearly cried with joy.

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Everything about this beautiful human filled my days with so much happiness. Every moment spent with Nikolai was a ray of sunlight illuminating the darkness I'd experienced in all my centuries alone.

I showed him how to prepare the soil for the seeds, mesmerised by his intense energy and focus.

He plunged his hands into the earth and felt it. Watching him let the black earth fall through his fingers made me sure he found it as healing as I did.

“Hey, little friend. Here, let's get you back on the ground.” He set a wriggling worm on the earth, watching it disappear from view. “Not as scary as I thought,” he said, raising his eyes and finding me staring at him. His tongue darted over his bottom lip, and he swallowed. “Am I doing this right?”

“Yes,” I breathed, mesmerised by his beauty all over again.

I got to my feet and retreated. There had to be more distance between us or I would do something exceptionally stupid.

Nikolai mirrored me. He walked around the raised bed.

“Is everything okay?”

I nodded. Nikolai took another step towards me.

“You're an excellent teacher, Jules.” His minty breath brushed over my mouth.

He's so close.

"I'm still a little scared of the critters but way less than last time." Nikolai's tongue swiped over his lips again. "I'm sure that worm bit me, though."

Please don't kiss me while we're talking about worms and bugs.

"I'm glad," I gasped, taking half a step back and stumbling over my feet. I hated myself when he retreated out of my personal space.

No, don't leave. I didn't mean it. You can kiss me if you want.

"I'm ready to cool off." He walked backwards. "You said you swam in the pond when it was warm enough."

"Yes, I..."

Nikolai turned and ran. He pulled his tiny crop top off and threw it carelessly to the side. Water splashed everywhere as he threw himself into the pond. He dove in, and I ran after him.

What if he drowns?

Then his head breached the surface, sending more droplets flying. They cascaded down his bare chest. Where the sun hit them right, they looked like tiny crystals.

Bunny shook his hair and laughed at the top of his lungs. I looked and looked until my heart threatened to burst from the feelings that flooded me at the sight of this carefree, beautiful human.

"Aren't you coming, too? It's great!"

“Yes, sure.” With shaking hands, I took off my trousers. His gaze never left me until he seemed to realise how nervous it made me to have a pair of inquisitive eyes on me. Of course it unsettles you. The last time I undressed in front of another person had been with Friedrich three hundred years ago.

Nikolai floated on his back, looking up at the skies above us.

“This is so fucking perfect, Jules.”

“It is,” I agreed as I joined him in the blissfully cool pond. Being here with him was as close to perfection as I had ever experienced.

We stayed in the pond, not speaking much but enjoying the water on our skins until gooseflesh spread on Nikolai’s chest.

He left the pond before me. For a moment, I found his backside level with my face. The shorts were plastered to his glutes.

Oh, by my trees.

I averted my eyes. There was no need for me to embarrass myself.

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“I will get us towels from my bathroom. Maybe you would like to lie in the sun for a bit to warm up?”

“Excellent idea.” He beamed at me, looking prettier than ever before.

“Good. I’ll be back in a minute.”

I quickly changed into dry undergarments and a fresh pair of trousers and fetched a large towel and snack for him. When I returned, I found Nikolai sitting on the edge of the pond.

Barnabas had his little head on his thigh. Bunny stroked and talked to him under his breath.

“Oh, thanks, Jules.” He accepted the towel from me. “You got us a snack? Awesome, I’m starving. Gardening makes you hungry, doesn’t it?”

Gardening or you in those shorts, one of the two.

“It does. I thought you could do with some sustenance.”

“Sorry, Barney,” he apologised to my pet when he dislodged his little antlered head as he wrapped the towel around his shoulders.

I poured a glass of elderberry juice for him. I had diluted it with water from my spring, making it ice cold and refreshing. Nikolai popped a cherry tomato into his mouth. Some of its juice dribbled down his chin. He wiped it away with a chuckle.

“Thank you, Jules. I can’t remember the last time I had this much fun.”

“Me either, Bunny.”

Twenty-six

Nikolai

With Søren’s help, I’d set up a new training regime and a meal plan that focused on all the foods that supposedly helped with ADHD. I’d found a book on nutrition for ADHD kids that I’d inhaled.

What worked for kids surely worked for my grumpy ass, too.

Maybe it was a placebo effect. But it felt like it helped. It certainly didn’t hurt to cut out even the last of the ultra processed food I occasionally ate out of my diet.

I had another appointment with Dr Schmidt who asked me to meet regularly. So he could keep an eye on me, I supposed.

I’d tried to tell him that my suicidal thoughts were a thing of the past but no idea if he believed me.

It was fine, though. My life felt pretty damn good. I knew that this on-top-of-the-world-feeling wouldn’t stick around forever but I was at a point where I took what I could get.

Gardening with Jules had been a huge win, too. I’d tried not to gape at him too much, but he was just so freaking hot. I thought back to when we sat in the sun by his pond, with Barney stretched out by my side, and we talked about random crap.

He probably wouldn't believe me, but it had been one of the best days of my life.

"Hello, Mr Lorenz." Schmidt admitted me into his office and pointed to the visitor's chair. "How are you today?"

"Oh, I'm pretty good. I think I'm slowly coming to terms with my weird brain, and being back with the team is so fucking good. Sorry," I added after I realised what word I had just used

"Nevermind." Schmidt chuckled and took a few notes. "I'm glad to hear this."

I told him about the book I'd read, and how Søren supported me as best as he could.

"He sounds like a good person."

"He's amazing. I wasn't super excited for the whole yoga routine, but it's been great for my flexibility and my brain, I guess."

Schmidt beamed at me. "I'm so relieved to hear that you have such a strong support system. And you've been putting in so much work."

"Well, I want to get out of this shit, and I want to learn what I can do to make it easier for myself. Work with my brain, you know? Not against it."

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“It makes perfect sense, yes.”

“And I’ve been thinking about what you said last time. I want to try it without medication first. See how far I get, and if it doesn’t work...” My voice trailed off.

“You can always tell me, and we can evaluate your options,” he finished my sentence.

“Great, thank you.”

“Of course, that is my job as your doctor.” He gave me a gentle smile.

“Thank you, anyway,” I muttered.

We fixed another appointment in two weeks, and I was off, back to the rink for some more time in the gym.

Back in my bed that night, with my body aching from an extra challenging workout at the gym, I had very little mental energy to think about my brain difference or about that beautiful man in the forest who I missed way more than I should.

I have no time to fall in love. But then again, I always had shit timing.

I turned over in bed and stared at the dark ceiling.

And Jules is worth it all.

Our back to back games and training regimen kept me away from Jules' forest for so long that my affection for him ached like a physical wound.

"Alright, team." Jerke blew his whistle. We all skated over to him like obedient dogs. Having played hockey since I was five, I had had more than my fair share of experience with coaches. None of them had ever had their team under control like Jerke without being an asshole. He was a natural born leader and a fantastic player.

"Take the afternoon off. I want you all well rested on the ice at eight tomorrow morning."

"Yes, Coach," we replied like school kids.

I checked the clock at the far end of the rink. It was barely one in the afternoon. If I got a move on, I could drive the twenty-five minutes out to the labyrinth and spend the afternoon with Jules.

What if he doesn't want to see you?

I shut my inner voice down.

Nope.

I knew how my brain worked. The longer I didn't hear from someone—and how could I when he didn't have a phone or a computer?—the more I became convinced that they hated me, and that's why they stayed away.

This is how you lost touch with basically everyone in the past.

No, it was going to be fine. He said he wanted me to come back. Why would that have changed?

Maybe he realised by now what a fake you are? Three imposters in expensive hockey gear.

Oh, fuck off.

“Bye, guys. See you tomorrow.” I shouldered my bag, waved at my teammates and was already on the way to my car.

It was only when I parked my car next to the labyrinth that I remembered I’d wanted to drop by a bakery to grab some coffee and baked goods for us. Shit. But then again, I didn’t want to bring trash into Jules’ life.

I bet he kept his forest clean from any litter. The idea of Jules in a cute outfit pottering around and picking up whatever the wind or the stream brought along amused me. I hated littering, though.

Some teammates had teased me when I had told off some of the teenagers who’d participated in the Blue Kraken training camp last year for littering. The little shits. I grinned at myself, as usual unable to control my facial expressions.

“Who do you think’s going to pick that up, huh? Do you think we throw our shit on the floor in our locker room? Coach would have our heads for that!”

They had scrambled to pick up the protein bar wrappers that they had discarded carelessly on the floor. Guns and Bo had fist bumped me, broad grins on their faces. Nate occasionally quoted me when one of us accidentally dropped something on the floor.

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God, I love my team.

I needed to be back on form asap.

I don't want to be traded.

I had to be a bit more careful when I approached the arch because a few people, an older couple and a family with three young kids, hung out at the labyrinth. Then I was through. It was as if a tremor ran through the land.

Is this his doorbell?

Barely five minutes later a slightly dishevelled Jules came down the forest path. It looked like he'd gotten dressed haphazardly, and his hair was a little rumpled.

Shit, did I wake him up?

For a moment I imagined him in sleep mode whenever I wasn't there.

That's silly, Nik. He has the chickens and Barney and his house and garden to take care of!

"Bunny!" A dazzling smile set his face alight when he spotted me. "You're back!"

He came right up to me, a little too close to still be in the friendzone. Without thinking, I flung my arms around him.

Jules froze.

Oh shit.

“Damn, I’m sorry.” I let go immediately and took a step back. “Sorry, Jules. I was so happy to see you and...I shouldn’t have hugged you without asking.” My cheeks burned.

“It’s...hello, Bunny,” he croaked.

“I’m sorry.” I wasn’t. “It’s something humans do when they see each other...but I suppose it’s not your thing.”

“No, I don’t want to forget about it. I wanted to hug you, too, Bunny. It felt very nice.” Jules cleared his throat when his voice cracked on the last words.

“Come here,” I mumbled, taking a step closer.

Still stunned from how good it had felt to hold him in my arms, I took a step forward and flung my arms around him again.

Again, Jules stilled.

“You okay?” I whispered.

“No one has ever done that, Nikolai,” he admitted in a soft voice.

“Done what?”

Twenty-seven

Jules

“Nobodyhaseverhuggedme before.”

“Ever?” Nikolai pulled back, warm brown eyes wide with shock.

“Well, I can’t remember being hugged,” I clarified, unable to tear my gaze away but needing to look away from him.Now. “Maybe my mother. But not in the last four hundred years.”

“I’m sorry for overstepping. If you hate it, I—” His voice broke off, when he realised I was still holding onto him and not letting go.

“Please, can you... this feels...”

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My gaze dropped to his throat, covered with stubbly hair. It bobbed, a strangely mesmerising movement.

“So, it feels okay for you?” he asked softly.

“Yes. It’s intriguing. And also kind of scary.”

“Scary?” Nikolai scrunched his nose. “It shouldn’t feel scary to be hugged, maybe it’s better if—”

“No.” I interrupted him again. “Please. Good scary.” I tightened my hold, painfully aware of how warm and solid his body felt.

He smells so good.

“You want me to keep hugging you?”

“Yes!” I said it with so much enthusiasm it made him chuckle, his chest moving against mine.

“Okay. Tap me on the shoulder when you want me to let go, yeah?”

I nodded against his collarbone. “Not going to lie, but I needed a hug, too, Jules.”

“Did you have a bad day?”

“I had a few intense weeks,” he explained.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault. Feels good to be here, finally,” Nikolai whispered next to my ear.

“I agree. It’s nice to have you back.”

“You know, nobody has told me that in a long time. People are usually happy to see me go.”

“Why?” I couldn’t keep the anger out of my voice.

“Because I am a grumpy asshole, Jules. Nobody likes that.”

“I like you.” The words left my mouth before I could stop them.

Letting go of him, I took a step back and focused on straightening my clothes to give myself a moment.

“Can I offer you something to eat or drink back at my house? Or both?”

“Yeah, that would be great. I came here straight from training. I’m...” He gave me that half smile again that made my stomach drop. “I was going to stop at a bakery and bring some stuff. But I forgot. I was too excited to see you.”

“You’re hungry? Come on, Bunny. Let me feed you.”

Something flickered in his eyes. If I didn’t know better, I would have said it was lust.

“You don’t have to, I’m alright. I can eat when I’m back home. It’s my fault. I drove straight here like I was on autopilot or something.”

“I want to feed you.” I beckoned for him to follow me. “It’s difficult to explain, and I am not saying this so you feel sympathy for me, yes? But I have only ever fed myself and my animals. It is good to do this for you. It makes me happy.”

“I want you to be happy.”

I stopped dead in my tracks. My shoulders dropped away from my ears. I tilted my head at him.

This beautiful human is so utterly adorable.

“I want you to be happy, too, Bunny,” I said. “Come.”

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“Your house is so beautiful,” Nikolai said from behind me as I led him across the entrance hall and into the kitchen. His voice was filled with awe. “I love the living walls and the old furniture. Reminds me of the house I grew up in. My mother is an antique dealer.”

I didn’t know what to say. Family was a topic I didn’t want to discuss.

“Did you grow up here?”

“No, Bunny. I grew up in my mother’s castle.”

“Castle?”

I could hear her voice in my head, warning me not to give her secrets away. But this was my story, and I wanted to share it with this wondrous human.

“My mother is the Elven Queen of the Zeitelmoos.”

“Seriously?” Nikolai blurted out. “So you are, like, a prince?”

“I suppose you could say that. I haven’t seen her or been to the court in over three hundred years, though.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. That must be hard.”

“Thank you, Bunny. I think I am used to it now.”

“Still. I’m super close to my mum. I couldn’t imagine not being in touch with her.”

For a moment, I wanted to ask if he had told her about me. But I thought the answer would disappoint me, so I didn’t.

Back at my house, I made a quick lunch for Nikolai and brewed some coffee for us.

“Thank you so much. That looks so good.”

He likes it!

Maybe it was a little sad how happy his praise made me, but I didn’t care. I soaked up every last morsel of his affection.

“I made some cookies today and pie...as if I knew you’d visit.”

“You made cookies? The idea of you baking is fucking cute, Jules.” He grinned at me as we walked across my kitchen. “Do you have an apron on when you bake?” he asked me.

“Are you teasing me?” I couldn’t help but grin back at him.

“Maybe a bit.” He leaned his hip against my countertop, standing so close his warmth seeped through my shirt. “But the idea of an Elven prince wearing an apron while he bakes cookies for me is pretty cute.”

“I do, indeed, have an apron. I even sewed it myself.” With a wink, I placed the cookies on a plate and added some dried fruit and nuts.

“I’ll have to work this off in the gym tomorrow but I might have to try a cookie.”

“Please do. Are you sure, though?” I tried to see his stomach. From what I remembered it was flat and perfect.

“Yeah.” Nikolai giggled. I wanted to lie down in the sound of his laughter, to bathe in it like in warm sunlight. “I train hard to stay in shape.” He snatched a cookie from the plate and munched it in one bite. “Oh my God, Jules, they’re amazing! What’s in them?” Nikolai took another.

“Chestnut flour, dried raspberries, and white chocolate,” I said. Watching him eat made me happy.

I’m feeding him!

“Hockey is a tough sport. We burn tons of calories, but ideally you want to fuel your body with whole foods, not cookies.” He leaned in even closer, his sweet breath fanning over my face. “Unless they’re as delicious as these.”

“Can you grab two glasses and some water, please?” I asked him in a choked voice. I wanted to run away. Hide. And bury myself in his embrace.

I’d never let go again.

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“Sure.” Nikolai pushed away from the counter, got the glasses from the cupboard, and then grabbed a pitcher of water.

He knows his way around my kitchen. Why does he make my heart so happy?

“Maybe we can sit outside? The weather is so nice.”

“That’s a great idea, Bunny.”

Nothing in my life prepared me for the way this man smiled or what it did to me.

We settled on the garden swing, so close I only had to reach out a bit to touch him again.

Twenty-eight

Nikolai

We had our rematch game against the Gators in Osterfeld two days after I first hugged Jules. We hadn’t touched any more except for a small hug to say goodbye, but his touch sat like a talisman on my chest.

I went into the game thinking that nothing could dampen my good mood. I was wrong. The Gators played dirty—even dirtier than usual. With their leading man, Chase Harper, traded, they had to rely on brute strength to get past us. And they did. I couldn’t even begin to count the penalties Bo, Luis, and I racked up.

Jarno Lipponen was one of the players I would never see eye to eye with. The worst part of the game was the moment he had me against the boards and gave me a black eye with the end of his stick.

I thought for a moment Bo would lose his temper and beat the Fox hybrid into a pulp.

“Lorenz!” Coach called me over to the bench so the doctor could check my eye. It hurt, but I knew it was nothing serious. What was serious was my murderous intent. I wanted to end Lipponen.

“That bloody asshole!” I snarled as I accepted a bottle of water from Søren. “That bloody motherfucking asshole.”

“Don’t let him get to you, Nikolai. The team needs you. Can’t you tell how much better they play now that they have you back? He’s not worth it.”

A couple of minutes later, Arne and I switched. Maybe Søren was right: the best revenge would be kicking the Gators’ asses so thoroughly they would have to scrape their deflated egos off the ice.

I’d never seen Guns protect his home like he had today. He’d always hated playing the Gators. You couldn’t blame him. The way Chase Harper taunted him relentlessly every time he’d hammered a goal past him would have gotten under my skin as well.

Not that we could allow their bully tactics to rile us. We had to be bigger than that. But sometimes you couldn’t, especially with an asshole like Harper.

We dominated the game. When the last third was over, we led by three goals.

I had hardly ever seen Nate and Max grin so big. After the game, we went out to a bar near the rink to celebrate our win. By the time I slipped into bed that night, I felt truly

invincible.

Next morning, I got up and checked myself in the bathroom mirror. A deep purple bruise bloomed under my eye, giving me a reckless look.

Maybe Jules will want to fuss over me. Wouldn't say no to that.

I peed and washed my hands, giving myself a sly grin in the mirror.

We arrived back at the rink in Veitsreuth around noon on Saturday. I'd left my car there so I could drive straight out to the labyrinth.

How the hell did I stay away from Jules a few weeks last time?

I had to force myself not to speed too much and drummed on the steering wheel when a tractor pulled out on the road a couple hundred metres in front of me.

Fuck! It was one of the tiny old ones that didn't drive but crept down the street.

He indicated right after three long, impatient minutes, and I continued on the dirt trail.

A short time later, I arrived at the labyrinth. I snagged the last empty parking spot and jogged to the archway. Again I made sure no hikers saw me go through.

A low thrumming ran through the ground like an earthquake.

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Only a few minutes before I see him again!

Much like when I'd been stuck behind the tractor, the time it took Jules to get to the arch felt like hours.

Then, finally, I spotted him through the trees.

"Bunny?" Jules stopped dead in the middle of the forest path. His irises clouded over. It looked like a summer storm swallowed the forest in his eyes. He stalked closer, shifting with every step. Sweet twink Jules was replaced by imposing scary AF forest god.

