



Claimed By the Orc Lord (Orc Mate Selection #2)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Kai

When my best friend goes missing, it's up to me to find him. There's always been stories of people in Destiny entering the woods and never coming out, but we never thought it would happen to us. That is, until I walk through a cave and find myself stepping into a different world with no way home.

Nash

I've always believed my mate would find me. I just never thought he would come in the form of a tall, clumsy human who seems incapable of taking care of himself when he stumbles into my world.

From the moment I set eyes on him, I know he's mine. Now, I have to convince a man who insists he only likes human females that he's an Orc Lord's Mate.

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Chapter one

Kai

The last time Rainn went missing for this long, I stole one of his packages off the porch out of curiosity and found myself staring at a replica orc cock that had green sparkles in the silicone.

He had to have added the sparkles as a special request, and a small part of me still felt bad that I stole it... but at the same time, he was the entire reason I was a closet monster-porn enthusiast, so it was almost like he owed me.

Almost.

That and I was straight, so there was no way he needed to know that I actually tried to use it on myself.

He definitely didn't need to know I did it while listening to an audiobook about a demon wrecking his human mate.

And he definitely, definitely... def-uh-not-ly didn't need to know I orgasmed so hard I fell off the bed, broke the nightstand, and got a black eye.

I told him I got hurt at a job, and thankfully Rainn believed me.

I didn't use it again after that, but sometimes I pulled it out from beneath my bed and side-eyed it.

I had no idea how Rainn stuffed himself full with things like that every night—and I knew he did it every night because he wasn't quiet about it at all. I had to guess that someone who wrote monster smut for a living needed to make sure that he knew what he was talking about... but still.

Every night?

That was real.... dedication.

It was honestly the lack of waking up to him moaning that made me realize he'd been gone too long. I'd been so busy on the project I was working on that it hadn't crossed my mind—I left early and came home late, and it wasn't until my sleep hadn't been interrupted for almost two weeks that I realized something was wrong—that was six nights too many for a week-long camping trip.

When I checked his room, it was still empty.

When I checked the refrigerator, there were no new groceries in there.

The bananas on the counter were going brown, and there was a few weeks' worth of mail in the mailbox.

So...

Rainn hadn't come home.

Thankfully, I'd finished my project the day before, so I had all the time in the world to grab coffee and breakfast and call our local police station.

"Hey there, Kai." The bored drawl of the woman who worked dispatch in Destiny was familiar.

“Hey, Charlene.” An easy smile she couldn’t see—but I knew she could hear in my tone—spread across my face. “How’re you today, sugar?”

If she could hear my smile, then I could hear the blush when she let out a small laugh, even though she was in her early fifties and happily married.

“Fine, like always. What has you calling?”

My hand lifted, scratching at my jaw while I tried to figure out how to phrase my concern. It wasn’t like this was the first time Rainn had wandered off. The whole ‘twenty-four hours’ policy didn’t apply to him.

“Just wondering if you’d randomly heard anything about Rainn.” Did that sound casual enough?

She let out a small, exasperated sound. “I’m sure he’s fine, Kai. He probably wandered off to join a dance troupe or something.”

“Nah, Charlene. He’d call me if he did so I could come watch. Besides, he went camping up at Forest Glen, but he’s been gone two weeks instead of a few days. I just wanted to see if anyone reported... I don’t know, bears or something? You know people go missing.”

She blew out a breath. “Like I said, I’m sure he’s fine. Why don’t you go out to check? If you don’t find him, you can call us back and we’ll file a report.”

I would have been offended if it weren’t for the fact that Rainn routinely stayed out longer than he said he would when he got inspired. She was probably right—he’d probably gotten distracted, and I’d find him lying in a field of moss wondering if he could come up with a plant monster with three cocks.

The thought played out in the back of my head—three cocks that could snake out like tendrils? I needed to write that down and tell him when I found him. But how many holes would you need for that? I—

“Kai, honey. Did you hear me?”

“Three is too many, huh?”

There was a pause, and Charlene let out a small sound. “What?”

“Uh. Nothing. Sorry.” Sometimes I had trouble keeping my inside thoughts to myself. I cleared my throat. “All right. Hopefully, I won’t need to call again.”

“It’s always nice to hear from you anyway, Kai.” She was warm when she hung up, but the message was clear—I needed to find Rainn on my own.

Fine.

I could do that.

I didn’t have another job lined up for a few days, so I had all the time in the world to go out to the woods.

With a low grunt, I dropped my phone and picked up a backpack. If I was going to go out and hunt down Rainn, I wasn’t going to do it without some snacks. After all, if he’d found something that distracted him enough to stay out days longer than he should have without bothering to give me a call or text, there was every chance he wouldn’t want to leave it.

Once I stuffed the bag full of protein bars and some water bottles, I headed out. At least the town was so small, it was easy to go out looking for answers if I didn’t find

him squirreled away at his usual campsite with a notebook smudged full of bad sketches of monster dick.

With a sigh, I pulled up the app Rainn and I had installed, since we both had a penchant for getting lost and losing track of time. It let me see where he was. His face was grayed out, but that made sense—if he'd gotten himself lost in the woods, of course he wouldn't take time to charge his cell. But I could still check his last pinged location, and I let out a small hmm . Five miles out from where the usual campsite was.

Up by Sumner Cave.

Had he really gone hiking there?

He did say he was looking for inspiration.

I hopped on my motorcycle and revved the engine, enjoying the feel of wind whipping against my skin as soon as I started driving. It took me a second to realize the reason I was feeling it so much was because I'd forgotten my helmet.

Again.

I turned around to get it... but I didn't realize I'd forgotten my jacket until I was already a mile out, and I wasn't turning back for that. I was already halfway to Forest Glen by then.

We'd been here a dozen times, so it wasn't like it was strange for him to be in the woods. It was just odd that he hadn't come home yet. It only took me a few seconds to find where he'd parked his car, and I pulled in beside him. It was pointless, but I tried to call him one more time before I took off at a trot, jogging down the path to the site where he always set up by the river if it wasn't occupied.

His tent was there, but the fire pit he'd built had obviously been rained on more than once, and it looked like something had come scrounging around in an attempt to break in.

“Rainn?” I wasn’t sure why I called out to him—he wasn’t here. But when I unzipped the tent, his pack and shoes were gone.

So he was probably exactly where his phone said he was.

Weird.

And he told me I was absent minded. I’d never forgotten to tell him I wasn’t coming home.

I did a quick loop around the trail to make sure he wasn’t off in the bushes taking a piss or something, and with a frown I pulled out my phone and glanced again—the location feature wasn’t perfect, but it was obvious.

Sumner Cave.

With a sigh, I started toward the trail. He’d probably... I don’t know, set up shop amongst the mushrooms and tried to figure out how to communicate with them. At the thought, my mind spaced—had Rainn ever written mushroom romance? Hadn’t I seen pictures of ones that were shaped like little dicks?

It had possibilities.

I had five miles to think about it as I hiked, and I was glad I’d packed a bag of snacks and water because I’d completely forgotten to eat breakfast in my rush to find Rainn.

By the time I got close to Sumner cave, something close to worry was creeping into

my stomach. I hadn't seen Rainn—I hadn't seen any signs of him. Not a backpack or a makeshift campsite, not even little scraps of paper like the ones he accidentally left sitting around everywhere at the house.

“Rainn?” I called out his name, but the only sound that came back was an echo and the squawk of some pissed off birds in the distance.

He'd stayed out longer than he said he would before, but something about this felt different. It felt...

I drew up short as I approached the mouth of a cave.

Sumner Cave.

Which Rainn said he was going to explore.

And people went missing when they visited.

“You didn't actually find a monster to kidnap you, did you?” I muttered the question aloud as I stepped forward, peeking my head inside cautiously—if something came running at me with its dick out, I wasn't sure what I was going to do.

The only sound was the drip drip drip of water somewhere in the distance and my voice echoing as I called out Rainn's name again.

Nothing else.

“Come on. Don't tell me you got lost in there.” The worry in my chest was starting to spread, making my fingers twitch. This was the last pinged location on his phone—he'd been here.