He towered over me, the breath rasping in and out of him. It brushed over my lips as he gripped my chin and forced my face up.

Fuck, that's so sexy. Make me kneel, daddy?

A high wind suddenly tore through the trees around us, whipping his long copper hair around his head. Jules didn't even blink an eye.

"Who hurt you?" he thundered.

"This? It's just a black eye, Jules." The hold he had on my chin tightened.

"Who did this to you, Nikolai? Tell me."

"Another hockey player. The asshole high stucked me." I still hated Lipponen's guts.

“You should see him, though.”

No matter what Søren had said, my hot head had gotten the better of me. The penalty I got for boarding that asshole had been worth it.

“I want to hurt him for wounding you,” Jules forced out between his clenched teeth. I had never seen him like this before.

“I told you what I do, Jules. I can take care of myself.” My voice was harsher than it needed to be. “I’m not a child.”

As his gaze bored into mine, the storm clouds dissipated. His mossy green eyes softened, but his hold on me didn’t.

“I know you are not, Nikolai. What do I do when my feelings tell me to take care of you, too?” he murmured, thumb trailing over the dimple in my chin.

He kept his eyes open and leaned forward. In no universe did the peck he placed on my lips count as a real kiss.

In no universe but mine.

I was stunned.

“Jules,” I whispered, not knowing what to say. He released me, shrinking as he stepped away.

“Let me take you home, Bunny.”

I was still numb with shock. Once or twice he had to steady me when I stumbled on tree roots.

No, not shock. What's the opposite of shock? Elation? Euphoria?

I raised two fingers to my mouth to check if there was an imprint of his lips on mine. There was nothing, only the memory of Jules kissing me.

For fuck's sake. An actual fucking god kissed me.

Twenty-nine

Jules

When we arrived at my house, Nikolai crouched down to greet Barnabas.

Shame at my outburst burned in my chest, yet the bigger part of me was still filled with that white hot burning rage. "Do you want to see your seedlings?" I asked him. I tried to unclench my fists and took deep breaths, but the air still rasped in and out of me. I sounded like an agitated stag during rutting season.

That my lips still tingled from our kiss didn't help calm me down, either. Why, by my forest, had I done that? Something in me had snapped at the sight of his bruise. Even now it drew my eyes. I wanted to find the other player and rip him limb from limb for hurting what was mine to protect. Bunny. My sweet, confusing, and beautiful human.

I'm not a child.

How could I make him see that I didn't want to shield him because I thought him weak?

If anyone took him from me my world would end. I wouldn't rest until I had taken my revenge. Then I would follow him wherever he'd gone. For a moment the peaceful forest before my eyes flashed and was replaced with a scene of destruction, red skies, and broken trees. The urge to take him and forge the mate bond, to give him some of my magic and tether him to my life force, threatened to overpower me.

"Jules?" His soothing voice made some of my fear disappear.

I'm scared to lose him.

"I cannot lose you, Nikolai," I blurted out. "I can't, I—" A warm hand snatched my fingers out of the air.

"You won't lose me. I'm here, okay?" He brought my hand up to his mouth and brushed a featherlight kiss on my knuckles. "It's nothing bad, just a bruise. It's happened before, and it will happen again." Nikolai nuzzled his cheek into my palm. "Come on, we can check on the plants later. Let's sit down."

He led me to the couch and took a seat next to me that was so close our legs almost touched. He rested back against the cushions.

My heart skipped a beat when his broad fingers laced through mine.

“I like holding your hand.”

“So do I,” I whispered.

Bunny rolled his head around, lips pursed.

Words failed me as I sank into his eyes. Everything about him felt so warm and precious.

“Jules? I want to kiss you again. May I?” he rasped, licking his lips and gently rubbing his thumb across my knuckles.

“I don’t know,” I told him truthfully.

Yes, I had kissed him but was still shaken to my core. Had I been kissed by anyone since Friedrich left? I doubted it because I had no memories of it. All memories of my time at court had been erased from my mind by the years that had passed. Like the wind smoothed over a rock, time had eroded them.

“You don’t know if I can kiss you again? You just did.”

My face heated. “I know you are physically able to kiss me, but I don’t know if it will make me feel strange. Well, even more strange than I already do.”

“Okay.” Nikolai pressed his lips together. If I had to guess I hadn’t hurt him with my words. He seemed amused.

“Would you like to try it, or should we go back to chilling and talking? We don’t even have to talk. We can just sit here.”

His smile was genuine and understanding. My eyes hung on his lips. I couldn’t deny

that I wanted it.

“What do I do if it’s strange?”

He’s not a child, but you sound like one, Jules.

“You will pull out of the kiss and use your safe word.”

“What is that?”

“A safe word? A word that will tell me to stop doing what I’m doing because it doesn’t feel right for you.”

“Okay. And what would that be?” I asked.

“You can use ‘red’ and ‘green’, to signal stop and go. You can also use something like ‘cerberus’ or ‘pomegranate’ or whatever you want.”

Thirty

Nikolai

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“I like ‘pomegranate’.” Jules smiled at me.

“Let’s use that, then?” I suggested. “Unless you’d rather not.”

“No, I would very much like to try it again.”

My heart hammered in my chest, my mouth flooding with saliva at the mere idea of giving him a kiss.

“Let’s take our time, yeah?” I whispered, bringing his hand up to my mouth and pressing a few more tiny pecks on the knuckles.

“Okay.” He swallowed hard.

“Jules. I am not mad or upset if you say no, okay? Forgive me for asking. I shouldn’t have assumed you were interested just because you are nice to me.”

And because you kissed me. Goddamn it. Of course he isn’t interested.

Jules was protective of me and something short circuited in his brain.

“But I am. Interested,” he whispered, a tentative smile on his face.

Oh, you pretty thing.

“Promise to say ‘pomegranate’ the moment it doesn’t feel right for you,” I told him, unable to stop the smile that crept onto my face.

“I promise.”

Okay, here goes.

Good thing I wasn't nervous about giving this age-old creature his first real kiss in three centuries. What if I messed up and he spent the rest of his days haunted by our horrible kiss? Or what if I did? With my brain that was a likely outcome.

Letting go of his hand, I caressed Jules' smooth cheek before cupping it in my palm. He stared at me like I was the most wondrous thing he had ever seen.

“Okay?” I asked, and he nodded, careful not to dislodge my hand.

Inching closer, I brought my thigh flush to his, and turned my upper body to face him.

Don't disappoint now. It's enough you suck as a human. Least you can do is be a good kisser.

Tilting my face, I softly touched my lips to his. Jules exhaled against my mouth before returning the pressure. It remained a close-lipped kiss. I backed out after a few seconds, already craving more but not wanting to overwhelm him.

“God, I've been dreaming of doing this all week,” I told him.

“Bunny?”

“Yeah, Jules?” I didn't have it in me to tell him that he was calling me by a pet name, and how very much I loved that he did.

“That felt really nice.”

“I’m glad it did.” With my free hand, I squeezed his leg above the knee, letting go instantly when he gasped. “Sorry.”

“No, don’t be. It feels confusing. I don’t understand what’s happening to me when you touch me.” Jules blushed and fuck, I did, too.

What happens to you, baby boy?

“My body reacts very strongly to you, Bunny,” he told me as if he’d read my mind.

“Yeah,” I huffed before I could zip my trap shut. “Same.”

“Can you kiss me again?”

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“Sure, only, how about we try something different this time?”

“Okay?”

“You can try touching me,” I suggested and placed his hand on my chest.

“I think I’d like that.” His eyes flickered up to meet my gaze, a small smile on his symmetrical lips.

“Me, too. You can touch me wherever you want, Jules. Nothing is out of bounds.”

Maybe don’t head for my cock straight away.

My lips were on his before either of us could brace themselves.

Is a bit of tongue a good idea?

Jules groaned so prettily when I licked the seam of his lips to ask for admittance. He granted it instantly. The fingers of one hand tangled in my sweater, and the others slipped into the hair at my nape.

I sighed and stroked his tongue with mine. His taste was so fucking good, it might as well have been a drug the way I reacted to it.

Jules shifted in his seat, then scrambled up into my lap.

Okay, you are hallucinating. This can’t be happening.

But when I opened my eyes, they fell on his handsome face, the long lashes resting on his greenish skin, his lips soft and pliable against mine. A hard bulge pressed down on mine as he dry-humped me.

An actual god gets himself off on my lap. Fuck yes!

“Oh by the Elven Queen’s left tit!” Jules snapped and pulled out of the kiss. He blushed fiercely as he clambered off and backed away from me.

Thirty-one

Jules

I scrambled to get off Nikolai’s lap.

What on earth were you thinking, Jules? Humping him like a horny rabbit?!

Overwhelming shame such as I had never felt before flooded my senses.

“Jules?” Nikolai’s slurred speech made me look at him.

He is beautiful.

His lips were red and puffy, his warm eyes heavily lidded, and his cheeks flushed.

“Jules, baby, are you okay?” He reached for me, and I retreated to evade him.

Baby? I am hundreds of years old!

“Why do you call me that?” I asked too sharply because I was still ashamed of my behaviour.

“What?” Nikolai looked confused at the question.

“You called me ‘baby’. Why?”

“Oh.” The red in his cheeks deepened, and he rasped a hand over the hairs at his nape. The hairs I had ruffled in my frenzy. “It’s just a term of endearment.” His nose scrunched up in that signature move of his.

“So you don’t mean you think that I behave like one?”

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“Oh my God, Jules, no! It means that you are freaking cute. I also find you super hot.”

He gestured between us, drawing my attention to the bulge in his jeans.

Yes. I, too, found him hot.

“Kissing you felt great,” Nikolai murmured around his teeth digging into his bottom lip.

“You liked it? But what about me...” I repeated his gesture, indicating my strange behaviour.

“God, that was so hot, Jules. The way you ground on my lap? I loved it.”

He did?

“Fuck yeah, I did,” Nikolai answered my silent question, just like I had responded to his implied question before, and got up from the couch. My eyes dropped heavily to his hand adjusting himself.

I swallowed.

“Sorry about that.” The gorgeous human gave me a rueful smile.

“Don’t be. It’s just that I am not used to...being near anyone like that.”

“Do you want me to go?” He asked gently, taking a step forward.

“I...no. No, I don’t.”

He took another step until he was close enough for me to feel his warmth again.

“Jules?” His voice was raspy. He cleared his throat and rubbed his hand over his neck again.

“Yes?” My voice was as hoarse as his. He made me nervous, something I couldn’t remember feeling in a long time. Maybe ever?

“I really want to kiss you again.”

“You do?”

“Yes. Do you want to kiss me, too?”

“Yes,” I blurted out.

“You’re so cute.” Nikolai palmed my cheeks, then pressed his lips on mine.

This time, he kept his mouth shut for only a few moments before his tongue darted out to coax my lips open for him.

Needing to steady myself, I cautiously put my hands on his hips.

“You can touch me, Jules,” he mumbled but kept kissing me.

I held back for a full minute before I slid my arms around his waist, mapping the expanse of his warm back.

Nikolai stirred feelings in my body that confused me, elated me, and made me lose my head. I shuffled nearer, hoping to feel his body brushing against mine.

I had touched myself in the past, yes, and I wasn't entirely inexperienced. But it had never felt this way before. Being near Nikolai woke nerve endings I didn't even know I possessed.

"God, Jules." With a groan, he sank one hand into my hair. The other skimmed down to rest on my—

"Bunny!" The name came out on a low, snarling growl, unlike any sound I had ever made. Afraid that I had scared him, I tried to pull away, but two warm hands kept me in place.

I could have broken his hold on me easily but was too desperate for his touch to even consider it.

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He massaged the ass cheek he'd just gripped, making my stomach swoop.

“Bunny, I...”

Nikolai retrieved his tongue from my mouth, panting hard. “I got carried away. I’m sorry,” he half moaned, looking at me out of those heavily lidded eyes. My gaze slipped down to the plush lips, swollen from our kiss.

“I don’t want you to apologise, Bunny. I want...I need...”

“Yes?” His hand found my face again. His thumb trailed over my cheekbone. “What do you need, Jules? You can tell me.” He placed a soft kiss on the tip of my nose. “The first time I met you, you were a head taller than me,” Nikolai whispered, a smirk playing at the corner of his mouth.

“I like that I don’t need to intimidate you with my height. But I can be taller if you want me to.”

“Oh, baby boy,” Nikolai crooned. I heard it now, heard ‘baby’ for what it was. “I don’t care how you look or how tall you are. I like you.” He took my mouth in a deep, toe-curling kiss and buried both his hands in my hair again. “I do love your long hair, though. It looks so good, and it feels so good in my fingers when I kiss you.”

Thirty-two

Nikolai

Fuck.

How good would it feel to grip his hair when Jules was on his knees for me?

Does he even want that?

Well, we'd worry about that later.

It's my turn now.

I invited his tongue into my mouth, swirling mine around his and gently sucking on it.

Jules groaned and dug his fingers into my back.

"Yes, baby, let me hear you. Damn, you're so hot." I kissed over his chin and down his neck then licked my way up to his ear. Brushing his hair back, I pulled his earlobe into my mouth. For the first time I noticed the unusual shape of his ears. They weren't round like mine but tipped like a stag's.

I went all in, sucking and nibbling, my breath coming out in gasps.

It was so hot how Jules trembled and moaned.

"Do you like that, baby boy? Does it feel good for you?"

"Nikolai!" He groaned beautifully when my breath caressed his slick earlobe. "It feels so good. I don't remember anything ever feeling so good in my life."

Wow, baby. Way to inflate my ego!

I cupped his cheek, tilting his head back with my thumb under his chin. His pulse fluttered like a frantic bird under his paper thin skin. I sucked a bruise into the spot.

“I’m not going anywhere, Jules.” Fuck, he looked perfect with the deep purple mark on his neck. I trailed my mouth down to his collarbone and gave him another hickey there. “You’re mine.” I didn’t stop until his skin was covered in lovebites and Jules was nothing but a shuddering mess under my lips.

“Yes, Bunny, I’m yours,” he whispered. “I was yours from the moment I first saw you in my forest. I waited for you for all those lonely years.”

My beautiful forest god whimpered when I nipped his skin.

“More,” he demanded.

“You want more?”

Thirty-three

Jules

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“Idon’twantmore.Ineedit.”

Nikolai retreated and again I hated myself for driving him away. I didn’t want him to give me space; I wanted him to invademine.

He called me his. Can’t he see how desperate I am for his touch?

“Jules.” He drew my attention to his eyes. “We don’t have to do anything you don’t feel comfortable with, but you can explore with me. I promise I will keep you safe.”

Without saying a word, I took hold of his hand and pulled him across the living room. He followed me up the stairs.

I had a feeling that being able to stretch out might add to the moment. And I didn’t want Barnabas to watch me fall apart under Nikolai’s lips.

“Come.” I led him down the hallway. “You haven’t seen my bedroom yet.”

Smooth, Jules.

The beige and mossy green sheets were pristine and smooth from when I had changed them this morning, and soft light, dimmed by the forest around the house, bathed the room in a green glow. Dust motes danced in a single ray of sunlight reaching over to the old wardrobe with the mirrored door.

Is this too much? Should we have stayed on the couch?

“Wow, Jules, this is stunning.”

Nik squeezed my hand and took a few steps inside. Then he turned on the spot. “Your bedroom is the size of my flat in Veitsreuth.”

“Really? What about the dining table? And the guest room?”

“I have a tiny table in my kitchen. It’s big enough for me. And I never have guests. When my mother visits, she stays in a hotel nearby.” He shrugged, before touching one of the plants in the room.

Does that mean he never has company other than his mother?

The idea of anyone but me sharing the tiny space with him made me feelbunny. I took a few steps closer. When I was next to him, Nikolai turned to face me.

“So,” he muttered, placing a hand on my chest. “You told me you wanted more.” One finger dragged my linen shirt down and traced the length of my collarbone. My whole body tingled when he drew a line connecting each bruise he’d marked on my skin. “More of what, Jules?”

Thiry-four

Jules

Nikolai’s eyes caught mine, flooding me with their warmth.

Do humans run hotter than us?

“More kisses, or something else?” he asked softly as he cupped the side of my neck and stroked the sensitive skin behind my ear with his thumb.

“There was no one in so long,” I gasped. “For the last three hundred years people were too scared of me to be within speaking distance, let alone get close enough to touch me.”

It was embarrassing to admit, but I wanted him to know.

“I hate the idea that you were alone for so long.” He stroked my cheek.

“It feels like...” Is it wrong of me to admit this?

“Yes?”

“Like I’ve been waiting for you all this time.”

“Oh, Jules.” Nikolai gave me another of those toe-curling kisses, so deep and hungry I felt it in my bones. “So you don’t know what you would like to do? Where to start?”

“No, I don’t. It’s a bit overwhelming,” I admitted. “Bunny?”

“Mm?”

“Is it bad that it’s been so long? It’s not going to be nice for you, I fear.”

“Hey.” His thumb slid around to rest on my lips. “Jules, I don’t know why they feared someone as gentle and sweet as you. It would be an honour to be the person to touch you like that. Damn, I get hard just thinking about touching you again.”

My eyes dropped to the prominent bulge in his trousers, and when I looked back up, he bit his lip.

Then Nikolai stepped back, gripped his shirt and took it off. Carelessly dropping it on the floor, he straightened up, confident in his nudity. My mother had stolen away the prettiest humans she could find, and yet I had never seen anyone more beautiful than Nikolai.

A cheeky grin flitted over his face as I greedily drank him in. Then he took both my hands in his and kissed me again.

Something in me cracked at the feel of his skin—warm as if he’d lain in the sun for hours—under my fingertips. I kissed him back, my tongue darting out to delve deeper into his mouth.

His primal groan stoked the fire in me even more. Our tongues tangled. My hands shook with nerves. I touched every inch of his skin I could reach. It was lightly fuzzed with hair as blond as that on his head, but the hair darkened around his navel where it disappeared under the waistband of his jeans.

I was starving to be touched and desperate to caress, to stroke, to kiss, and to tease. It'd been way too long. I couldn't even remember the voice of the last person I had kissed. At the time, I had thought I was in love with Friedrich. Now I knew how wrong I'd been. Anything I had felt before Nikolai had been shallow, nothing but smoke and mirrors.

This man, though? I will never forget him.

I wanted him to be my last everything: my last kiss, my last fuck, the last face I saw before I followed him into the dark. Nikolai was the only one I would ever kiss for the rest of my life.

The sight of my shirtless Bunny burned itself into my soul. He was beautiful. His flat stomach with the lines of his abs was visible, and I saw a small tattoo on his hip bone. A light smattering of freckles dotted his chest.

And those pecs.

Panting, our tongues curling around each other, we moved closer to my bed.

I needed him on it and on me. I needed to see what exactly ~~themore~~I had asked for entailed.

"Take off whatever you feel comfortable with and lie down on the bed, Jules," he told me in a throaty voice after we reluctantly broke the kiss. Those lips of his, I knew they would be my doom. Just like my mother had always warned me.

Love makes you weak, Julius.

But I didn't feel weak, and if I was, it didn't scare me at all. Nikolai made me feel powerful and strong. And, for the first time in my life, someone made me feel wanted.

Wanted not because I washerson, but because they likedme.

Taking off the fresh tunic I had put on minutes before he arrived was exciting and a little daunting.

Am I attractive to a human man?

Nikolai exhaled through his open mouth as if to steady himself.

“Jules,” he whispered and took half a step closer before stopping dead. “Please get on the bed.”

I moved immediately to follow his raspy command but took off my trousers first, thankful I had chosen to put on a pair of cotton undergarments today.

Without meeting his eyes, I settled on the mattress, feeling a little awkward when I leaned back against the headboard.

Is it a good idea to put my body on display like that?

In this position I had no chance of concealing theexceptionallyhard bulge in the thin cotton fabric.

“May I get on the bed with you, Jules?”

I nodded, unable to speak through my dry throat.

“Thank you,” he rasped, his Adam’s apple bobbing.

He undid the buttons at his crotch, his eyes never leaving my face. I watched him push the jeans down his muscular legs until they pooled at his feet and he could step

out of them.

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The undergarments he wore were so tight that they looked painted on his sculpted thighs.

By my forest, this human takes my breath away.

Nikolai set one knee on the mattress, cautiously, as if he was expecting me to stop him.

“Jules?” His voice had dropped another octave, making it dark and growly. A voice to raise goosebumps.

“Bunny?”

“Do you remember the safe word we discussed?”

“Pomegranate,” I muttered.

“Mine is red.”

“Your pomegranate?”

“My safe word,” he chuckled. “If you want me to leave, tell me now, okay? Because I feel like I am going to die if I don’t get to touch you, but I’d rather stop now than once I have my mouth on your body.”

“I want you to stay, Bunny. Please. And to touch me. I feel like I’m losing my mind.”

“I’ve got you, Jules.” Nikolai brushed my foot with his hand then moved forward on his knees.

My body trembled like an aspen tree in the summer breeze when he set a hand on my thigh.

I knew I could trust him to handle me with care, but tell that to my stupid heart.

Then my beautiful human leaned in and pressed the gentlest kiss on my sternum as if to pacify the organ beneath it.

Moving lower, he placed licking kisses on my skin all the way down to my navel.

“May I take your shorts off?”

“You may,” I gasped, raising my hips a few inches from the bed so he could slide the cotton undergarments down my legs.

Then he just looked and looked until I started fidgeting my backside on the bed.

Does he not like it?

I was of half a mind to pull the cotton shorts back on when a warm hand on my thigh stopped me from moving.

“My God, Jules,” he breathed and his fingers tightened around my leg. “You are beautiful.”

Thirty-five

Nikolai

Ifoundithardtobelieve someone as gorgeous as Jules existed in real life. And if they did that they wantedmeof all people.

But maybe this is all a hallucination. Maybe you are just spaced out and this is all a dream.

He felt so real, though. And so did the raging erection drooling all over my boxers.

I trailed my fingers up his cool, lightly fuzzed skin to his hips. I needed to get my mouth on him, needed to taste his body in places nobody had in three centuries.

I still can't believe it.

But if he spent most of his time as that grumpy old dude I had met on the path, it was no wonder.

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It's a shame, though, that nobody had enjoyed this man in hundreds of years.

I should brace myself for a starved Jules. If I'd not had sex in three centuries, I'd want all the orgasms.

He's lucky. If anyone has the strength and stamina to end his dry spell with a bang, it's a hockey player. I'll gladly give him everything I can.

I was sure this form, the one laid out before me, was closest to what he actually was. In this form, he was not very tall. His long ginger hair fanned out around him like a red gold halo, and his mossy green eyes were heavily lidded. He was so beautiful it hurt to look at him...but I couldn't stop hurting myself.

His stomach was flat with cute little bumpy abs and an intriguing V-shape. It guided my eyes down to his cock. It curved up proudly and drooled precum all over the light fuzz around his navel. Thick at the base, he had elevations and swirls all over the shaft that reminded me of tree bark, and then it tapered into a tip covered in tiny blunt spikes.

"Bunny," he gasped, probably confused by my staring.

My eyes snapped up to meet his as I reached out and wrapped my fingers around his throbbing cock.

"Oh, Bunny." Jules whimpered the words, making my own dick twitch eagerly.

I wanted to make him feel good first. What was a year of abstinence compared to

hundreds of years of solitude?

“Is this okay?” I asked, gravelly, surprised that my voice could go that deep.

“Yes, Bunny, it’s—” he broke off and gasped when I gave him a slow jerk.

“Relax. And remember to breathe. And your safe word.”

“I won’t forget.” Jules moaned and spread his legs some more.

His high-pitched sigh when I opened my fist a little and spat on his dick to get a better glide almost made me come in my boxers.

Holy fucking shit.

“Feel good for you?” I asked as I cupped his pec to find his nipple.

“Yes, Bunny. So good.” Jules seemed lost for words, feverish and already close to coming, too.

“Can I use my mouth on you?” Another slow jerk made him pant.

“What? Yes!”

“My eager baby boy.” I hummed. I settled into the curve of Jules’ body and rested my cheek on his stomach. Immediately, a hand found the top of my head, and his fingers sifted through my hair.

I moved a little closer without dislodging his hold on me and tilted his cock so I could taste him. A strangled gasp from him made me stop immediately.

“No, please keep going, Bunny. Please,” he mewled.

Oh, fuck yes.

Feeling a little overconfident in my ability to give head, I took him all the way to the back of my throat and promptly gagged on his girth.

His taste was the weirdest and best thing I had ever tasted in my life. I couldn't even begin to describe it. It was salty and strangely savoury with a hint of sweetness.

Fucking addictive, that's what he is. Congratulations, you are now my favourite low calorie snack.

Thirty-six

Nikolai

Every time the blunt spikes on Jules' tip hit my throat, my dick twitched, and I groaned around his cock. It felt so fucking good.

Enjoy your first blowjob in three hundred years, baby.

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I sucked his cock like a desperate man, starving for his cum.

Oh, fuck YES!

The moment I touched his nuts, Jules' hips bucked off the bed again and again until he fucked my face.

Just hold still and let him use you.

Jules sinking his fat cock into my mouth got me so freaking close. I gripped myself through my boxers and squeezed in the hopes of holding out at least until he had come.

His second hand joined the first, holding my head in place as he used my mouth.

Tears streamed down my cheeks. I tried my best to breathe through my nose, and not to panic. I didn't want him to stop.

This is the hottest head ever.

"Bunny," he growled, then stilled before his strangely cool cum pulsed out over the back of my tongue. I choked on it, the sheer amount overwhelming me. But I swallowed it all down because I didn't want to waste a single drop.

He's so tasty. Never thought I'd say that about anyone's cum.

Jules pulled me off his cock and tilted my face up so he could look at me.

“Wow,” he breathed, making me snort.

My beautiful forest god sat up, wiping away the cum that had spilled over and trickled down into the scruff on my chin. Then he saw my tears.

“Oh no, Bunny.” He stroked them away with frantic fingers, looking mortified. “I am so sorry.”

“Don’t be,” I rasped around my strained throat. “It was so good for me, baby.”

The tension left his body, and the caresses got more gentle, almost adoring.

“Thank you, Bunny. You have no idea how wonderful your mouth feels.”

“You’re welcome.” I pressed my lips against his pec, then settled on the bed next to him. “I love the way you taste, Jules.”

My dick brushed against his hip, and I groaned. As soon as I got home, I needed a furious wanking session to take that fucking edge off.

“Can I touch you, too?” Jules asked.

“It’s okay, you just enjoy it now.”

“But I already did,” he said. “I want you to feel as good as I do.”

Raising myself up on my elbow, I looked down at him. His eyes shone with eagerness and curiosity.

Who am I kidding? I want him to touch me.

“Okay, but only if you’re sure that you’re ready. We can leave something to explore another time. You don’t have to do it all today, or ever.”

“So you will be coming back here?” He palmed my cheek, brushing what I thought was another drop of cum off my chin.

“Of course. If you want me to.” My face heated under his touch.

You just blew him, you dumbass. Stop it with the self doubt.

“Yes, Bunny. I really want you to come back. I live for the days when you are with me,” he whispered.

For the first time, it was Jules who initiated our kiss. It took him a moment or two to find his footing, but he was either a natural or a fucking fast learner because he made my toes curl and my dick harder than ever with every slow, teasing lick into my mouth.

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Guiding me to inch a little higher, Jules trailed a hand down my side to my hip.

He's a fantastic multitasker, too.

His mouth was relentless, sucking and nipping me into oblivion.

When his hand slipped into my boxers, my world stopped spinning. I feared that I might be unable to hold back.

Then his hand was on my cock.

A strangled groan escaped from me, and I urged my aching length into his fist. He applied just the right amount of pressure, somehow imitating what I had done, but with a slight twist to it.

My orgasm built at the base of my spine, my body getting ready to come all over his hand.

Marking him as mine again.

"Jules," I gasped, my lips clinging to his as an anchor. "Oh my God, Jules, I think..." I trailed off, thrusting my tongue back into his mouth.

I think I'm so close.

"Yes, Bunny." He growled, his hand speeding up around my cock and focusing on the head. "Yes, come for me, my beautiful human."

And I fucking fell off the cliff, my abs contracting and my body curling in on itself with the sheer force of my O. He kept jerking me slowly, getting all the cum out and spreading it around my dick.

I was fucking sensitive but couldn't even tell him to stop. My brain was mush.

"Sorry," he mumbled when I hissed in discomfort and stopped his gentle strokes.

"Don't worry, Jules. I loved it," I slurred.

"You did?"

"Yeah." I slumped back to the mattress and snuggled up to him. "That was wonderful. No idea when I last came so fast or hard."

He inhaled sharply.

What's wrong, Mr Hot-and-Ancient? You're not really jealous of a hypothetical other dude's hand jerking me off?

"It's been ages since I came from anything other than my own hand," I murmured, pressing a kiss on his cheek.

"I'm not judging you." Without seeing Jules' face, I knew I was right.

He's jealous. Oh sweet baby boy.

Instead of a reply, I flung my arm over his chest, plastering the length of my body to his.

"Just kiss me again, you hot thing, okay?"

Thirty-seven

Jules

Nikolaicalledmehot.

Oh, Bunny, you perfect creature.

I moved in for a kiss.

He tastes of me.

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This was a new experience.

I suppose I had enjoyed it when I had been with Friedrich. Yet the disgust I had felt at my own behaviour always overshadowed any bliss or happiness.

I know he is with me because he wants to be, not because of my magic.

It made all the difference in the world.

“I love being here with you, Jules.” Bunny pressed a kiss on my brow and stroked his hand up and down my naked back. “I actually told my therapist about you.”

“You did? What did you tell him?” The thought of someone else knowing about us didn’t unsettle me.

Perhaps it should have, but all I felt was boundless happiness that I was important enough for him to talk about with his therapist.

“Well, I told him I’d met someone, someone special.”

I raised my head and almost started crying when I found a blush spreading across the bridge of his cute nose.

Oh, Bunny.

“Well, I said you were a friend.” He chuckled softly. “But I think he saw straight through me.”

“I suppose I am your friend.”

“Yeah, but you’re also so much more.”

“Yes,” I breathed and leaned in to kiss him on the lips.

You are everything to me.

“Anyway, he loved the idea of us gardening together.”

I thought back to his tiny shorts and the crop top.

“I would be lying if I said I didn’t like gardening with you, too.” I knew full well that my voice sounded dreamy, perhaps even a bit turned on.

“Horny gardening with you is one of the best things ever, Jules.” Nikolai grinned and pulled me back onto his chest.

“I think my favourite part was when you jumped into my pond.” I hummed. The way his wet clothes had clung to his muscular body had been one highlight of the past three hundred years.

“Dr Schmidt suggested I try pottery as well,” he said, ignoring my comment.

“Oh, I bet it is wonderful to make something from clay with your own hands.”

“Right? I love the idea of making my own dishes. I found a pottery class in Veitsreuth. It’s just a weekend, but I already know I am going to make it my entire personality.”

Nikolai chuckled under his breath.

“I don’t think I understand what you mean by that, Bunny.”

“Well, when I find something that interests me, that’s all I want to do. My mum was lucky it was only ever hockey when I was a child. I don’t think she would’ve been able to afford multiple hobbies.”

“So if something else had caught your interest...”

“I would’ve wanted all the equipment, yes.” He turned us around so my back was on the bed. Then his mouth was on mine.

“I’m just glad my apartment is way too small for a pottery wheel. I’ve been watching all the pottery videos on KrakenTube. I’m obsessed, baby.” His lips kissed down over my chin and to my throat. “Not just with pottery, though. I’m obsessed with you, Jules.”

What he did to me with his tongue and his lips next drove pottery from my mind.

Thirty-eight

Nikolai

Jules and I spent most of the day in bed together, kissing or making out interspersed with sharing more about ourselves.

Not being from around here, I had never heard of him before.

“You should have been scared to death when you saw me.”

“I just thought you were a random old guy.” I grinned at him, nuzzling my face into his neck.

His scent triggered something in me.

Horniness, yes. But not just that. He smells like home.

For all my adult life, I had never felt at home in my own skin. I’d always wanted to find that place even when I’d been in my home. Everywhere I’d gone I’d felt lost and lonely with no way out.

I had tried to shove my loneliness out of sight and into a remote corner of my brain, but it had never stopped. Jules hadn’t magically healed my feeling of dislocation. But when I was with him, I felt less frenetic and less like a fox with one foot in a trap, ready to gnaw the limb off to get the fuck away.

I inhaled his scent again.

Yeah, he smells like home.

“Well, I am a random old guy.”

“Was that a joke, Jules?” I licked an open-mouthed kiss on the smooth skin under his jaw.

“Uh yeah,” he groaned, arching his head back.

“I really want to taste you again. Can I?” I kissed my way down his throat and across his chest to take his nipple into my mouth.

“Please, Bunny.”

I focused on the tight bud for a bit, then made my way down his stomach until I reached the duvet slung low over his hips.

“You are the most beautiful man in the world.” I moaned into the sparse tufting of hair under his navel.

“Don’t be silly, Bunny.”

Sinking my mouth down on his cock shut him up.

Good. Because you are, and we’re not arguing about it.

I traced the length of him with my tongue, mapping the bark-like texture. Nudging his legs wide with my knee, I trailed deeper to cradle his almost hairless balls in my palm. Restless hands scrambled over the sheets when I gave his balls a gentle

squeeze.

I pulled off and spit on it.

He liked that so much the first time.

“Bunny!” His pleading voice sent me spiralling.

I hummed, taking him to the back of my throat. More saliva drooled over his length as I slurped and gagged.

God, I love messy blowjobs.

“Bunny, I can’t, I...” Jules broke off, ending in a guttural groan as he came down my throat once more. I kissed my way down his softening length until I could nuzzle my nose into his skin.

“I’m getting addicted to your scent, Jules. And your taste.” I pressed a lewd kiss on the base of his cock, sucking it into my mouth.

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“Don’t stop, Bunny. Oh please,” he sobbed, hips bucking up against my mouth.

I didn’t stop until he had a deep purple bruise on his unblemished skin. The sight of my mark made me feel like the king of the universe.

“Marked you,” I murmured before I could overthink it. “Guess this cock is mine now.”

Jules gaped at me, mouthing like a fish on dry land. I thought he had a seizure.

“You’re mine now, Jules,” I repeated as I ran my fingertips over his thighs. I had no idea how I should look at him with anything but awe.

“What do you see in me, Bunny?”

Thirty-nine

Jules

The words escaped my mouth before I could stop them, but I knew I needed to hear his answer.

Please tell me this isn’t just my magic.

Nikolai raised his eyes to mine. He did it so slowly he reminded me of a wolf spotting its prey across a clearing.

This was different from the playful, perhaps even a little goofy, Bunny I'd come to cherish.

Different and so hot.

"I am going to pretend I didn't hear that, Jules." His voice sounded calm and collected, but dangerous. I realised he had only ever shown me his kind side. There was something dark about him that he kept on a leash around me.

He tried to warn you, and you wouldn't listen, Jules.

"If you weren't my precious baby boy, I would have to punish you for saying that."

"Punish me how?" I asked, my length stiffening again.

"Oh, I'm sure I could think of something." Nik smirked and tugged on my sack.

The groan that escaped me made him chuckle.

"But not today, Jules, so you better behave yourself. Let's work through a few things before we get to spanking, yeah?" With another squeeze that made me groan, he let go. "I'll gladly let the big bad enforcer out when we get to this stuff."

"What things?" I whispered.

"Things like sucking a cock. And our first time together, baby." His voice was leashed and bound once more. "Although," he murmured, pressing his nose into my skin again, "I don't know if I can stop sucking you off long enough so that you can have a go." Nikolai nuzzled my hardening length from base to tip, making my thighs tremble and my breathing speed up. "I just want to make you feel so good, baby boy."

His hand found my nutsack again, and he took me into his warm mouth a third time.

Every time he did it still felt brand new.

“What—what’s an ‘enforcer’?” I managed to ask. He pulled off, and I cursed myself for making him stop.

“That’s the position I have on my team. We get our hands dirty in the games.”

His hands moved up to hold my waist, pinning me in place. I doubted he could actually do such things.

With hands so gentle.

“What does that mean?”

“What does what mean, baby boy?” Nikolai asked, his eyes flickering between my face and my cock.

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A tremor ran through my body every time he called me that.

“Getting your hands dirty?”

“Mm, you know.” He leaned in a bit and sucked one of the elevations on the underside of my length between his lips. “Bo and I, we make sure our team wins.” He moved to the next one. “We sometimes have to get a bit...clearer in our message.” The third elevation he kissed was the one right under my crown.

It was so sensitive I thought I would come again before I was ready.

“Bunnyyy,” I whined, my hands fisting the sheets.

Nikolai stroked my trembling thighs.

He is soothing me.

“Is that good?” His voice was hoarse. He suckled on the bump with his glistening lips pursed against my cock.

“Yes! Oh by the trees, Bunny!” He flicked his tongue over my skin.

I lost myself in his arms. I was desperate and blind in the dark, and completely at the mercy of Nikolai driving me wild with his mouth.

I cried out when my climax hit, a sound unlike any I had made in my life. Unable to hold out a second longer, I came so fast and hard that he took a face full. Cum

dripped down his lips and off his chin, but he didn't let up until I felt limp and empty.

My beautiful Bunny pulled off, breathing as if he'd just run a race, a maniacal grin on his cum-smeared lips.

“Wow, Jules. That was so hot. Thank you.”