What if he was stuck somewhere and hurt? What if something really had kidnapped him? I didn't know about monsters, but he could have gotten grabbed by a person.

Or a bear.

Or...

"Rainn?" I shouted his name again as I stepped into the cave. As soon as the cool air hit my skin, I felt goosebumps rise on my bare arms—if I'd known I was going to go spelunking, I would have definitely gone back to grab my jacket. I couldn't change it now, though, and I wasn't about to turn around and alert the authorities that Rainn was missing. Again.

They wouldn't take it seriously, or they'd take too long.

I was here now, and I wasn't going to go anywhere until I found him.

My head swiveled to look at the light pouring out of the mouth of the cave—I wouldn't go in too far. I'd be able to find my way out.

I didn't get lost that often.

I trailed down the path, keeping an eye out for anything that would let me know Rainn had been here... but it wasn't like we were in a fairy tale. He wasn't leaving me breadcrumbs. The only thing leading me forward was the smell of dirt and water, and the echo of my feet on the ground.

When I came to a fork in the pathway, I frowned.

"Rainn?" I called out for him again, and when there still wasn't an answer, I bit my lip and looked back and forth at the options in front of me.

How would he have picked?

What if he wasn't even in here?

"He's not gonna forgive me when I'm the one who gets lost," I muttered beneath my breath and arbitrarily went to the right.

I took a second to scratch a mark on the wall with a rock—I didn't want to forget which way I turned. I noticed Rainn didn't do the same for me.

If he'd been here.

I was beginning to wonder if he had been here.

When I came to another split in the path, I paused.

I needed to turn back.

It would be smart for me to turn back and ask for help.

When I pulled out my phone and glanced down at Rainn's little grayed-out face on the tracker app, I knew I wasn't going to. No one had ever accused me of being smart.

Headstrong, yeah.

Handy? Sure.

Smart...

Hm. I think the closest I got was when I was little and my mother was still alive.

She'd told me I was bright then, but I was pretty sure she was talking about my smile. I didn't remember her much, other than how sweet she was and how much she'd loved me. I remembered that her being alive was the last time I really, really felt like I was home, like I was anchored.

Rainn was the closest thing I had to that now. I couldn't leave him stuck in a drippy, wet cave.

So... I had to pick a direction. With a sigh, I turned left and headed down the fork, hoping if I kept moving I'd stumble on something soon.

After another ten minutes of walking, I finally saw light at the end of the tunnel. I took off at a jog, and let out a small grunt of relief when I spilled out of the mouth of the cave—though the sun on my skin made my body tingle for just a second. I hadn't been inside for that long, had I? And as far as I could remember, Sumner Cave only had one exit... but maybe I'd gotten turned around?

Maybe there was another way out that no one had found.

Maybe Rainn had found it and...

My eyes searched around and the hope I was feeling slowly dwindled.

This... wasn't right. This didn't look like Forest Glen at all.

It didn't look like anywhere I'd been.

"I don't... think I'm in Kansas anymore," I muttered under my breath, then paused. "I don't live in Kansas, though... so..."

I vaguely remembered how Rainn told me I talked to myself when I was freaking out,

and I paused. Was that why I'd felt so weird when I walked out of the cave? Because I was freaking out?

Maybe.

Yeah, probably.

"Rainn?" I called his name out again, and the sound of an animal yowling screeched from the trees in front of me.

That didn't sound... normal.

None of this was right.

I backed up slowly, and when my shoulders slammed against something solid, I froze—there'd only been air behind me before, so what was it?

Monster?

Bear?

Bear monster?

No. It was too solid. A bear monster would be soft and snuggly, right?

I turned and... there was nothing. Just the mouth of the cave that led into darkness.

When the yowl came again, I jumped and darted forward...

And promptly slammed face first into whatever that invisible thing behind me was, falling flat on my ass in the unfamiliar dirt.

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Chapter two

Nash

The trill sound of the warning system alerting that someone had entered from the human world sounded through the air, catching my attention from the route I was marking out for my scouts to check. I still couldn't believe there'd been dissent amongst my camp to begin with, but at least a dozen orcs had broken off and made out on their own.