Holding open my arms, I invited him to come lay down on my chest. I used a corner of the bedspread to wipe his face clean.

“Thank you, Bunny.”

Forty

Nikolai

Ididn'tknowwhatitwas about Jules's taste that made me delirious with desire. I wanted to drown in him, and not for the first time, I wanted to stay with him. I wanted to stay in his forest and never leave—to become a full-time disciple for this beautiful forest god.

His priest who would worship him on his knees for eternity.

“Are you hungry, Bunny? I keep forgetting that you are human and need to be fed regularly.” When I raised my eyes to his, I found an indulgent smile on his lips.

“Yes, Jules. Like any good pet, I need to be fed.”

With a playfulness he had never displayed before, Jules took hold of me and rolled us around. With my back on the bed, I looked up into his handsome face. His beauty was so ethereal there was no doubt about his true nature.

My Elven Prince. He rules his forest, though. Doesn't that make him a king?

“As much as I would enjoy that, my seed cannot be your only sustenance, Nikolai.”

There was a hint of sadness lacing his voice. Most people wouldn't have picked up on it, but I had learned by now that my brain could.

I bet he's not upset that I can't live off his cum alone.

You keep forgetting that he has lived for four-hundred-some years longer than you. Who knows what he's seen?

He won't have stayed alone just because he wanted to, not when he was this starved for affection.

“I know that, Jules. But a guy can dream.”

Jules chuckled and lowered his mouth to my sternum. He kissed a line from my heart down over my stomach to the base of my cock. I loved the gentle tickle of his long ginger hair on my skin.

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“Yes, you may dream of me, Bunny. I will make sure they are the most beautiful dreams of your life.” He kissed up my length before letting me slide into his mouth.

“Oh God, Jules. I never want to wake up.”

Once he had made me come with his warm mouth and clever tongue and had swallowed every last drop I had to give, he returned to my lips.

Later, I couldn't have said if it was his magic or post orgasmic exhaustion that dragged me under. I fell into a deep, restful sleep from which I woke up feeling better rested than I had in weeks.

“Good morning, Bunny. I brought food up for you. Are you hungry now?”

I turned over to my stomach, hugging the pillow and grinning over at Jules, who sat on the side of the bed.

“Starving for you. But also kinda hungry, yes.”

He returned my grin and got up to retrieve a tray from the desk by the window.

“You're wearing my shirt,” I stated. I wasn't mad at all. It fell down past his ass, leaving it to my imagination if he wore anything under it.

Holy shit, I was sure seeing him in only my jersey would've turned me on more.

Note to self: bring your jersey next time.

“Yes, I’m sorry, Bunny. It was the first garment I found, and I didn’t want to wake you, so I pulled it on. I can take it off if you want.”

I sat up, reaching out for him. Jules set the tray down on the bedside table and came near. Pulling him into my lap, I took his mouth in a deep kiss, cupped his nape with one hand and skimmed the other up his naked thigh.

“Leave it on,” I told him in a hoarse whisper when I backed out of the kiss.

Forty-one

Jules

After Nikolai had eaten, he put the tray aside, reclined on the bed, and then pulled me on top of him.

I had sensed how much he liked seeing me in his shirt, yet feeling his hard length next to mine still came as a bit of a shock.

But mostly, I was surprised by how good it felt when he took hold of my backside and pulled my hips closer to his. The movement rubbed our lengths together. I couldn’t believe I had never experienced this before.

This is beautiful.

We both leaked, and our combined fluids made the sensation even more intense.

“Bunny! This is—“

Nikolai’s expressive eyes begged me to kiss him, and I did. I needed that kiss at least as much as he did.

“I know, baby boy,” he said against my mouth before he thrust his tongue inside.
“You feel so good.”

I whined, kissing him so fiercely our teeth clashed together. I tasted blood but couldn't stop. I rutted my hips against his, dragging my cock up and down his hard length, until we both fell.

His warm release mixed with mine, and we kissed and groaned and held each other through our climaxes.

We were silent for a long time. The space between our bodies was slippery with cum. I kept my ear pressed to his heart and listened to his steady heartbeat.

Even when we got up, we didn't speak. We didn't need to; we understood each other without words.

How did we reach this new stage in our relationship?

When I had tasted his blood, I feared for a moment that we would forge a mate bond.

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Made from blood, magic, and love.

That's what the books said. But I had only tasted his blood, not mine. I hadn't been hurt, and I had kept a tight hold on my magic—the way I always did around him. I would never forgive myself if I enthralled him with my powers.

We walked into my bathroom where I took off Nikolai's dirty shirt and pulled him into the shower with me.

A soft smile sat on his kissable lips when I took the soap I had made myself, foamed it up between my wet palms, and then spread the sweet smelling bubbles all over his body.

He bit his lip when I washed his cock and balls. I wasn't trying to arouse him again but wanted to care for him.

“Can you tilt your head back so I can wash your hair?”

He did as I asked, groaning softly when I lathered the wet strands with more foam, massaged his scalp, and then rinsed his hair under the warm spray.

“Thank you, Jules,” Nikolai said when I had finished and he had turned around to me again. “I can't remember anyone ever doing this for me. Except for my mum when I was a kid, of course.”

His cheeks blushed, and I fell for him all over again.

“You are welcome, Bunny. I hope it felt good for you.”

He reached out and hugged me, pressing a soft kiss on my brow.

“Yes, it did. I loved it.”

“I loveyou, Bunny.”

Nikolai held his breath for a long moment before he exhaled deeply.

Then he leaned back a little and brought his hand up to cup my cheek.

He trailed his thumb over my skin, raising goosebumps on my arms. And those eyes, they told me everything I needed to know. For a moment, I was tempted to tell him he didn’t need to say it—I could read it all on his face.

“Me, too, Jules,” he told me with tears in his eyes. “God, I love you so much.”

Then his warm lips were on mine again, stealing my breath and every conscious thought.

It was difficult to leave the shower, to dry off, and get dressed because neither of us wanted to let go of the other. Every time we caught each other’s eyes, we grinned and blushed like teenagers.

Every single second of the last 433 years of my life I had waited for this. And nothing had prepared me for the depth of my feelings for Nikolai.

“Can you stay for a bit longer?” I asked him when, at last, we both wore trousers. Nikolai had grabbed a fresh T-shirt from the small backpack he brought.

“Yeah, I can stay for a bit. There is nowhere I’d rather be, anyway.”

Once more the skin over his sharp cheekbones reddened. I wasn’t so sure anymore who in our budding relationship worshipped whom.

I am his to command.

We curled up on the sofa, my head on his solid chest, drank some more coffee, and looked out into the forest until, at last, it was time for him to leave.

“Bye.” He didn’t cross the arch. “Jules?”

“Yes?”

“I really want to come see you again next weekend. My coach put me back on the roster for the next game. That’s Thursday night in Feuerfeld. But I could come back on Saturday. Maybe we could have lunch together, or I could bring my laptop so we could watch something? I mean, I don’t even know if it will work around you...your magic, I mean? Probably not, that was a stupid idea. Just ignore it.”

I gripped his forearm to stop the flood of words tumbling from his mouth.

“That sounds wonderful, Bunny. I’ll come pick you up. And while electronic devices usually don’t work around my magic, I will try to suppress it long enough that you can show me a movie.”

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“I can’t say when I’ll manage. I might need a bit more sleep. It’s been a while since I played a full game.”

I brushed a strand of hair off his forehead. “Don’t worry. I shall know when you arrive. The forest will tell me. And then I will come to get you.”

“Okay.” He bit his lip to hide a grin.

Then he took hold of me and kissed me deeply before slipping back through the veil.

I stared after him until he was out of sight. Even then, I waited some before turning back in the direction of my house.

He would be back, and I had plans.

I am ready.

My heart hammered against my rib cage when I thought about it. But there was one thing I was sure of: if I wanted to go further with anyone, it was Bunny.

He made me feel safe and loved, something I had never experienced with another person before, least of all with my mother.

The Elven Queen’s magic was strong. As her son, the ones falling for her had extended their desire to me. When the Elven Queen had spurned their advances or moved on to her next toy, they had tried to get me to satisfy their desires instead.

Their grabby hands and blank eyes had repulsed me.

A shudder ran through me as I thought of them. I had felt hopeless on their behalf and had tried to convince her to release them. She laughed me off.

‘They love me, Julius. They want to stay. Go ahead, ask them.’

Whoever was her favourite at the time had then confessed their love for her in a sickly sweet voice, falling to their knees at her feet.

So I had left. I would rather face a life alone than one in her shadow, or worse, in her footsteps.

With Bunny everything was different, and it showed me that I had made the right choice staying true to myself and not abusing those poor people’s position.

He liked me. Truly liked me. I felt it in every fibre of my being. And I...I was his for as long as I lived. There would be nobody else for me.

I spent the week preparing the house and my food storage for him. If I wanted Nikolai to stay with me more often, I had to include him in my plans. And my forest provided.

I also wanted to spoil my bunny a bit. So I worked hard on setting up a space in a clearing behind the house. Under a freshly grown canopy of rambling plants, I made a nest for us to curl up in. I pruned and cut and planted all through Thursday evening.

And then, I waited for the weekend to come.

Forty-two

Nikolai

The memory of Jules getting himself off on my lap carried me through the first half of the week.

Nope, I didn't think even for a minute that frothing with a hot forest god magically cured me of my depression, but it did help me get out of bed—after jerking off imagining it was his hands on my cock. Plus, I played better.

“Well done, Nik,” Arne clapped me on the shoulder. “If you play like that tomorrow, the Füchse won't have any reason to laugh.”

“Thanks, Captain.”

“Well done, Kleiner.” Bo punched my bicep with a grin. Snorting, I punched him back, careful not to hurt myself on his bulging arms...again. That had been an interesting bruise to explain to our PT.

“We'll kick them back to their burrows,” I said, perhaps a bit too sure of our team. But we had never played better.

Raven and Decks were a match made in heaven—on the ice at least. Arne was at the height of his strength. Guns was having the best season of his career. He led the category for the goalie with the most saves. The sun now shone out of Bo's ass since Ollie had moved in with him, and even I sucked less than usual.

My lips twitched as I stripped my clothes and protective gear.

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I knew Jerke worked hard behind the scenes to have possible successors for the older players who would be retiring soon. It was only a matter of time, and I got excited thinking about who he might be able to sign as people retired.

Rumours were circulating about the Gators wanting a change in their offensive line.

I get it.

Chase Harper was more of a liability than an asset these days. While he was a fantastic player—something I wouldn't admit even under torture—he made tabloid headlines at least once a week for everything and anything you could think of. He got in fights. His seemingly countless hook ups gave scandalous anonymous interviews. Or inexplicably yet another deal he made with an underwear company.

But without Harper, their roster didn't make any sense. I tilted my head up into the shower spray, letting the water run down my face and body.

I just hoped that Jerke stayed the fuck away from him. His position would fit our needs. Our right winger, Leo Schramm, turned thirty-six at the end of the year and would likely retire at the end of the season.

But fuck no. We didn't need someone like him.

The game was hard won, but we ended ahead by two points, unfortunately, also with an injury for Nate. The Füchse's new defenceman, Adin Williams, was lithe for a position that usually depended on bulk. But he made up for it with his wicked fast speed and ruthlessness on the boards. That asshole tackled Nate to the boards so hard

that he smacked his head. Now, Nate was out under concussion protocol.

It was good that we didn't play in Veitsreuth, or I was sure Vee would have dismembered Williams for hurting his precious baby.

Just like Jules threatened to hurt Lipponen.

I reclined on my hotel bed, headphones on so I didn't have to hear Bo being all cute on the phone with Ollie.

Although, it barely bothered me these days. The only twinge of sadness I felt was that I couldn't just call Jules, too.

Only one day to go.

I missed him like crazy, even more from five hundred kilometres away. One night here, a bus journey back to Veitsreuth, training, a good night's sleep, and then I could suck and kiss the shit out of him—and he out of me.

Trying to steer my thoughts away from Jules giving me head, I snacked on a few handfuls of nuts, downed some water, and got ready for bed. I was fucking exhausted.

"I can't wait to get home," Bo said as we were about to leave the hotel the next morning. "I miss my man."

"Yeah, same," I replied without thinking and got a cocked eyebrow back. Then his face split into a grin, exposing his gleaming fangs to me.

"Nikolai, youfox! Are you dating someone?"

I felt my cheeks heat, and Bo's grin widened.

“Don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone about it. Is he hot?”

“So hot,” I muttered, unable to suppress my smile.

“Aw.” Bo clapped me on the shoulder. “It’s good to see you smiling again, Nik.”

Don’t start crying now.

“Yeah, feels better, too.”

“Where did you meet? Do we know him?”

“No. We met in the forest, actually. I lost my way, and he saved me from a storm.”

“Gods, that’s the perfect love story. You deserve it.” He clapped his hand to my shoulder again. Had I been a smaller man my knees would have buckled from the impact.

“Thanks, Bo.”

“Come on, let’s get back on the bus and home to our men.”

The bus ride back to Veitsreuth sucked. I usually didn’t mind it at all; it was a comfortable carriage, and we listened to music or read and some played cards or games on their handheld consoles.

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We got stuck in traffic though, turning the normally five-hour journey into an odyssey.

It was past three in the afternoon when we finally reached the rink. As soon as we pulled up, we found an agitated Vee, who was worried sick and wouldn't stop fussing over Nate.

"We'll call it a day, men," Jerke called over the commotion. "I think we all need to go home and relax. I'll see you all on Monday morning."

Bo, Max, Arne, and I shouldered our bags and set off together. Veitsreuth was so tiny, we all lived more or less near each other.

None of us spoke; you could tell that we were collectively exhausted.

"Have a good weekend," I said to Max and the Viking when we reached their house.

"You too," Max yawned and bumped fists with me.

"See you on Monday." Arne repeated the gesture, and they trudged off in the direction of their front door.

Bo waited until they had gone.

"Tell your boyfriend I say 'hi'." He bumped his meaty fist to mine and hoisted his bag higher up his shoulder.

“Say ‘hi’ to Ollie.”

“Will do.”

I watched Bo cross the street and turn onto a side street. After he left, I made my way to my apartment.

It had never felt more empty and depressing than it did in that moment.

Without much conscious thought, I took a quick shower, threw some clothes, food, and my laptop with the two power banks I’d gotten for it into my weekender, and headed for my car.

“The forest will tell me,” that’s what Jules had said. I hope he is listening.

Forty-three

Jules

The moment Nikola stepped through the veil, a low thrumming went through my forest like an earthquake.

He’d said Saturday.

Why is he already here? Has something happened?

In seconds, I had given my mask for the occasion a last minute check in the floor length mirror behind my bedroom door, then I turned around and left to meet him.

“I will be back in a bit, Barnabas. With him,” I told my Wolpertinger as I left the room. I heard a satisfied little grunt back.

“Bunny!” I called when I spotted him near the pathway to the labyrinth. “You’re early. Are you alright?”

“I am,” he said, rasping a hand over his neck. “Sorry, I know I’m early, but I wanted to see you.”

I stepped forward until I was within his reach. Immediately, he slid his strong arms around me.

This is my favourite height.

I nuzzled my nose into his neck, inhaling the scents of shaving soap and his cologne. They were unable to mask his own, the one I would recognise anywhere these days.

“My home is your home, Bunny. You know that.”

Nikolai buried his hands in my hair and let out a needy little gasp as he tilted my face up and kissed me.

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“It’s so good to see you, baby,” he rasped when he eventually backed away. “Take me home.”

I knew he probably just said it but my heart skipped a beat at his words.

Home. Yes, I will. In more ways than one.

I led him around the house into the clearing, my heart fluttering like a caged bird in my chest.

Thank the trees I had prepared everything already.

“I have a surprise for you, Bunny.”

“Oh my God, Jules!” Nikolai turned on the spot, taking in the mountain of pillows and blankets, the picnic basket, and the canopy of leaves shielding us. “Did you do all this?”

Does he hate it?

“I did, I thought you might...”

“Jules,” he stopped me with a hand on my arm. “This is the most romantic thing anyone has ever done for me.” Leaning in a little, he pressed a kiss on my cheek and hugged me. “Thank you.”

“I’m glad you like it, Bunny. I thought we could watch a movie, eat, and maybe

cuddle a bit?”

“That a great idea.”

We took our shoes off and settled on the cushions. Smiling to myself when I remembered how I had stripped every room in my house of anything that even closely resembled a cushion to make the forest bower, I poured him a glass of my sweet summer wine.

“To this perfect evening.”

“To you. Thank you again, Jules. You have no idea how much I love this.”

You have no idea how much I love you.

We drank. Then I moved in, feeling brave enough to steal a little kiss.

Nik lingered on my mouth for a long time before breaking the connection. His cheeks were flushed as he fired up his sleek laptop and picked a movie for us.

“I had a pretty tough week, Jules,” he sighed when we snuggled up with our hands joined under the fluffy blanket I had brought and our empty glasses set aside. “Thank you for this.”

“Anything for you, Bunny.” I raised our clasped hands to my mouth and kissed the back of his. “Anything.”

A clear drop slid down his cheek, followed by another and another.

It took him a long time to calm down. I held him through it, stroking his golden hair. Getting things out helped.

“Sorry, I—”

“Don’t apologise for your feelings, Nikolai. I adore your tears as much as I do your laughter. They are all part of you.”

“Fuck.” Sniffing, he buried his face in my chest, fresh tears seeping into the fabric. “I feel so dumb. I have everything. A supportive family, the best job, a hot boyfriend. Why the hell am I so fucking miserable?”

Boyfriend? Does he mean me? But who else would he be talking about? Unless...

“I don’t know, Bunny. You are, and you have every right to be. There is no amount of suffering you need under your belt to be allowed to be sad or empty. Sometimes we just are.” I stroked his sweaty hair off his brow. “And having supportive people in your life makes things easier, but they don’t magically heal you, as much as your family or your boyfriend might want to do that for you.”

Nikolai pressed a soft kiss on my throat. “I would never expect you to, Jules. I hope you know that.”

He means me.

“I’m your boyfriend?” I blurted out.

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He sat up abruptly, hair sticking up in all directions, his face red and puffy; he was still the most beautiful man I had ever seen.

“What the heck, Jules! Did you seriously just ask me that?” His indignant expression made me want to whoop with joy.

“I...”

“Did you think I had another boyfriend out there?” Nik pointed at the woods behind himself. “That I only come here when he isn’t around or what?” With a frustrated sigh, he pushed his stubborn hair off his brow and slid off my lap.

I stopped him with my hands on his hips. “We never really talked about it. I didn’t want to assume...”

“Assume? Jules! After we did all this stuff together? We had sex the other day, for God’s sake! I don’t do that when I have another boyfriend. That’s not my style. And if it’s yours, then...” Once more he tried to push me away, but I hugged him close.

“It’s not, Nikolai. I don’t even have a style. All I want is you.”

He stopped avoiding looking me in the eyes. Then my big, burly hockey player tackled me to the pillows, straddling my hips and taking my mouth in a deep kiss.

The movie kept playing, unnoticed by both of us.

Within minutes we had stripped all our clothes and rubbed our bodies together in a

delicious dance.

“I should have brought lube.” Nikolai blushed. “But it’s all good. We can just kiss and make out.”

“We can, but we can also...” By my forest, at nearly four hundred and fifty years old, I should be a pro at discussing sex.

“Sleep with each other? Absolutely not, Jules. It’s not that I don’t want you.” Nikolai kissed my neck. “Believe me.”

I believed him.

He’s so hard.

“You can’t get hurt, baby boy. That’s just not happening.”

“You won’t hurt me, Bunny.”

He tried to object, but I stopped him with a finger pressed against his lips.

“My backside it’s uh...it is self-lubricating,” I muttered, unsure how he would take the news.

His thick eyebrows arched. Pecking the pad of my ring finger, he gently pulled my hand away.

“Are you kidding me?”

“No. You can feel it for yourself, if you like.”

Jules! What are you saying?

Nikolai sank back down onto the mountain of pillows, cupped my cheek, and pulled me in for a kiss. A long, slow kiss that made my cock buck against his.

His warm body stretched out under mine grounded me, and my budding shame dissipated.

I'm safe with him.

"Mm, God. Yes, I want to feel for myself, baby boy," he breathed into my mouth, his fingers trailing down my back until he stroked my glute. "Do you get wet when you get aroused, Jules?"

His low purr travelled right through my body, and I let out a low whimper.

"Yes," I whispered, breath hitching in my throat as his fingers slid between my cheeks and grazed my hole.

"Oh good lord, Jules," Nikolai groaned, bringing his hips to mine and lining up our lengths. "You are so hot, baby." He massaged my sensitive skin, not forcing his way inside, but spreading my wetness around my backside. It felt beautiful.

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I rested my head on his palm, kissing whatever bit of his skin I could reach.

“Is this alright?”

“Yes, Bunny, yes. It’s so good.”

“Can I touch you inside, too?” He peppered my face with kisses. “It’s okay if you say no, at any point, sweet Jules. Please don’t forget that.”

Forty-four

Nikolai

Ididn’twantJulestoget carried away and do things he wasn’t ready for. But what I wanted even more was to service this man so thoroughly he melted under my touch.

“I want you to touch me,” he moaned, frotting his dick to mine. “Please, Bunny.”

“Tell me to stop if it’s too much.”

His ass was slick and hot around my index finger.

“No, Bunny, don’t stop. I need you, please.”

Oh fuck me!

I added another finger, giving him time to adjust before moving them inside him.

“Damn it, Jules. You feel so good. So wet for me.”

He nodded hurriedly, nuzzling his face into my neck and kissing my skin.

“I am,” he breathed. “I want you so badly, Bunny.”

I delved deeper, curving my fingers toward his front.

Does he even have a prostate?

“Bunny!” he whined, sounding so fucking horny it did my head in. That answered my question.

“There?” I stroked the spot again, feeling his dick twitch.

“Yes, yes, right there.” His hands fumbled with my dick.

“What are you doing, baby?”

“I want you, Nikolai.” He dragged himself up my body. “I need to feel you inside me.”

Pulling my fingers out of him, I tried to stop him from taking me inside him.

“Holy shit, Jules. Slow down, I—”

“No, Bunny. I don’t want to slow down. I want you,” he snarled, struggling up to his knees. He straddled my hips, and gave me a bold and confident look.

Good lord, he’s so pretty.

“Lie back, Nikolai,” he told me in a low voice. I hated myself for obeying without hesitation, but I did it, anyway. He crawled on top of me the moment I settled on the pillows. “Do you want this, too?”

“Of course I do, Jules.”

He reached behind himself, fisted my dick, and brought it to his slippery hole.

Jules rested his hands on my chest to have more control as he sank down on my length. The tight, wet grip his body had on my cock almost ended me.

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“Baby?” His face was tilted up at the sky, eyes closed and his perfect lips open.

When he looked at me, it was as if the milky way sparkled in his eyes. They were alive and so beautiful I could barely look at him.

“Bunny?” His tender smile made my heart melt. “You feel so wonderful inside me,” he breathed. He raised himself up a few inches, then sank back down.

With every round, he sped up, growling and snarling under his breath. He sounded bestial, and for the first time I truly understood that he was not human like me. I never thought his monstrous side would turn me on as much as it did.

Jules bouncing on my cock was a beautiful sight. He rode me hard, taking his pleasure from me. All I could do was try not to come too soon. I wanted to give him this moment. He was always so demure. Seeing him let go like this made me want to weep. I didn’t know why.

Maybe because you’ve been craving someone to take from you.

I liked to top but most people I’d been with expected me to dominate them.

On the ice, I was the one who took it. I defended our goal, and I did the dirty work for my team. In bed, I longed to be soft, to be used, to be nothing but a piece of dick for my partner’s pleasure.

Skin slapping and back arching, Jules brought me to the brink of orgasm.

“God, baby, I’m so close,” I groaned. I gripped his hips and raised my upper body off the bed. The change of angle got me even closer.

“It’s so good when you call me that, Bunny. Let me be your god. Worship at my altar, my beloved human.” He fisted my hair, tilting my head back and exposing my neck.

Fuck yes, baby!

“You have no idea how much I worship you.” He stressed each word with another sharp slap of his hips. “You are pure perfection, Bunny. My life was nothing before I met you. Only darkness and despair. With you, the light came back into my life. You feel like the forever I never thought I’d have, my sweet.”

I dragged his lips onto mine as I came, thrusting my tongue into his mouth and up into his tight ass one last time, as I flooded his hole.

He joined me a heartbeat later, his ass milking my cock. Hot cum painted my abs in long spurts. Jules collapsed in my arms.

“You feel like forever,” I whispered when I lowered us back on the pillows, taking him with me and holding him on my chest. “I love that. I love you,” I added, kissing his brow.

Forty-five

Jules

We stayed in each other’s embrace for a long time, drifting in and out of sleep. Nikolai cradled me to his chest, occasionally humming bits of songs I didn’t know under his breath.

His length had softened and shrunk, leaving me empty. I wanted him back inside me.

Eventually I scrambled off his lap and got up to my feet.

“Oh my God, Jules,” Nikolai groaned from where he knelt on the pillows. I turned my head around and found him staring at the spot where his release leaked out of my body. “Remember what you said about worshipping at your altar? Fuck, I’m ready to service you, my god.” He pulled me back down and turned me over with gentle hands. “I was never much of a church goer,” Bunny rasped, taking hold of my glutes, squeezing and massaging them. “You’ve converted me. You’re my god. Let me be your priest.”

He kissed me where I still craved to be stretched, where my wetness and his release had made a mess of me. His warm mouth on my most private part was odd and at the same time the most wonderful feeling in the world.

“Bunny,” I sighed, cheek resting on a cushion, with my backside in his face—or maybe the other way around.

He licked me with the flat of his tongue, humming under his breath. Then he entered my body. His soft groan made me shudder.

“Your taste, Jules. It’s the fucking best. Be warned,” he whispered, breath fanning over the skin he had just tasted. “I’ll eat this ass whenever you let me.”

And then he feasted on me. It was sloppy and loud and beautiful. A warm, eager tongue and the scratch of his beard, they got me close to the edge again. When his hand joined in and he jerked my length in long strokes, I couldn’t hold back any longer. Not caring at all for the pillows I would have to wash, I came with a hiccuping noise and his name on my lips.

“Am I doing well?” he asked, groaning as he massaged all the cum out of my slit. “I want to be a good boy. Tell me I’m a good boy, please!”

“Mmm, yes, Bunny. You’re being such a good boy for me.” He didn’t let up until my legs shook.

Then Nikolai wiped his hands on the grass, flung himself down next to me, and pulled me into his arms.

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“Sweet Jules, thank you for this. God, that was amazing.” Turning his head, he gave me a gooey smile. “Was it good for you, baby boy? All of it, I mean?”

“Yes, Bunny.” With a sigh, I nuzzled my face in his neck. “It was beautiful.”

When it got too cold, we left the pillow fort behind and headed to bed. A hint of autumn was in the air at night even though the days were still sunny and warm.

Nikolai turned me around so my back was to his front, and curled his muscular body around me.

Then, we were both out.

Forty-six

Nikolai

Whenwewokeinthe morning, Jules wordlessly fisted my morning wood and let me slip into his ass.

“Fuck, baby,” I drawled.

Not that I would have minded, but it was fantastic that we didn’t need to bother with lube.

“Oh God, Jules,” I whined, slipping my hand into his hair to drag his mouth around for a kiss. It didn’t take either of us very long. As I drove my cock into his tight hole I

felt him come, accompanied by a low whimper. My hand reached his dick just in time for him to come all over my fingers again. I enjoyed it so fucking much that I joined him a moment later.

“Yes, Bunny!” he growled into my mouth, thrusting his tongue inside as if he wanted to conquer me. But he already had. Jules owned every part of me.

“Waking up next to you is the best,” he gasped between more frantic kisses. “We should do that more often.”

Every night?

We had a perfect day together. Jules took me for a walk in his forest.

“This is my favourite spot. And now it’s even better with you here.”

I flung an arm around his shoulders and kissed his temple.

Large, mossy boulders lay scattered around in the shade of an enormous oak, as if a giant had played with them. I let go of Jules and sauntered over to the stream that gurgled merrily in its bed. “Thank you for sharing it with me. It’s so pretty.”

“So are you, Bunny.” He gave me the gentlest smile. At his words a shiver ran through the oak, and a couple of its leaves sailed to the forest floor.

“Yes, I know,” my forest god chuckled. He rested a hand on the tree’s rough bark as if he tried to pacify a skittish horse. “I’ve known this tree for all its life.”

I joined him, somewhat reluctant.

Am I nervous to meet his favourite tree?

Jules plucked my hand out of the air and rested it on the tree trunk. Another tremor shook the old tree's branches.

"I planted an acorn in this spot, and I watched over her while she grew into what she is now." One of the leaves that fell around us caught on my hair. "She likes you."

"Do you understand her?"

"Yes, Bunny. I speak the language of the trees. Some I understand better, like oaks. Others are a bit muddled. Aspen trees, for example. They can be divas."

I snorted when my brain supplied me with the image of a haughty Aspen tree cold-shouldering Jules.

"Beech trees are naughty like teenagers. That one over there, for example." He gave me a beaming smile. I supposed I was the first one he had ever shared this part of himself with.

"That's a pretty cool power to have."

"It is," he agreed, then his eyes landed on my face. No idea why, but I found it super hot that he could talk to trees. My sexy forest god in his element was definitely a turn on.

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I slipped a hand around his nape and pulled him in for a kiss.

“Bunny,” he gasped when I released his lips. God, he looked flustered as fuck.

So cute.

“Not here, please.”

“Okay.” I brought my mouth next to his ear and nipped his earlobe. “You don’t want them to see me on my knees for you?”

“Bunny, please!”

“It’s okay, I’ll stop now.”

“No—I—oh by my forest! I can’t believe I’m even thinking this.” His breath hitched in his throat.

I sank to the soft forest floor at his feet and unlaced his leather trousers so I could ruck them down.

Without another word, I took his rock hard length into my mouth.

“Oh, Bunny,” he sighed, resting his body back against the tree. I held nothing back and, once he got over his initial shyness, neither did Jules. He ground on the fingers I slipped into his slick hole and fucked my face until he came down my throat with an almost bestial groan.

My gorgeous god dropped to his knees, and he took my mouth in a hungry kiss.

We continued our explorations on the way back to his house, up the stairs, and into his bedroom.

“Stay with me again tonight, Bunny, yes?” he asked me between frantic kisses as he straddled my cock. We’d just come together but were still starving for each other.

How is that possible?

It was as if he bypassed my brain and called to my most primal instincts.

Reproduce. Reproduce. Reproduce.

My body didn’t give a fuck that I couldn’t get him pregnant. Like an animal in the rutting season, my hindbrain wanted to keep going until I succeeded.

“God, yes, I do. I didn’t want to ask—“

“Why not?” Jules pulled back and gaped at me with incredulity. I met his eyes.

“I didn’t want to seem clingy,” I admitted.

“Why not?” he repeated. “I love clingy. I’m clingy. If it were up to me you would never leave my forest again. Or my bed.”

“You know I can’t, Jules,” I told him gently. I mean, he could probably imprison me here; nobody would ever know where I was.

“I do, and I would never keep you here against your will.” He let my dick slip out of his hole and turned around to face me. Soft lips pressed against my chest, making

their way over to my nipple with tiny, licking kisses. “You have a home here with me, Bunny. My door is always open to you, and so is my bed.” He moved down my abs and nuzzled his face into my happy trail. “But I want you to come here of your own free will. I want you to come here because you want to be with me, not because you think I am lonely or angry or upset.”

He moved even lower and stuck his nose into my groin, burying it in the hair at the base of my cock, inhaling deeply. “God, Bunny. I know what you mean. Your scent is beautiful to me.” Jules sniffed me again, rubbing his hairless cheek to my length.

Eventually, he took my limp length into his mouth, not sucking me off. He just kept me there. I knew of cock warming in theory, but my imagination paled in comparison to the real thing. It was so nice, just being in his warm, wet mouth.

Jules sighed softly as he rested his head on my hip bone.

“That feels so good, Jules,” I breathed after a long moment of silence.

He hummed around me and held me by the hip, stroking my side. I couldn’t decide if I was less proud of getting hard again, or of how long it took me.

My body still felt sluggish like it did after a long night’s sleep.

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Letting go of me, Jules sat up.

“Bunny?” he asked me in his deep forest god voice. The kind of voice that woke my body to his. “Can I...?”

“Can you what?”

“I want to sit on you,” he whispered, his face flushing with embarrassment.

“Baby, yes! Of course.” Offering him my hand, I helped him climb on top of me.

“You can always...ride...me, oh fuck,” I growled the words, desperately holding on as he sank down on my cock and started to move. Like a stubborn bull that he was intent on taming, he rode me. His slick hole gripping my dick while my crown pegged his prostateannihilatedme.

We came way too fast and with inhuman groans.

“Bunny,” he whimpered, collapsing forward into the puddle of his cum on my abs. I hugged him to me.

“Are you alright, baby boy?”

“Yes. It wasso intense. For you, too?” he breathed.

I tried to contain my feelings but couldn't. I laughed so hard I cried.

“Oh my God, Jules. I’m sorry. I swear I’m not laughing at you.” Another fit of giggles made me snort. “Baby boy, you made me come in five minutes flat looking so fucking sexy and so hot. Yeah, it was intense.” I heaved a big sigh. “You make me so happy, Jules.”

Forty-seven

Jules

Iloveyou,Jules.

Nikolai’s words were like warm honeyed wine that slid down my throat and warmed my insides.

Let me get drunk on your love, Bunny.

When he left me this time, it hurt more than ever before. Maybe making love was the most crucial part of the mate bond? For a couple of hours, I worried that we had accidentally forged it—unknown to either of us. But there had been no blood when I had cleaned myself afterwards. And I had kept my magic locked away. I’d practiced keeping it tamped down to such an extent that I didn’t even transform my body anymore.

Without having a destination in mind, I arrived by the stream that snaked its way through my land. A flat, mossy boulder was one of my favourite thinking spots. I sat there and observed the frogs and salamanders, the tiny water birds, and Barnabas, who played in a shallow pool above a small waterfall.

When we mate, it will be with the knowledge and consent of both of us.

Why did his absence hurt so much, like I was missing a chunk of myself, then?

Is this just love?

My mother had warned me again and again not to give in, least of all when it came to humans.

It makes you weak, Julius. You cannot afford to be weak. You are a god among men. And gods walk the earth alone.

I remembered how bitter she had sounded. Had she not spoken of herself but of my father, too? I might be wrong, but I had come to accept Cernunnos as the most likely option for my father.

The book had spoken of sightings of an antlered man who walked with a fox and who slept among the deer.

Apparently, they had built him a temple not far from the moor where my mother lived. It hadn't survived the past centuries years, but stories of it had.

'Clad in animal hides and pelts, he planted seedlings in the fertile soil. Within a day, thick, gnarly oaks stood where he had planted the acorns. For mighty oaks had always been the forest god's most favoured trees.'

Did I get my love for oaks from him? It was a strange idea that something like a preference for a certain kind of tree was genetic, but if it was, that must be where I got it.

Or maybe you are just reading way too much into it.

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I supposed it was normal for children to want to know where they came from and to find the little things that connected them with those who had come before them.

I wondered if he had loved my mother, or if I had just been the byproduct of a momentary weakness in the Elven Queen's life.

A lapse in judgment...

Was I making the same mistake with Nikolai? Would he just move on with his life and leave my side?

I don't know if I will survive this.

I picked up a pebble and threw it into the stream. My Wolpertinger looked up and hopped over to where I sat.

A couple of months ago all you wanted was to be left alone. Peace and quiet, that was all you needed to be content.

"Hey, baby." I stroked Barnabas' wet snout. "I really miss him." My pet huffed. "I know. It would be so wonderful if he never had to leave us. But we can't make him choose between here and there. He lives in both worlds."

Barnabas rested his chin on my thigh and settled closer to me.

"No, it wouldn't be fair of us to ask that of him. We need to trust Nikolai. He loves us."

Barnabas rubbed his furry cheek over my leg, humming happily.

“I know, baby. You love him. So do I.”

I tried to keep myself occupied, and it worked moderately well.

Saturday around noon, he’d said. That’s when he would be back with me.

When I felt him arrive, I had barely made it past the pond when I saw a tall, blond figure flying down the path that led from the archway to my house.

He breathed hard, breaking his sprint only when he was right before me. He stopped so fast, he almost threw me off balance.

“Oh my God, Jules. I missed you so fucking much,” he groaned. His large hands cupped my face and dragged my lips on his.

I missed you, too.

“Say it out loud. I need your words.” Nikolai slid his broad hands into my hair and took control of the kiss. I surrendered to him.

“I missed you, Bunny,” I said into the kiss, barely getting out more than gasps and whimpers. “I exist for the days when you are with me.”

I had not meant to say that out loud.

“I am not ignoring what you said, Jules,” Nikolai murmured as he left my mouth and kissed his way down to my neck. “We need to talk about this. Later. But now we have other, more pressing matters at hand.”

As if to illustrate his words, Nik's strong hands slipped under my shirt, mapping my skin, and moved up to tease my nipples. One hand trailed back down to busy itself with the lacing on my trousers. Nikolai freed my length, then his, wrapping his broad hand around them both. His teasing jerks and silky hard dick pressed to mine made me feel lightheaded.

Pressing matters, indeed.

"Bunny," I groaned, hips arching up into his grip, almost doubling over when precum welled from his slit and he used it to slick both our heads. "That feels so..."

"I know, baby boy. So. Fucking. Good."