Their leader, Koth, had tried to start a silent insurrection—his anger at my lack of drive and ambition and my desire to keep peace in most places we roamed apparently incensed him. Enough that he'd tried to fight me for my place as the leader of our people.

Enough that when I beat him and left him bloody on the ground, he took his group and left. I should have killed him then—I knew that—but I'd thought, perhaps, he would learn his lesson from the cuts and bruises and realize his place.

Instead, we were having more and more issues with him now—he'd disappeared into the trees months ago, and the few skirmishes between my men and rogue orcs were starting to become a problem. I'd told Axum, but...

One time could be groups crossing paths.

Four times felt... targeted. I'd known Koth was bitter, but this...

A part of me was furious that I'd let him leave to begin with, taking a dozen others with him, but it hadn't seemed important at the time. There was more than enough land in Belzod for him to roam.

But he chose to stay near.

It wasn't an innocent thing... but thankfully, another part of me could feel the singing in my blood—the call for violence and fight. The knowledge that I'd get to put him in his place when I eventually hunted him down.

There was a reason me and mine roamed the outskirts of the city and patrolled the places where portals joined our world to others—I didn't crave violence, but I needed excitement. City life was too stagnant, too restricting.

That and I was exhausted with Axum rolling his eyes every time I mentioned the word mate in his presence. The adamant denial he had that such a thing existed for him was almost sad, if I truly thought about it. I sometimes worried he would end up alone, but I knew—just as much as I knew I would find my mate—that someday Axum would be taken by surprise when they wandered across his path.

I would be waiting to tell him I was right when that day happened.

Someone entering my tent cut my musing short, and I stood.

“Nash, do you want us to take a group to check out the—”

I cut my second in command off with a wave of my hand. “I can handle it, Vex. I need to stretch my legs.”

He arched a brow at me, his blue eyes narrowing in curiosity. I understood why; it had been some time since I'd gone out on a solo patrol, and it was just an alarm for

the portal. More than likely, some stray human had wandered through, and now they were roaming the dense trees with no idea what was going on.

Humans were... strange. Interesting, but strange. I understood why they were usually escorted to the city if they found themselves trapped on this side of the barrier. They needed protection until they could be made to understand how our world worked—no one who crossed through the portal could return to the human world without a claiming mark. Only those who had fated mates on this side could interact with the magical threshold to begin with, and until they fulfilled whatever spell it was that let them pass into Belzod, there was no return for them. I'd seen it happen a handful of times; a human would make their way through one of the portals and find their mate. It was always strange to me, though I didn't question fate.

It was just. Well... I'd never met a human I actually liked. They all seemed so frail, so overwhelmed and swallowed up in our world.

I snagged one of the communicator cuffs from the table in my tent and slapped it on my upper arm, murmuring a word to make the leather fit against my bicep—our magic had long since worked out any language barrier between us and visitors from another world. As long as I wore the cuff, I could understand and speak to whoever had sounded the alarm. I wasn't sure if I intended to show myself to them, but better to be prepared than incapable.

"Are you sure you want to go alone?" Vex's voice rang out as I exited my tent, and I lifted a hand over my shoulder without looking back.

"I'll be fine."

He didn't protest again as I skirted around the edge of our camp. Even though a dozen had left, we were still thirty strong, men and women... and I knew if I showed my face, I'd have a dozen of them asking me the same questions as Vex.

I wasn't sure why I wanted to go out alone so much. I just knew that I did... and I was never one to ignore my instincts.

As soon as I stepped into the lush tree line, I felt something in me relax—this was what I enjoyed, where I belonged. I still couldn't understand how my brother was happy, contained behind gates and walls, restricted to rule in place... but I never really questioned him, because our people needed a strong leader and I couldn't imagine anyone better suited for it than Axum, even though I knew he questioned himself.

Still...

It would have driven me to the brink of insanity.

Axum had never faulted me for leaving the court, and he'd made sure my position was safe... and in turn, he knew I would lay my life down to protect him if the need arose.