Every word came out on a gasp, and he underlined it with a slow pump of his fist.

"Kiss me, Jules."

I obeyed, searching his mouth with a desperation my previous self—the one I had been before Nikolai stumbled through the arch—never knew.

A slick tongue awaited me, pushing past my lips with a hungry moan. It ended me. And I was reborn in his arms as I painted his hand, his stomach, and his chest with my release.

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“Fuck, yes!” Nikolai gripped my hair, deepening our connection even more. It hurt, but I loved it, loved his bruising kiss, loved the way he sighed my name as the climax conquered his body.

With lazy strokes he wrung every last drop of cum from our cocks, mixing them together.

“Shit. I’m sorry, baby boy.” Nikolai’s distraught voice made me open my eyes.

Pain clouded his vision, and he stared at me as if he had seen a ghost.

“What’s wrong?” I slurred, trying to shake off the post-orgasmic haze.

“Your lip.” He inhaled a shaking breath, and touched a fingertip to my mouth.
“You’re hurt. I am so sorry.”

“I don’t feel pain like a human being, Bunny.”

I hugged him when he still didn’t look convinced.

“It’s alright. I promise you there is no need to worry. My body heals impossibly fast. Give it an hour. You won’t even be able to find it again.” I stroked the stubble on his face.

Nikolai nuzzled his cheek into my palm. “Are you sure?”

“I am. And it was so hot.”

“Yeah, it was.” He gave me a reluctant grin.

“We better get into the house to clean up. Unless...” Nikolai’s eyes left my face, and they landed on the pond. “It’s pretty hot today.”

“It is,” I agreed. Within moments, we were both naked. We threw ourselves into the pond just like we had done on the day we’d gardened together. Nikolai had looked like sin incarnate in his sopping wet shorts and the crop top. Perhaps that was when I had realised how much I wanted him.

Warm hands turned me around and pulled me into a hug and a kiss that robbed me of all conscious thought. I wrapped my body around his, kissing him like no one else existed on the planet but him and me.

Forty-eight

Nikolai

We let the sun and the warm breeze dry our bodies. Then, we pulled on our underwear and trousers. I picked up the rest of my things that I’d discarded in my excitement to feel Jules again, and we crossed the garden to the swing where we’d sat together before.

“What’s that?” I approached the newest addition. Rambling roses covered most of the sturdy wooden structure, and their scent filled the air around us.

“Do you like it?” Jules rested an arm around my hips and snuggled into my body.

“It’s beautiful.” He’d made us a bower in his garden: a mattress with a pile of soft cushions under a canopy of light pink roses.

Holy shit.

“I love it.” I stretched out a hand to brush one of the large blossoms with my fingertips. Their petals were velvety soft. “Thank you, baby.” I kissed him for a long time.

“You’re welcome, Bunny. I tried to keep myself occupied so that I wouldn’t feel too lonely while you were away.”

I was sure he’d just meant it as a harmless statement, but his words triggered something in me. Before I could get a glimpse of my emotions they flooded my head and something in me snapped.

They rose up my throat like bile and choked me until I was unable to draw breath. I backed away. Maybe putting some distance between us would let me breathe again.

“Nikolai?” Jules sounded mortified.

Finally, I got air back into my lungs and took shaking gulps. Fuck! I’d almost blacked out.

“Bunny, what’s wrong? Do you need anything? Are you ill?”

“No,” I snapped. I knew I should be sorry, but in the maelstrom of emotions I couldn’t make out a single one.

Do I feel sorry?

“I’m just...” I took up but was unable to finish the sentence.

What the fuck do I feel?

“I don’t want to have to choose between hockey and the love of my life, Jules! This isn’t fair!” I raged, stomping across the yard to get even further away from him.

It took me a few minutes to calm down enough to look at Jules again. His youthful face betrayed nothing but pure shock.

I hated it. I despised how perfect he looked. And how young. And how he wasted his days with me, a puny human! My life was nothing compared to his. It was the blink of an eye and would be over before I knew it.

It scared me. I would look at him in seventy years and he would still be his beautiful self. And I? I’d die. Jules would go back to his routine. Time would take the memory of me away from him until he forgot I had ever existed.

“Nikolai?” His voice was gentle, way too gentle. I wanted him to rage like the storm inside me. Why was he so calm? Had he already accepted that we were only a brief interlude in the grand scheme of things?

“Please let me hold you.”

It was such a simple request, yet it broke me. I let out a wail of despair, a sound

unlike any I had ever made before.

“You can’t make me,” I gasped. “You—I can’t lose you.”

Without another word, Jules wrapped me in his arms. He was shorter than me, lithe, and breakable. But in that moment, he was the pillar that held up my world.

For a long time, he swayed me on the spot, stroking my hair and my back, and just let me work through my feelings.

Once the storm had passed, I felt numb, but weirdly calm, too.

It was as if I’d had a poisonous thorn pulled from my body. I straightened up and loosened his hold on me.

“You will not lose me. I am ageless, Bunny.” Jules brushed the hair off my face and gently pulled me back into his arms.

“Ageless? How?” I spoke softly so he could pretend not to hear me. Jules had never just ignored my questions or musings the way everyone had done for all my life.

Then it was he who backed away.

“I am everything at the same time. A young boy, the old man you met out on the path, this, and everything in between.” His face flickered with different versions of him, there one second and gone before I could take a closer look. Then he resembled my Jules again.

“So you cannot die?” My face burrowed into the crook of his neck, inhaling his mossy scent to ground myself.

“I don’t know.” Jules sounded amused. “I’ve never tried.”

I chuckled reluctantly.

“Oh, Bunny. If I can, though, I want you to go first. I wouldn’t want you to be sad about me. And you must know that I will follow you into the dark. I will follow you anywhere.”

“Hey, I hope I have at least half a dozen decades left.” It was hard to keep a note of indignity out of my voice.

His hand wrapped around my throat, pushing up my chin to make me look at him. His eyes were soft and warm like a spot of moss in the sunlight.

“Whenever, my sweet. Whenever.”

When Jules kissed me, the world stopped spinning. Everything came to a halt and nothing mattered to me but him.

A groan echoed between us as I ran my fingers through his hair and tightened my grip on him. I tilted his head slightly to give us a better angle, then ran my tongue across his lips. He followed my lead willingly. And every time he did, it baffled me.

That this ancient creature even bothered to look at me was crazy. Letting me kiss his lips and touch him and allowing me to do what I wanted? That was more than I ever expected.

Jules hummed. His hand left my throat, and he hugged me even closer to his body. His fingers dragged down my back to just above my ass. That was all it took to change the tone of the kiss.

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Like starving animals, we pounced on the other, tearing at our trousers to get them out of the way.

He gripped my ass, set me on his hips, and carried me to the bed he'd made in the garden. A canopy of dense leaves grew over it and shielded us from the elements. Jules' strength baffled me. In this form he was soft, thin, and almost a head shorter than me. Yet he handled me easily.

"Bunny," he moaned when my half-naked body was stretched out before him, my legs still wrapped around his hips. "You are my favourite thing to look at."

"Your plaything." I winked at him as I struggled to get out of my shirt.

"That," he affirmed, his fingers moved to help me take it off, then trailed down my chest. "And so much more. And you know it."

He leaned down to kiss the hollow of my throat. "You are everything to me." Jules planted the words into my skin, his mouth trailing lower until he reached the waistband of my trousers.

I groaned and rested my head back on the cushions.

He spent a long time worshipping the few square inches of skin under my navel until my cock was rock hard and pressed against my zipper.

"Baby, oh fuck, you need to..." I trailed off when he mapped the tattoo at my left hip with his tongue.

“Yes? What do you need from me, Nikolai? Tell me.”

“You need to get me naked and into your mouth, or I’ll come in my pants,” I groaned, tightening my grip on his hair.

Jules felt pain differently than humans. He also had no gag reflex.

“Fuck!” I hissed as his hot mouth closed around me and he took me straight to the back of his throat.

He moaned around my cock, sucking and slurping.

It took me no time to get naked.

“Bunny!” An earthquake ripped through the ground beneath me, sending violent shivers down my spine.

He commands all of us.

He was a force of nature, pure magic personified.

Jules took his pleasure from me.

“Baby,” I growled, my hands keeping a bruising hold on his hips. “Yes, fuck me, my god! Let me serve you.”

He stilled.

“I mean it. Lube up and make love to me, Jules. I want to know how you feel inside me. There’s lube in the bag I brought.”

With shaking hands my forest god pulled the lube out. By the time he had prepped me, I was the one shaking.

Precum leaked over my stomach, and I was close to begging for release.

“Jules? Baby, please!”

My beautiful man raised his eyes to mine. He placed his hand on my stomach.

“Don’t worry, my sweet Bunny. I’ve got you.” Jules gently spread my legs further apart and knelt between them, his hands resting on the inside of my thighs. “I need you to try and stay soft and open. Can you do that for me?”

“Yes!” I nodded, almost sobbing with arousal. “I’ll be the best boy for you, baby.”

“I know you are, Bunny.” He leaned in and ran his nose over my temple.

Tears spilled down my cheeks at his words and the tender touches. I hadn’t bottomed in years, never feeling safe enough to relinquish my control. With Jules, the soft, mushy emotions I felt were in good hands. I could be as raw as I needed, and he cherished me even more for it.

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Slick fingers probed my hole.

“You’re so good for me, Bunny. So good,” he muttered as his ribbed cockhead breached my ass.

“Oh fuck!” My breathing was laboured. He was fucking huge. Every single bump that went in hurt. I relished the pain and marvelled at the way my body stretched to accommodate him.

“Breathe for me, Bunny.” Jules’ voice was as gentle as his hands. I knew why he’d said it a moment later. We’d arrived at the thickest part of his cock, about halfway up. A bulging ring I’d never paid attention to. Well, not more than the rest of him.

“Oh shit, Jules!” I sounded close to tears again, and I let go of my restraint.

He changed before my eyes, something he usually didn’t do. His body morphed into a taller version of him.

“What...?” I gaped at him through the veil of my tears.

Then it dawned on me. It was still him, still that angelic face so beautiful it hurt to look at him. But he could cradle me to his chest now, his body cocooning me in a loving embrace.

“You can be soft for me, Bunny. You don’t have to be strong. I’ll hold you up.”

I broke. Hiding my face in the crook of his neck, I sobbed into Jules’ sweet smelling

skin. He kept perfectly still, tangling his legs with mine and running his fingers through my hair.

I'd wanted to get it cut for ages but was glad I hadn't.

This is so good.

"You are my world, Bunny," he murmured, his lips lingering on my brow. "I will keep you safe, I promise."

I dragged him closer even though we were sweat-slicked chest to sweat-slicked chest. My calf pushing his hips forward took him by surprise. He slid inside me in one thrust. I grunted at the impact. That stretch was almost a burn but the kind that ignited my body.

"I need to feel you, Jules. Please. Help me get out of my head."

"I hear you, my sweet."

His hand sifted through my hair. Then he gripped it tightly and fused his mouth to mine.

His other hand took hold of my hip, fingertips digging into my glutes, spreading me wider.

Jules moved inside me, bumping his ribbed head into my spot. He didn't pause or tire. He made me feel it all—every last elevation on his cock as he worked my channel.

The pleasure built inside me like a wave, lifting me until my face broke free of the suffocating dullness of my mind.

I sucked the fresh air into my lungs, the rush of oxygen making me feel dizzy for a moment.

I didn't think. The thoughts surfaced like the colourful fish in Jules' muddy pond.

If I'd ended this, I would never have met him.

I'm still here.

And others, too. More abstract ones I didn't understand just yet.

A sliver of light is back.

A door thrown open.

Maybe the world isn't a worse place with me in it.

Maybe that night will end, and the sun will rise.

"I love you, Jules." I had told him before, but this time it felt different. The words came from a dark and warm place inside me where they'd laid dormant in their sleep until they, too, craved to see the light. More tears followed. Through the haze, I saw his beloved face. That familiar smile and his softness and strength, his age and youthful spirit. Here he was, the man I wanted to marry and grow old with. The man I wanted to have by my deathbed so his face was the last thing I saw.

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“I know, Nikolai. Don’t fight it. I choose you, too. And I will choose you again every day for the rest of our lives.”

I didn’t fight. I surrendered.

Gentle fingers tilted my head to the side and exposed my neck.

“I’m yours. Forever, Jules,” a voice sobbed. I was confused because it was my own.

He kissed the spot where my neck met my shoulder. Then he bit me.

The orgasm tore up my universe. I imploded into a million tiny pieces and reformed in an instant. Jules swam before my eyes. But this time, it wasn’t tears that blinded me. He solidified in my arms, and I didn’t know where my body ended or his began. We were one.

“Bunny!” he moaned around my flesh and sank his teeth deeper into my skin, drawing blood.

“Oh fuuuck!” My climax went on. How is that possible? My cock twitched between us, rope after rope of cum slicking our bodies even more.

He pulled off, and I watched him biting down on his tongue in slow motion. My blood coated his lips and his—darker than the summer wine he made—pulsed from the wound. Jules pressed his mouth back on the spot where he had bit me. He sucked and licked and mixed our blood. Tingles shot through my body from my neck. Like soft electric pulses, they zapped through me, making me shudder and groan.

“Baby, that feels so fucking good.”

I had finally stopped coming, but Jules didn't pull out. He moved again. Rolling his hips against my ass, he kept his mouth latched on my skin, every swirl of his tongue exquisite torture to my aching dick.

His bark-like length drove me wild, and I felt my arousal tenfold. It was an ancient feeling, dark and dangerous, yet so pure it made my heart sing. His hand hitched under my knee, pushing it up and opening me for his pounding.

Jules released me and raised his body up just enough so he could see my face. Blood dripped from his lips and down his chin. The gleaming ginger hair was dark and wet and stuck to his sweaty face.

He looked like a deity. My pagan god who I would worship on my knees.

“Bunny,” he rasped and brushed a hand over my cheek, his soft caress so at odds with the blood smeared on his face. “My mate.” Jules smiled as tears filled his beautiful eyes. “I will devote the rest of my days to being the man who deserves to be your mate.”

“Baby, you already are. If anything it's me who doesn't deserve—”

Forty-nine

Jules

“No!”

Nikolai's eyes flew open at the finality in my voice.

“You deserve to be treated like a king, Bunny. And I will make sure that you will be.”

“Baby, that’s not what I want.” His smile was gentle, his tone genuine. “All I want is to be with you, Jules.”

After all the tears he had shed it felt strange to be the one who wept.

Nikolai guided our lips to meet. I was sure there was still blood on my face. I’d known, deep down, how to mate with him. Instinct had guided me through the process, with the itch to bite and the need to give him my blood, too. The taste of his blood had almost sent me into a state of frenzy. Letting go was the hardest thing I had ever done.

A slick tongue prodded my lips to open. He craved the connection just like I did.

“You drank my blood?” He asked me when we backed out of the kiss.

“Yes, Bunny. Did it scare you?”

“Maybe it should have, but no. It was so hot, baby.”

His eyes slid down our entwined bodies, to where my length was still buried in his tight body.

Does he realise I haven’t come yet?

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“Jules...” Nikolai moaned my name and dragged my mouth back on his. His powerful legs came around my hips and dug his heels into my backside. “I want you to fill me up now, baby boy.”

Something in me snapped.

For a few moments, I wanted to rein myself in and make love to him gently instead of rutting him like a beast. But my wild side won.

“Jules! My God! Yes!” Nikolai plastered his chest to mine, bearing down on my length to take advantage of the full impact of my thrusts. “You’ll make me come again!”

His hands grabbed fistfuls of my hair and brought our foreheads together. I sank into his eyes, invading every part of him.

“Yes, baby! That’s it. You’re so good, yes!” With a groan, Nikolai climaxed for me again, his muscles clenching around my length. His pleasure flooded my senses as I joined him, my own orgasm lasting for a few blinding seconds. They felt like an eternity.

“Baby, thank you,” my sweet mate gasped as his body sank into the mattress, pulling me down on top of him. “That was beautiful.”

“Thank you,” I murmured, nuzzling my face into his neck and inhaling his musk.

A long time later, we left our bubble to clean up. It would have been warm enough to

sleep under the canopy, but Bunny led me to my bedroom and curled his body around mine.

“Gute Nacht, Jules. Ich liebe dich,” he murmured into my neck.

“Ich liebe dich auch, Nikolai. Gute Nacht.”

I let sleep drag me under.

Fifty

Jules

‘Lethimgo!’ Myscream echoed through my head, my bedroom, and the forest beyond the windows.

“Jules? Baby?” Nikolai’s sleepy, terrified voice came from the bed behind me.

When did I get up?

The sleep inertia drained away, and I became aware of my ragged breathing.

I sound like a stag again.

“Holy shit. Jules? Are you all right?”

Nikolai got up and moved around the bed. He treaded lightly, as if apprehensive to approach me.

I hated myself for scaring him.

He rounded me, eyes glued to the top of my head, his slack mouth thrown into sharp relief in the moonlight streaming in through the windows.

“Are you alright?” he repeated his question.

“Yes, I am. I’m sorry for scaring you.”

“You don’t scare me, Jules.” His voice was so gentle yet strong that the iron band around my heart loosened its tight grip on me.

Here with him I was safe. And more importantly, in my house my magic protected him.

“I’m just surprised, that’s all. I didn’t expect those. But they look great on you.”

“Those?” I sounded like I had screamed for hours.

“The antlers?”

Thewhat?

I turned around to the mirror and stumbled back into the dresser.

Twothingsgrew out of my head. Now that I was aware of their existence, I felt them weighing on me. Just like in that last dream I had...

Not even bothering to hide my magic anymore in Nikolai's presence, I ignited the lamps scattered around my bedroom. Their soft yellow glow illuminated the antlers. Their smooth horn arched outwards before they followed an elegant curve and then jutted almost straight up.

"By the trees I know and the land I have walked for centuries," I breathed, raising a hand to touch one of the blunt tips.

I felt it in my bones.

Note to self: touching them makes me horny. How fitting.

"Why did you scream like that? It took me at least ten minutes to wake you up. You kept pleading with someone to 'let him go'. Broke my heart to hear you like that."

"I dreamt of my mother. And you," I confessed in a low whisper.

He needs to know.

"Not for the first time. She tries to take you away from me, and no matter how much I

scream and fight I can never reach you. It always ends in the same way. I turn into this. She kisses you, I shatter the mirror, and you are lost forever.” My voice cracked like the glass did under my fists.

“Hey, baby boy, come here.” A pair of strong arms wrapped around me in a hug. “Let’s get you back to bed. You are freezing.”

Nikolai guided me to my bed and helped me get tucked in. He laid down facing me. I had to be careful about the antlers and the hooves, but it worked well, especially considering I’d had them for all of five minutes.

“I’m so sorry for what happened with your mother. I promise you I will never leave you. No matter how rich or beautiful she might be. I’m yours, Jules. Do you hear me?”