We'd made camp close to the portal, and I pulled my blade from my back, prepared in case this was some strange attempt at luring me and mine out for an ambush.

I frowned—I still wasn't sure how I was going to handle the issue with Koth, more than to warn Axum and monitor the situation. I had hoped he'd leave the kingdom, that he'd become the problem of another neighboring country... but he was spiteful.

And I was the one who'd caught his ire.

So...

The sound of someone shouting in the distance drew me from my thoughts, and my brows knit together. I recognized the cadence of human language, though it was too

far away for me to make out what was being said.

The loud thunk followed by a low hum of something hitting the portal barrier gave me pause.

Because I heard it again.

And then again.

When I finally made my way to the edge of the trees so I could peer through and see what was going on, I'd heard the sound so much that the vibration of it was humming along my tusks.

And then I saw him .

The one making the sound.

A human man was taking a few steps back and then flinging himself at the barrier as though brute force would let him back through. Each time, he fell to the ground... and each time, a low string of filthy words ripped from his chest. He stood, shook his long tresses of golden hair, and did it all over again.

Him .

I didn't know his name, but I knew one thing.

I'd been waiting my entire life to meet my fated mate—I had been certain it would be an orc... Though a few in our land had mated with humans, I found them to be small.

Weak.

Incapable of surviving the lifestyle I lived.

But the human who stumbled back from the barrier for a sixth time, his expression a little dazed and his mouth pinched, belonged to me.

Him.

Mate.

Mine.

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Chapter three

Kai

No matter how many times I slammed my hands against the invisible barrier, I couldn't seem to make my way back through. It was... strange to say the least, and my fists were hurting after the sixth or seventh hit.

But as I drew back to ram into it again, something dawned on me.

If Rainn came through this way, he probably couldn't get home either.

That would be a good reason for him to be gone for two weeks when he was supposed to be home sooner.

With a sigh, I turned, looking around. I couldn't put my finger on it, but everything was slightly off. Just a little too bright and lush and untouched.

Just a little too wild.

The leaves were shaped differently; the air smelled different.

The noises weren't... right.

"The fuck am I supposed to do now?" My eyes instantly flicked to the ground. Nervous talking... I was probably going to be doing a lot of that until I figured out what was going on. If I'd been in one of Rainn's books, there would have been tracks

leading me to where I needed to go.

Well, either that or there would have been some huge hunk of a monster waiting just this side of whatever I'd walked through to fuck me senseless and convince me I was into guys.

Monster-dick magic.

"Not happening," I muttered to myself, pausing for a second to see if my voice was going to bring the aforementioned monster out of the wings to do exactly what I'd imagined.

When nothing came charging at me, I sighed, leaning my shoulders back against the invisible barrier and shivering at the hum of power that tickled along my spine.

I glanced down at my phone one more time. Still no signal. No signal, no Rainn... and no idea what I was supposed to do.

All of this was lame.

So fucking lame.

Stuffing my phone back into my pocket, I pushed off the wall that wasn't there and started forward. I didn't actually have any direction in mind, but I figured if I were Rainn and I got lost in a place like this, forward was probably the way to go. It was the only way that had any kind of path, after all.

"Okay, think like Rainn." The words came out soft beneath my breath, and I glanced around one more time. Third time was not the charm to make anything come charging out after me—not that I wanted it to.

Because I didn't.

I enjoyed reading monster books. That didn't mean I wanted to live one out.

"Think like Rainn." I said it aloud again, but it wasn't doing me a damn bit of good. Rainn would be looking for the monsters, for the adventure and inspiration.

If this was where he'd ended up, at least I wouldn't have to be worried about him being lost and terrified. He'd be having the time of his life.

And I was...

My eyes flicked back behind me—the mouth of the cave had already been swallowed up by the trees, but that was fine. I'd be able to find my way back.

Probably.

Maybe.

Especially if I just walked in a straight line.

I had faith in myself.

That faith lasted for a good ten minutes before I heard a growl coming from my right and paused in my tracks—it wasn't that I was afraid of animals in nature. It was just that the growl was unlike anything I'd ever heard before.

Deep, rumbling, lower than any big cat I knew of. Reverberating, like it was palpable in the air.

"Shit, fuck what Rainn would do." Because Rainn would probably run toward

whatever it was to see if it was a monster, and I wasn't about to do that. I took a step back and darted through the trees, completely ignoring the mantra I'd been slowly muttering under my breath about staying in a straight line, because a straight line would not get me away from the heavy footfalls I could hear crashing behind me.

The string of curses that ripped from my lips as I ran probably weren't helping me get away from whatever was chasing me, but I couldn't seem to stop them. I ran, tripped over branches, picked myself up, and ran some more...

I finally got to the point where I wasn't sure if I was still being chased, or if the thundering I heard was just the pounding of my own heartbeat.

It didn't help that the trees I was running through were so thick there were spots where the entire ground was shadowed because the sun couldn't reach through the foliage. The ground was slick and damp and dangerous . I slipped and slid my way forward as best I could, letting out another low string of profanities as my gaze landed on a spot of sunlight ahead of me.

A clearing?

Shit, was it better or worse to be in a clearing when there was something chasing you?

I didn't know, but the thought of getting out of the thick trees was enough to send me scrambling forward.

This time, it wasn't a curse that tore from my chest. I screamed as I was suddenly jerked upward, and it took me a good fifteen seconds to realize that I couldn't move my arms because they were pinned to my chest with a net that had molded itself to my body. I dangled nearly eight feet off the ground, which... wasn't ideal, but maybe it would keep me safe from the thing that was after me?

It was a thought, until another low sound of panic tore from my chest when the thing that had been chasing me came out of the trees.

It was huge .

Fuck.

It was so huge that I was pretty sure me being eight feet up in the air was only going to make it easier for the creature to eat me. That and it was the strangest shade of green I'd ever fucking seen on a cat.

Mutant cat?

Shit, were there really monsters? If there were and this was it, Rainn was going to be so disappointed when he realized they were the “eat you painfully” kind and not the “eat you until you couldn’t walk” kind.

“Uh... nice kitty?” I half cooed, half whimpered the words out. Its low, rumbling growl, and the way it fixed bright orange eyes on me told me...

It probably wasn't actually a good kitty, was it?

“Oh, shit. Please don't eat me?” It snarled again in response, and I had a second to wonder if I was actually antagonizing it instead of helping my situation.

Probably.

“I don't taste good, I—”

My words cut off in a scream as it lunged at me, but the snarl that tore from its mouth cut off in a loud hiss as a blur of motion slammed into it midair and sent it flying.

I could barely process what I was seeing—the cat monster scrambled off into the trees like it knew a more dangerous predator was on the scene, and my eyes flicked to the form of something standing from a crouch.

And standing.

And standing .

I was met with bright violet eyes... and they were level with me.

Nearly eight feet in the air, and the monster was looking at me square on.

“Oh, shit. I swear... I really, really don’t taste good. I probably taste like energy drinks and cheap pizza,” I muttered miserably. He was looking at me like he wanted to absolutely devour me. But...

But the thing in front of me was humanoid, and looked like a man.

If I didn’t count the green skin and the tusks spilling out of lips that curved into a wicked smile.

Why did I suddenly feel like Little Red Riding Hood?

“Uh, can you... cut me down?” I tried for the warm, charming voice I used when I was talking to any of the men or women I wanted something from in town. He still didn’t say anything, just searched me over with those absolutely inhuman eyes, the perusal slow and almost...

Proprietary.

Fuck. I didn’t like that. It made me feel weird. All tingly and warm, and...

“Please?”

The low rumble that poured from his chest at the word made me think he could understand me. If he could, he was obviously ignoring me, because he walked around me in a slow circle that made me feel like I was some kind of animal on display and he was deciding if he wanted to keep me for a pet or cook me over a fire.

If I had to choose, I’d choose pet.

But if there was a third option that said “let me go and help me find my friend,” I needed to figure out how to request that one.

Instead, I was forced to dangle with zero dignity while he stalked around me three more times before pulling out what looked like a way-too-fucking-big machete.