“She’s got powerful magic,” I cut in.

“So do you. Don’t forget that. And we have the mate bond connecting us, Jules. I’m only human, but even I can feel how powerful it is.” Nikolai rested his hand on my chest, and warmth spread out over my heart.

“You are my human, Bunny. And you have a bit of my magic in your veins now. You are tethered to my life force.”

He raised himself up to look me in the face. His eyes darkened with a possessiveness I’d never seen there before.

“See? Even if she tried to take me away from you, she wouldn’t succeed. I’m yours.” Nikolai kissed me again. “For me, it was instant. When I saw you on that path for the first time, it was as if I’d finally found what I didn’t even know I had been looking for.”

“Yes, Bunny. That is how I feel about you, too. We are two halves of the same being. Technically whole apart, but better and happier together.”

“Yeah, that sounds like us.” He beamed at me. “A few of my colleagues have found their mates, but I never thought I would be so lucky.”

Warm lips pressed on my mouth and a tongue dipped inside. His kiss made me forget about my fears and the terror that had consumed me only moments ago.

“See?” Nikolai barely withdrew from the kiss, speaking against my wet lips. “Do you think, for a moment, that anything in this world is a match for the power of this?”

“No.” The answer came from deep inside my heart. “We belong together.”

“That’s right, baby boy.”

He pressed his lips back on mine as his hands roamed my body and set me alight with desire.

“It’s the fucking best that I can do this to you, Jules. You are so turned on, aren’t you?”

One hand gripped my hard length. He stroked me with slow jerks that made my toes curl. The other teased a nipple before trailing up to repeat the slow pace up and down an antler.

“Yes, Bunny,” I moaned. “How you touch me feels so good.”

“I know you are about to come for me. I can feel the orgasm building in your body.” His delicious moan made me whimper under his touch. “Be a good boy and drench me in your cum, Jules.”

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Using my antler as a handle, Nikolai dragged my mouth onto his. His fist sped up and my precum made a slippery mess. It sounded lewd and filthy, and I loved every second of it.

“Bunny,” I whined as my climax took hold of me.

“Yes! Drench me!” he commanded in a harsh rasp, and I obeyed.

He dripped with my seed by the time I sank into my mattress, my body spent but my heart fuller than ever.

“Damn it.” Nikolai gasped the words as he pressed his chest against mine, which covered us both in my release. “I love you so fucking much.”

Fifty-one

Nikolai

“Goodmorning,Bunny.”Softlips pressed to my forehead. “I brought a cup of coffee up for you.”

“Thanks, baby.” I yawned and rolled over, accidentally dislodging the duvet.

Oops.

Jules inhaled a deep breath. We hadn’t even showered last night.

Two filthy animals.

A grin stretched my lips wide, and I blinked my eyes open. My gorgeous forest god gaped at my morning wood with his mouth half open. I spread my thighs and put my hard cock even more on display.

“Feel free to indulge, Jules.” At the purr in my voice, his gaze raised up to my face.

“Gladly, Bunny. But I think we should talk about last night first.”

“About what, exactly?” I knew I sounded like a brat.

“The mate bond and my nightmare? The antlers?”

“Oh, wow, yeah. I completely forgot about those.” I sat up and let my eyes travel over his body. Jules wore a pair of boxer shorts and nothing else. “Where did they go?” His eyes hung on my cock for another heartbeat, then he flushed pink and forced his gaze back on my face.

“I can manipulate them.” He reached up and parted his hair. I saw a little stub of horn on the top of his head. “These seem here to stay, though.”

“I like them,” I admitted. “Loved the antlers, too. They looked so hot.”

He sat down on the edge of the mattress and stroked my face.

“I’m glad you think so, Bunny. I feared I had scared you.”

“You didn’t.” I leaned in and rubbed my nose against his.

“So, the antlers...are you a shifter or something, Jules?”

“I’m not sure, Nikolai. I can shift, yes. You’ve seen me do it before.”

I remembered how he’d shifted on the day we met. And when he’d topped for the first time.

“This form here”—he got up from the bed and stepped back—“it’s how my forest sees me. And probably also how I see myself. But I am also this.” His body changed. The antlers materialised on top of his head and fur grew on his legs. I watched his feet morph into split hooves and his cock retreat into a furry sheath above his heavy balls, which were covered in creamy fur and nestled between his sinewy thighs. “Does this body scare you?”

“Oh no,” I breathed and crossed the room to hug him. He towered over me in this form so my head fit comfortably under his chin. “You are always beautiful to me, no matter which form you take.”

Fifty-two

Jules

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MysweetNikolai.

His reassurance was all I needed.

“I think my father is a god. I’ve been trying to find out more about him.”

“Are you serious? Your father is an actualgod?”

“I think, but I will never know for sure. I can’t ask my mother for more information.”

“Yeah, I tried to get more information out of my mum when I was a teenager.” Bunny snorted. “She hated that.”

I pressed a kiss on his brow.

“I’ve been having these dreams for a while, you know? I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. I shifted in them, just like I did tonight. This god,hisanimal, is a stag. It fits...”

“It does.” Nikolai lifted his head, gripped my antlers, and kissed me. I took hold of his wrists to break his grip on me.

“Let’s eat first, Bunny. You need your strength.”

My sweet human chuckled. He palmed my ass and pinched me.

“Yeah, I do.”

I extended my magic to my antlers again, glad that I could manipulate them like I could every part of my body. Just like earlier, I was unable to eliminate them entirely. They shrank until they were nothing but two little nubs on my scalp.

“Aw, I’m sad to see them go.” Nikolai squeezed my glute again. “You look so hot with antlers, Jules.”

“Oh.” I gasped. “I’m sure I can wear them when you’re around. Maybe not all the time, though. It’s a bit of a hassle when I get caught in branches or lamps.”

Bunny snorted and buried his face in my neck. “Is that a fear you have?”

“No. Earlier, when I let the chickens out, I got stuck in one of the apple trees.”

“Oh my God.” Nikolai started to giggle. “I’m sorry, baby but that’s so funny. Sorry,” he wheezed again and tears trickled out of his eyes. “Maybe you better not wear them, then.” A tilt of his head and then his lips were on my cheek. “I love you.”

Our mood darkened with each hour that passed, reminding us that the time until we’d have to part ways approached.

Bunny held me in his arms.

“Please come to Veitsreuth,” he whispered in my ear. “I won’t be able to visit you again for at least a week. There’s no way I’ll survive this.”

I understood what he meant. Neither would I.

“I’m scared, Bunny,” I confessed. “And what about Barnabas? And the chickens?”

“Damn.” Nikolai folded in on himself. “I totally forgot.”

“I want to make it happen for you, my sweet Bunny. It’s not fair that it’s always you visiting me. I don’t want to be your secret. I want to be your partner.”

Nikolai said nothing but I saw in his eyes how much he appreciated my words.

I fed the chickens and locked them in their coop before we left.

“I will be back tomorrow, my sweets.”

Vines shot from the ground and wrapped around the cage.

That’ll keep them safe.

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I couldn't remember the last time I had left my home for longer than a couple of hours.

"Are you sure you want to do this, baby?" Nikolai pursed his lips and crossed his arms before his chest.

"I know it is important to you. That makes it important for me, too." I took a few steps toward him. "I am sorry I won't be able to stay longer than a few hours. I understand if you..."

"If I what?" He cocked his head.

"If this is a dealbreaker for you." He had used this word before.

"You not wanting your pets to starve isn't a dealbreaker for me, Jules. I don't want that, either. I'm prepared to go to any length to be with you."

"So am I, Bunny. Please know that." I reached out to him and caressed his arms. "You are my everything."

"Oh, Jules." He sighed and hugged me. "Thank you for coming to Veitsreuth. It means the world to me."

"Let's go. I think Barnabas is already at the arch." My Wolpertinger was way too excited. He had set off the moment I'd told him he'd be coming with us.

We took a shortcut to the arch and from there it was only a short walk to the car park

where Nikolai's car waited. It was a sturdy, blue vehicle.

Nikolai sent messages to his team members as soon as we arrived at the car to ask if a few of them wanted to meet us for dinner tonight. I couldn't deny that I was nervous. I clutched Barnabas to my chest.

"This is the first time Barnabas and I will be in a car."

"It's going to be okay, baby boy. I'll get you home safely."

In the end, it wasn't as scary as I thought it would be. Nikolai stopped at a supermarket on the way into Veitsreuth to pick up a couple of things for us to eat.

We'd agreed that he would take me back home tomorrow morning so the chickens wouldn't have to stay inside their coop for too long.

"Bo, Nate, Arne, and Max texted me back. They're looking forward to meeting you. I'm still waiting for Guns to reply, but I bet he'll be there, too." Nikolai told me once he'd stowed the two shopping bags in the boot of his car and had taken the seat next to me again.

"Hey, baby. Are you alright?" he asked when he saw my face.

"I'm okay," I lied.

"That might have worked on me before you..." His eyes dropped to my mouth as if he still saw his blood dripping from my lips. He leaned across the middle console, placed one hand on Barnabas' back, and kissed me.

"I'm scared," I admitted. "Everyone used to fear me. What if they still do? I don't know if I can exist in the world today without being met with animosity."

“You forget that you still have me by your side. Whoever tries to give you shit has to go through me first.”

Oh, Bunny.

“It’s worth facing my fears for you. This much I know at least.”

Fifty-three

Nikolai

Nervousness radiated off Jules in waves as we walked through the court gardens. He never let go of my hand—not when we arrived in the city centre of Veitsreuth, nor at the team’s favourite restaurant.

I held him back before we entered and hugged him.

“It’s going to be fine, baby boy. I promise.” A bit of the tension left him when we kissed.

One thing was clear: I wouldn’t let anyone give him shit. This was my domain, and I knew how to handle the guys.

Vee, Nate, Max, and Arne were already hanging around in the side room where our usual table stood.

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“Hey, guys,” I greeted them. “Thanks for coming. I want to introduce you to someone. This is my partner, Jules.” I gripped his hand tighter. “Jules, meet the guys and their partners.”

Vee, who had turned around when he heard me speak, stilled like a hound whose nose had just picked up on a deer trail.

“Hi, Jules. It’s great to meet you, I’m Arne.”

Nate tried to approach us to shake Jules’ hand, too, but Vee flung out an arm to stop him.

“Baby, what’s wrong?”

“Stay behind me,” Vee rasped, his dark eyes fixed unblinkingly on my man. “Why have you come here?” he asked Jules.

“What the...? Baby?” Nate tried to get around Vee’s arm again, but the massive Elvertritsch didn’t budge.

“We should go, Nikolai. It was a mistake.”

“Yes, it was,” Vitus said in a dangerous voice.

I’d never seen Vitus like this. It was scary.

“Get a grip on yourself, Vee!” I snapped.

“Don’t you dare be an asshole to my husband,” Nate snarled, getting up into my face. “The others might be okay with your antics, but my line is crossed when you attack my mate.” His lips pulled back into an inhuman grimace.

“Frat boy,” Vee muttered softly, slipping his arms around Nate and pulling him back. “Calm down, please. It’s all good. There’s no need to fight for my honour. Even as hot as it is when you get all protective of me.” He kissed Nate’s temple, and I watched the temper drain out of my teammate.

“Shit. Sorry, Nik. I have no idea what happened.”

“The mate bond is strong between you,” Jules said in his low, melodic voice. “You are right in protecting the other half of your soul.” He gave Nate a radiant smile as if he hadn’t just threatened me. It made Vee grumble under his breath.

No need to worry, big guy. This one is mine.

“But I have to ask you not to insult Nikolai. I feel about him the way you do about your mate.”

He never raised his voice, and his face stayed pleasant... but shit. The memory of Jules’ reaction to my black eye sent a shiver down my spine.

“I invited Jules tonight so he could meet you at last,” I told Vee to steer the conversation away from our men measuring their dicks. “We met a few months ago and fell in love,” I explained and took Jules’ hand. “I want him to hang out with us without any issues.”

The giant chicken man contemplated me for a long moment.

“He’s been faced with nothing but prejudice, and it makes me sick. From the moment

I met Jules he has been so lovely and kind to me.”

He squeezed my fingers.

“Jules deserves respect and company.”

“You’re right, Nikolai.” Vee nodded. He kept his left arm around his husband and extended his right hand to Jules.

“It’s nice to meet you. I’m Vitus, but everyone calls me Vee. And this is my hot-headed husband, Nate.”

My sweet precious baby shook hands with both of them. “It’s nice to meet you,” he said politely, never letting go of my hand. His anchor, and mine. “I’m Jules.”

“Can anyone explain what we’re missing?” Arne cocked an eyebrow and contemplated the scene before him.

I noticed that Max kept his mate close, too, and how his outline blurred with the shadows.

“Jules is the Höimann,” I explained.

“That rings a bell. Baby, isn’t that this old guy you told me about? The one who joins the Wild Hunt in winter?” Nate snorted and gave Jules a once-over. “No offence, man, but you don’t look like I imagined.”

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A small smile pursed Jules' perfect mouth into a pout.

"They are local lore people made up about me over the years. I never bothered to correct them." He shrugged apologetically and laced his fingers through mine. "Vee is right, I am dangerous to humans. But not the way you think. I am not joining the Wild Hunt. I have a pet Wolpertinger and chickens. I could never leave them alone for so long."

Max snorted and pushed away from the wall. He held out his hand. "Good to meet you."

"And you, Nachtkrapp."

My teammate cringed at being addressed thus.

"Just call me Max, yeah?" He rubbed the feathers at his nape, looking flustered.

"Jules."

Arne shook his hand as well, as did Guns who'd just entered the restaurant's side room.

"Good to meet you, man. And you. Hey, bud." Guns dropped to one knee and greeted Barnabas who was hiding between Jules and me. He extended his neck as far as he could to sniff Guns' fingers.

"Oh, look, baby," I said to Jules. "He likes Guns."

Our goalie snorted and shook his head at my dumb joke but kept his eyes on Jules' pet.

"He is very sweet," Vee agreed.

"Guns? Or the Wolpertinger?" Decks asked in an innocent voice.

The enormous Elvertritsch cocked a heavy eyebrow and turned his head to look at his husband. He flung an arm around Nate's back and pulled him close to his body as if he weighed nothing.

"I was talking about the Wolpertinger. No offence, Martin."

"None taken," Guns muttered gruffly.

"Cheeky frat boy." Vee kissed his husband's cheek. I couldn't imagine being kissed by someone with a beak.

Yeah, I'm Team Antlers.

Barely an hour later, Bo and Ollie had joined us, too, and Jules had told Vee his story. It was even sadder than I'd anticipated. It made me never ever want to meet his mother.

I need to introduce him to mine, though. He deserves to be fussed over by a mum.

Fifty-four

Jules

Barnabas, Nikolai, and I walked home through the warm summer evening. Veitsreuth

was simultaneously larger and smaller than I had expected. I'd never been in the city before, and only visited smaller villages to do my shopping. The sheer number of buildings confused me, but it felt cosy.

It's a nice city to live in.

I also liked his apartment. The court gardens it overlooked reminded me of my forest. It made me happy that Nikolai had a safe home here in the middle of all these people.

Once he'd prepared a little nook in his kitchen for Barnabas, Bunny spread me out on his bed.

He doesn't want him to watch. Neither do I.

My beautiful mate folded me in half and made love to me until I fell apart around his length.

"You feel so good, baby," he groaned into the kiss as he reached his climax and filled me up with his warm release.

"Oh, Bunny." I sighed and pulled him down on my chest, stroking his sweaty back and feeling happier than ever before.

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Early the next morning, I straddled his hips and took his morning wood inside me. Sleeping next to him always made me so wet and aroused.

“Fuck!” Nikolai gripped my hair and kept our mouths fused as I rode him until he came. Ever since I had felt him inside me the first time my hunger for him only grew.

“Wow, baby. That’s the best way to be woken up.”

“I’m glad you enjoy it. I will never stop.”

Nikolai snorted and pulled me down on his chest.

“I want you to meet my mother, Jules.”

“What?” His arms around my back stopped me from sitting up.

“I don’t know yet how we can manage with Barney and the chickens. Maybe we could ask Vee and Nate to take care of them?”

“Do you think they would do that? Or that your mother will want to meet me at all?”

“Believe me, she does. I told her about you, and she’s so excited to meet ‘my Jules’.”
Bunny pecked me on the forehead.

“If we can manage to find someone to take care of my pets, I’ll try to be brave for you.” He cuddled me closer.

“Thank you, baby boy. It would mean the world to me.”

I knew. And I would move mountains for him if he needed me to.

We agreed on a weekend at the end of July before Bunny would travel to Scotland for three weeks. The thought of being away from my forest for three days scared me, but I knew how important it was to Nikolai.

I will be brave for my mate.

Vitus, who had already visited me in my forest, agreed to come by to feed the chickens. He and his husband would take care of Barnabas at their house. I was sure they would do fine with him. My Wolpertinger adored Vitus’ human, Nate.

Just like he adores Bunny.

Nikolai and I agreed that the long drive wasn’t ideal for him to do by himself, but I would be lying if I said I wasn’t looking forward to being in the car again. It had grown on me, being Nikolai’s passenger.

Watching Bunny prepare for the trip was so cute. It made me feel all mushy inside how excited he was.

“I’ll get to introduce my two favourite people to each other,” he’d said when I asked him what he looked forward to the most.

When I visited him in his tiny flat the week before our trip, it was taken up by boxes.

Fear enveloped me when I spotted them.

“Are you moving, Nikolai?”

Don't leave me, Bunny.

"Oh my God, no. The only move I'd ever consider is in with you." He bit his lip and leaned in to gently bump his nose against mine.

"You would?" I breathed, unable to ask.

"Well, yeah. I've been thinking about it, to be honest. I'd have to drive a bit more, but I'm staying at your place most of the time anyway. I mean, I don't know if you even want that. Probably not, and it's fine."

"Bunny," I ended his rambling with my hand on his heart. "You have no idea how happy it would make me if you moved in with me. It's the only thing I want." I didn't know what made me say it, but when I probed the spot the words had escaped from I found I had spoken my deepest truth.

"Seriously, baby?"

"Seriously." I cupped his scruffy cheek in my palm and kissed him. "Being with you is the only thing I truly ever wanted."

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Nikolai heaved a deep sigh and kissed me long and hard.

“Let’s do it when I get back from Scotland, okay?”

“Yes, Bunny. Yes, please. Oh, this will make the wait even sweeter.”

He grinned at me and pecked my nose tip. “The boxes...”

“Oh yes, the boxes. Tell me what’s in them.”

They contained clothes he had ordered so that I would blend in a bit better. I’d come to like modern human clothing and his clothes in particular: oversized jumpers, clothes with his team logo on it, and those soft grey joggers he wore.

Bunny was a fan of them on me because, he said, he could see the outline of my cock under the fabric.

Sure enough he pulled a box full of Pumas merchandise from under his little desk.