“Hey. Wait. Wait, wait, wait. I’m handy, okay? I can... well... uh... shit... I can fix anything? I can totally pick up a lot—” That probably wouldn’t help. He was like fifty fucking feet taller than me. “I’ll do whatever you want. Anything. I—”

The blade caught the sunlight that I’d almost made it to as he swung it downward. I clenched my eyes closed, hoping he’d at least have the decency to lop my head off fast.

I was halfway through trying to decide if decapitation or getting stabbed through the heart would be quicker when I realized I was being lowered to the ground. He had the rope in one hand like I weighed nothing, and when I finally smacked against the wet grass, the woven material around me fell away and left me there.

On my ass.

At his feet.

I swallowed hard as I forced my eyes up to see if he still had the blade out.

And up.

And up .

Up, until I had to lean back and crane my neck so I could see that he was sheathing the weapon and fiddling with the black band on his arm. He murmured, and it fell away from his skin, a strap in his fingers as he slowly leaned toward me.

I needed to scramble back.

I needed to get up and run.

I needed to do anything other than stare at him while those warm tingles I'd felt earlier rippled through my body and kept me firmly in place.

While I was struggling with what weird magic he was using to paralyze me, I felt something warm slap around my neck.

The band he'd pulled from his arm was now around my throat. With a low murmur of a word I didn't understand, I felt it tighten, nearly molding to my skin. I'd process later that his bulging bicep was so big he had to tighten the thing on my neck, because at the moment I was just trying to pull the soft material off me.

It wouldn't budge.

It fastened around my throat like some fucked up choker... or a collar.

Then he grinned, leaning forward so he could look me in the eyes—his fingers slid beneath my chin and lifted my gaze to his.

Fuck. Monsterfuck.

The curse caught on the back of my tongue as he leaned in close enough for the warmth of his breath to play against my lips. There was a small part of me that wanted to sway forward... maybe fall against him and ask for help . He was so big, and his violet eyes were like a galaxy swirl, and his mouth was really pretty and looked soft, and...

I stopped myself mid-thought—shit, did hitting against the barrier so many times fuck with me that bad? Or was it all of Rainn's books putting ideas in my head that were definitely not my usual?

Because I liked women.

Human women.

Not fucking green monsters who were a foot taller than me and looked like they'd bust me in half like a log splitter.

He studied me for another second and smiled.... and when he spoke, I understood him this time.

Well, kind of, because the word that came out of his mouth and the way he was staring at me made no sense.

His voice was a deep rumble, spilling along my skin and sliding straight into my bones as he spoke.

“Mate.”

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Chapter four

Nash

Anything .

He said he would do anything. A part of me was frustrated that he thought I'd hurt him. He was my mate, which meant he had to feel the connection too. Fated mates could sense the draw between them from the moment they met, even before they took the mating bite.

So if I could feel it—the line between us, the warmth when I looked at him, the overwhelming need to possess, to keep, to own—he had to feel something too.

So why did he think I would hurt him?

Logic, of course, said he was afraid because he was in an unknown world, he'd just been chased by a massive tandrax... and he probably didn't know what I was.

Apparently, though, logic had no place when it came to the way my insides twisted and my hands itched to run along every inch of his sweaty skin, all warm and sun-kissed.

I wanted to touch him.

I wanted the anything he promised.

I wanted everything from him.

But... for the moment, I needed to provide him with a sense of safety and security, if only so he would calm himself enough to accept the inevitable truth that he was here, and that I was never going to let him leave.

He was still looking at me with bright blue eyes gone wide, confusion painted clearly across his features. Some small part of me wanted to stay here, to keep him in this clearing and sequestered away from the rest of the world. I wanted to learn every inch of his body, to learn everything about him.

A human.

My mate was a human.

I couldn't have predicted it if I'd tried, but it didn't matter. It could have been anyone—any gender, human, orc, elf. I would have known them anywhere, and I would do anything to keep them... and I knew the man in front of me, even if I knew nothing about him.

I knew he was mine .