“I thought it was time for you to have your own. I don’t want you to change your form just so you fit into my clothes.”

We had so much fun picking the things I liked the most, interspersed with Nikolai distracting me with kisses and more.

Fifty-five

Jules

The weekend after that Nikolai picked Barnabas and me up. It was still early and a soft mist hung in the firs as we drove to Nate and Vitus' place.

"Good morning, you two," the tall Elvertritsch greeted us when we got out of the car. "Nate's still asleep, but little Barney and I will find a way to pass the time, won't we?" he cooed and scratched Barnabas' neck.

"Take good care of him, Vee. Goodbye, my sweet little baby." Barnabas ignored me.

"I promise I will. Have a great time with your mother, Nik. And drive safely."

"Bye, Barney." Nikolai stroked Barnabas' little antlered head and was rewarded with a lick from my Wolpertinger. It made me weirdly happy that my pet loved Bunny so much. "Bye, Vee. Thanks again."

He waved us off, cradling a happy Barnabas in his enormous arms.

Three and a half hours later we pulled up in front of a pretty white house. A woman burst out of the front door the minute Nikolai stopped the car.

"Mama!" He strode around his car and hugged the short, round-faced woman. Liberal silver strands streaked her golden hair. She had the same eyes as my mate.

"Oh, honey, it's so good to see you." His mother squeezed him again, and then let go and turned around to look at me.

Bunny reached out and slipped his arm around me. I leaned into his warmth, feeling grounded by his presence.

“Mum, this is Jules, my boyfriend. Jules, this is my mum, Monika.”

“Jules, I am so happy to finally meet you. Niko told me so much about you.” Her eyes brimmed with tears as she stepped closer and hugged me, too.

“Thank you for inviting me into your home.”

“Oh, of course, my dear. Come inside. I made a cake, and the coffee’s ready.”

She fussed over me all the way into the house, leaving Nikolai to deal with our bags.

“You probably want to freshen up after the drive.” Monika led me to her guest room in the attic. It was a bright, cosy space with a large bed on the far end, a little seating area, and access to a rooftop terrace.

“Oh, what a beautiful room.” I turned on the spot, my heart squeezing in my chest when Bunny entered behind his mother.

“Thank you, Jules.” She beamed at me. “I’ll leave you boys to it. Come downstairs when you are ready.”

“See you in a bit, Mum.”

Nikolai dropped the bags, shut the door behind her, and strode over to where I stood. He hugged me from behind, dragging me into his warm chest and kissing my neck.

“Are you okay, baby boy?” he murmured.

“I am. What about you, Bunny?”

“Mm, I’m just horny. I’ll never get over seeing you in those slutty joggers.” His fingers trailed down my chest and under the waistband.

“Bunny,” I groaned when they wrapped around my cock.

“Yes?”

“What are you doing?” I should stop him.

We are at his mother’s house!

“Don’t worry, I locked the door.” He gave me a slow jerk. His body pressing into my back, Nikolai walked me to the doors leading out on the terrace so I could rest my weight on the glass. “I want you so much, baby boy. Can I have you?”

“Yes, Bunny,” I breathed, my head coming around to find his lips.

Nikolai’s hand left my cock. He dragged my joggers and underwear down over my

backside, and I felt him fight with his shorts.

I groaned when he rubbed his cockhead through my wetness and pushed inside me.

“Oh my God,” my sweet human moaned into my neck.

“Yes, Bunny. I am your god. Now be a good disciple and fill me up.”

Nikolai huffed at my words but moved inside me as I commanded.

He worked my ass and rearranged my guts with every sharp thrust.

“Be a good boy, my god, and come first. And hurry up. I’m so close.” He dragged my shirt aside and sank his blunt teeth into my shoulder.

“Bunny!” I gasped and came in my underwear, shuddering with brief discomfort. Then he followed me, burying his cock in my hole. I loved it when he came inside me. His warm release coated my insides, and in his bliss, he rested his weight on me. I would forever hold him up.

“I love you, Bunny.” I sighed and kissed his cheek.

“Love you, too, Jules.” He smiled and met my lips in a sweet kiss. “Let’s get cleaned up, yeah?”

Fifty-six

Nikolai

“Goodmorning,darling,”mymum greeted me with a hug the next morning. “Good morning, Jules.” She flung her arm around his shoulders, too, and squeezed him to

her side. “Did you two sleep well?”

She gave us an indulgent smile and then turned around to the stove to make some eggs for breakfast. The table was filled with a selection of meat cuts, cheese, jam, honey, and more heaped on plates or sitting in pots and bowls.

“Yes, thank you, Monika.” Jules blushed beautifully when he addressed her.

“Thanks, Mum. I love the new space.”

When I’d told her about Jules several months ago, she had gone overboard with designing her new guest room. She had gushed, “You can’t possibly sleep in your kids room with your partner, Niko! The bed in there is barely big enough for you anymore.”

God, I love my mum.

“I’m so glad you do! What do you think, Jules? Scrambled eggs?”

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He expressed how much he liked it and her style, and they started discussing antique furniture over breakfast.

I wasn't completely okay yet, but somehow, I knew I would be. And if the Big Sad knocked on my door again, I had all these wonderful people to help me carry the weight until I could walk unburdened again.

Under the table, I reached for Jules' hand, needing to hold him. His words didn't give his actions away, but he took my hand and placed it on his thigh. He then covered it with his own and rubbed gentle circles on the back of my palm.

I thought Mum would explode with joy. She had always cried easily and I saw tears sparkle in her eyes.

"Right," she sniffed, wiping her eyes stealthily as she reached for her coffee cup. "What are the plans for today?"

"I'm taking my favourite people out for lunch, and I thought we could show Jules the town?"

Neukirchen had grown and changed so quickly in the past five years that even I, who had grown up here, barely recognised it anymore. The old parts dating back to the Middle Ages had, at least, stayed the same, and I thought he might appreciate its narrow lanes and crooked houses.

"That's a wonderful idea, darling." More tears leaked out of her eyes, and she dried them on her jumper, laughing. "Sorry, it's just so good to see you happy."

Jules squeezed my hand. “And I have two sons now. It’s too much for my heart.”

I felt my love sit up straighter as if concerned she might keel over.

“It needs to adapt to all this love and until it does, I’ll start crying every time I look at you.”

I snorted and drank from my coffee.

“I am sorry to upset you like this,” Jules told her in a quiet voice.

“Oh my God, no! Oh, Jules!” She got up, rushed around the table and hugged him. “I’m not upset. You know when Nikolai was born...” Letting go of him, she took a seat again. “I always hoped that, one day, he might find someone who loves him for who he is. That’s all I ever wanted for my child. And seeing you two together... I don’t know if it makes sense at all, but I love you so much because you love him the way you do,” she added in a soft voice, smiling through fresh tears.

Jules nodded, a smile spreading across his face. “It makes sense to me.”

“How about we chill for a bit once we’ve cleared the table? It’s too early to leave,” I suggested, wanting to be alone with my man.

“Excellent idea, Bunny.”

Back in the guest room, I urged him on the bed, holding him down with my body between his legs, and took his mouth in a hungry kiss.

As we struggled to get our clothes off, we kept our mouths fused. We tried to be extra quiet as he took me inside his ass. He felt so hot and tight when I slid my cock inside him. And so wet.

He is so fucking turned on.

But so was I. I fucked him hard and deep, trying to hit his sensitive spot with every thrust. I needed him to come; I couldn't hold out any longer.

With the tiniest gasp that I swallowed down, he came around me, his muscles milking my cock for every last fucking drop of cum.

“Oh my goodness, Bunny,” he breathed as his body relaxed under me and sank back to the bed. I looked down between us, to his obscenely spread thighs, my hips lodged firmly between them, and his cum-streaked abs.

“You are perfect, baby boy. So fucking perfect.”

I brought my mouth on his again, trying to put my feelings into the kiss.

He broke our connection, cupping my cheek, and smiling up at me. “Not at all, Bunny. But I am perfect for you just like you are for me.”

“I love you, Jules.”

My forever.

Fifty-seven

Jules

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“Nik,Jules,hi!”Natewaved at us from the door. His soft green cashmere jumper hugged his muscular torso and a warm smile sat on his lips.

I like this human.

“Did you have a good trip?”

“We did, thanks. My mum was so excited to meet Jules.”

“I can imagine.” Nikolai’s teammate grinned at us. “Vee and little Barney are out on the deck. Come on. You have a few minutes, right?” He led us through the living room and out onto a sprawling wooden deck. It still smelled of fresh wood.

Vee lounged in a chair, a sleeping Barnabas on his lap.

“Hey,” the massive Elvertritsch smiled at us. “Did you have a good time with your mother, Nikolai?”

Barney raised his antlered head at the sound of Bunny’s name. My pet gave a little yelp and launched himself into Nikolai’s arms. He tried to lick his cheeks.

“Yeah, we did,” he laughed, trying to get his face out of Barnabas’ reach. My heart swelled in my chest until I was so full of love I could barely breathe.

Bunny had replaced me as Barnabas’ favourite dad.

My little family.

“I think Jules might have enjoyed it, too. A bit?” Bunny’s eyes met mine. His bright grin made them sparkle.

“Oh, I had a fantastic time. I adore your mother,” I assured him.

“Sit down, please. I made pecan pie, a new recipe Nate’s mother gave me last time we visited.”

“It was my favourite pie when I was a kid.” The beautiful human gave his husband a dazzling smile. “And don’t tell my mom, but the one Vee makes is even better than hers.” He leaned down and kissed Vee’s brow. “What can I get you to drink, Nik?”

“Coffee for me. For you, too, baby?” Nikolai looked over at me. I reached out and threaded my fingers through his.

“Yes, thank you. Coffee is perfect.”

“Did you have a good time with Barnabas?” I enquired after I had tried the first forkful of pie. It was delicious.

“Oh yes, it was wonderful.” Nate’s smile put his dimples on display. “He’s just so sweet. Vee was against having a pet, but I think Barney converted him.”

“Nonsense.” Vitus snorted, winking at his husband. “I simply don’t have any resolve when you pout at me, Frat Boy.”

Nikolai tried to disguise his snort as a cough and kept his eyes on his plate.

“We also loved taking care of the chickens.”

“I bet the girls loved you, Vee,” Nikolai deadpanned. For a moment, I thought Nate

would choke on his pie.

He reached out and fist bumped Bunny, tears leaking out of his eyes.

“They made me their ruler, yes,” Vitus said dryly and took a sip of his coffee.

“You are welcome to see your subjects whenever, Vitus.” I didn’t know why I said it. It just slipped out.

“Oh my God.” Nate giggled so hard his face turned the colour of my favourite summer wine. Bunny’s shoulders shook as he tried to keep his laughter contained. Then it burst out of him. A disgruntled Barnabas jumped off his lap. My Wolpertinger gave him a scandalised look and settled back on Vitus’ lap.

“Sorry, Vee.” Tears slid down Nikolai’s cheeks. “So sorry,” he wheezed.

Nate seemed beyond words. He curled up in his chair, shaking with fits of giggles.

It was the arrival of another Elvertritsch that sobered the two humans up. I was sorry, but I hoped Vee wasn’t upset with me.

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“Hello,” the newcomer called and raised a four-fingered hand. Unlike Vitus, whose plumage was dark green with blood red, the newcomer’s feathers gleamed in a burnt orange with dark blue. But both Elvertritsch were enormous walking, talking mountains of muscle. “Sorry to butt in. I was on a patrol in the area and thought I’d say hi.”

“Frederik, hey.” Nate got up and shook the man’s hand. “Good to see you. Do you have time for a cup of tea and a slice of pie?”

“Oh, I don’t want to cause you any trouble.” He ruffled his feathers, clearly flustered at the idea of joining us.

“Nonsense, it’s no trouble. Have you met Jules and Nik?”

“No, I don’t think we’ve met.”

“Baby?” Nate left it to Vee to introduce us and then disappeared into the house.

Vee gestured at Barnabas in his lap to indicate why he couldn’t get up as it was customary. At least I believed that.

“Nik is a colleague of Nate’s, and Jules is...”

The orange Elvertritsch gave my hand a firm squeeze. “The Höimann?” It was so strange. They surely had never met me—I would remember—yet we recognised each other.

“Yes,” I confirmed.

“It’s nice to meet you, Jules. I’m Frederik, Vee and I work together as forest rangers. So, I think we have things in common?”

“Yes, I think we do.”

He took a seat at the table.

“Here you go.” Nate placed a cup of tea in front of Frederik.

“I’m not too fond of coffee,” he explained. “Thank you, Nate.”

When I had fallen in love with Nikolai I hadn’t realised what being a part of his life might entail. I had not realised that he had a life outside of my forest, and that we might experience it together.

It was still a new experience for me, but it was one I loved. It was like having friends and belonging somewhere.

My perfect mate. He had given me so much more than just his affection. Nikolai gave me a richer life, and I adored him all the more for that.

Epilogue

Jules

Eversince Nikolai had admitted how much he loved my stag legs and my antlers, I hardly ever bothered with my human form anymore while we were at home. I hadn’t expected that I could ever find a body that fit me even better than the slender human man Bunny had grown to love.

The half stag with heavy antlers crowning his head had become the truest form I knew.

It had been beautiful to watch Bunny getting to know this new body of mine. He said he adored the feel of my fur on his skin, my little tail, my sheath... The first time he had explored it still lived rent-free in my head.

I snorted. Just like Bunny had invaded my forest, my home, and then my heart, I'd made his language my own.

Oh, my sweetest Bunny.

He had moved in with me after his training camp. This new turn my life had taken made me happier than ever before. I often caught myself prancing through the forest like a ballerina. I was glad nobody but the trees and my animals saw me.

Ever since he had moved in, his games away had gotten harder. I missed him so much, but I also breathed a lot easier since his life was now tethered to mine.

It would require a lot more to take him away from me.

The tremor that ran through the ground alerted me to my tired white knight returning from a game in Osterfeld.

I turned and sprinted towards the arch. My hooves crunched on the first fallen leaves.

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Autumn is here.

“Bunny!” I called when I spotted my wondrous mate coming down the path, his heavy equipment bag on his shoulder.

I swept him off his feet and cradled him against my chest. “Welcome home, my sweet.”

“Hi, baby boy. God, I missed you.” Nikolai palmed my cheek and kissed me.

“I made something for you,” I blurted out, unable to wait a minute longer to tell him.

“A surprise?” Nikolai cocked an eyebrow at me. “Damn. I was going to take you straight to bed, but I’m dying to see it first!”

“I wish I hadn’t told you about the surprise.” I gave him a sneaky grin. “But maybe it will be even better once you’ve seen it.”

He snorted. “I’ll want to say thank you?”

I set him to his feet at the edge of the garden.

“Come on.” I took his hand and pulled him in the direction of the chicken coop. There was a new wooden shed next to it.

“What is that? Did you build this?”

“Vitus and his colleague Frederik were kind enough to help me. Go in and see for yourself.”

Nikolai pushed down the handle and flung the door wide open. He took in the bright open space with its large windows looking out over the chicken enclosure and the pond and...

“Is that a pottery wheel? And a kiln? Oh my goodness, Jules. Did you make a pottery workshop for me?”

“Well, you mentioned you wanted to give it a try. I’m—”

I couldn’t finish my sentence. Nikolai’s bulky body pressed me against the door, his hands buried in my hair, and his mouth accosted mine. I sat him on my hips so he could reach me better.

“I love you. I love you. I love you,” he gasped between frantic kisses. “Thank you so much, baby. This is the best surprise ever.”

“Maybe we’ll build you a gym next? Or a sauna? Vitus told me how much his mate enjoyed that.”

“Oh my God, Jules.” Nikolai snickered. “I don’t want to know.”

“You don’t want to know that his mate liked the sauna?”

“Nope. I don’t even want to think about it because my brain is too filthy.” He brought his lips to my neck and licked a kiss over my pulse point. “And then I’ll think about how he thanked him.” Bunny shuddered in my arms. “No offence. I like them both, but I prefer to keep my focus on the hot, antlered god between my legs.”

“This isn’t how I imagined we would inaugurate your workshop,” I whispered into his golden hair when, at last, my beautiful mate lay heavy on my chest, his body spent and our hearts beating as one.

“No?” He huffed and snuggled his cheek into my pectoral. “This is exactly how I want to inaugurate every single building with you from now on.”

“I guess I better get building then.” I pressed another kiss on his brow. “You are my everything, Bunny.”

Bonus Epilogue

Jules

“Goodmorning,myheart.”Nikolai’s soft lips pressed a kiss on my forehead. “Stay in bed, okay? I’m getting ready to head to the rink in a bit.”

His mouth pecked a trail down my temple and cheek until it reached my neck.

“You smell so good.” My mate breathed me in the way he did every morning. “I’ll never get enough of you, Jules.” Taking another deep inhale of my scent, he kissed my neck, sending goosebumps down my spine.

Humming with happiness, I snuggled into his lingering warmth.

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Just a few more minutes.

“I should have known better.” Nikolai entered the kitchen twenty minutes later, showered and dressed, his hair still damp and sticking up in all directions.

“You definitely should,” I agreed. “Coffee?”

“Thanks, baby.”

We drank our coffee in silence, one of his arms around me and my back against his chest.

This was our little ritual. I loved it more than Nikolai knew.

The stillness of our kitchen, his feet planted wide, and him holding me in the cradle of his body as the forest awoke outside the windows.

This is my version of paradise.

“I should stop waking you up,” he mused, breaking the silence. “But you look so beautiful in your sleep I think I’ll die if I don’t get to kiss you and tell you how much I love you before I go.”

My heart soared at his words.

“I’m glad you wake me up every morning, Bunny. If you weren’t, I’d have to dig out my old mechanical alarm clock. Believe me, you don’t want that.” I drank from my

mug, one of the first things Nikolai had made in our new workshop. He had presented me with the pastel green, slightly crooked cup on our first anniversary. The coffee had tasted even better since then.

“I don’t want that,” I added, snuggling back into his embrace. “You waking me with a kiss is much better.”

Bunny’s hand slipped under the Pumas shirt—his shirt—I wore around the house after borrowing it from him a couple of months ago.

“I’ll keep doing that, then.” He kissed my shoulder and caressed my bare stomach with his fingertips. “I got to go in a few minutes. What are your plans for the day?”

“I’ll pick raspberries for jam. It’s a berry picking day.”

He never understood how I knew and had given up questioning me.

“Are you making more of the raspberry and white chocolate cookies when you can find enough?”

“I wasn’t planning to, but I guess I will.” It was a white lie. Of course I had. They were his favourite. “Pick up some chocolate for me on the way home, please.”

Nikolai plucked the cup from my hands, set it down on the counter next to his, and spun me around.

My body reacted before the rest of me caught on, face tilting up as he palmed my cheeks and kissed me hard.

“Yes, baby boy,” he whispered against my lips. “You are my home. And I am yours.”

THE END