“Come.” I stood, extending my hand down to him as I did. His head turned up as I moved, his neck craning. I thought of the other humans I knew, those who'd come through the barrier over my time patrolling. It wasn't a frequent occurrence, but it happened often enough that I'd seen quite a few.

He was... larger than most.

It probably felt strange to him to be so small now, but the thought just made my body shiver in delight. I could lift him easily if I wanted. I could protect him, could keep

him.

I could—

He slapped his palm against mine in a quick gesture and scrambled back a few steps before pushing to his feet.

“Uh, thanks, bro.” He lifted his thumb and offered me a weak grin. “For cutting me down. And saving me from that big... uhm... cat?”

His voice sounded warm, like sunshine on my skin. I could see the near panicked expression crossing his features, even though it was obvious he was trying to sound brave and bold.

It was hard to do when you had to turn your head up to meet someone’s eyes, apparently.

“Bro?” I said the word carefully, letting it roll over my tongue. I was used to many languages—I’d studied them to the point that Axum sometimes questioned the way I spoke because it all blended into my speech—but the word bro wasn’t something I was familiar with. The magic of the band that allowed the human to speak my language didn’t extend to strange slang.

“Yeah... bro. I mean... uh, well...” He glanced along the length of my body, his eyes catching for a second on my cock before jerking back up to meet my gaze again with cheeks stained pink. “It’s a term of... endearment?” he finally sputtered out before covering his face with a low groan. “Listen, I... Am I dead?”

My brows snapped together. “No.”

“Didn’t... hit my head too hard trying to get out of here? Am I in a coma?”

I looked him over. There was a bit of a red mark where he'd slapped into the barrier, but he seemed none the worse for wear. "No."

"Am I... high?"

Another word I wasn't quite familiar with... but he was on the ground now, so I felt confident answering.

"Not anymore."

"Okay," he finally threw his hands up with a frown. "I don't get it. What's going on? Why did you put a collar on me? Where am I? And what are you?"

Not who.

What.

I felt another streak of irritation that he wasn't instantly asking me about the connection between us, but his eyes kept drawing helplessly along my body, so maybe he was simply hiding it.

"It's not a collar—it lets you understand my language." His eyes widened.

"Like magic? Okay... that's cool." His fingers brushed the material on his throat as he waited for me to continue.

"You are in Belzod, little human."

"I'm not little—"

I cut him off as his arms crossed over his chest and his eyes narrowed.

“I am Nash, Orc Lord and brother to Emperor Axum Yagnatz. And you...” I stepped forward, crowding him until his shoulders slammed against a tree, cutting off his escape. “You have crossed the barrier between our worlds because you are my mate.” Then, in hopes that it would alleviate some of the tension obviously running through his body, I added on at the end. “Bro.”

Perhaps if I spoke in his endearments, he would understand me better.

The word made his mouth quirk, and the amused sound that spilled from his throat was almost breathy. He tilted his head to look up at me and pressed his lips together for a few seconds before giving up and laughing again.

“Orc?” He looked across my face, my chest, then brought one hand out and swiped his fingers across my arm. Just the touch sent a tingle of satisfaction through my body. I could imagine the feel of his hands all over me, but his words drew me out of my thoughts. “Yeah, that isn’t coming off, huh?”

“What isn’t?”

He prodded my skin one more time. “Green.”

Ah, that made sense. I raised my fingers in return, swiping one slowly along the sharp curve of his cheekbone. “No more than this red painting your cheeks would.”

The color in question deepened. He took a shaking breath and pushed away from the tree, dodging under my arm and spinning to face me again.

“Okay, say I believe I crossed some magical barrier... Sure, I guess it could happen... I’ve read enough books that I’m a believer or whatever. But you’ve got the rest of it wrong, Nash—”

“What’s your name?” I interrupted him again, and he barely missed a beat responding.

“Kai Cross. But listen, I didn’t come here to be your… shit, your anything really.” His eyes roamed across my body one more time and he shook his head like he was trying to rid himself of an unwanted thought. “My friend went missing, and I was just trying to find him. Little guy, about this tall.” He dropped his hand to his chin. “Dark hair, dark eyes. Probably squealing in delight that he’s here.”

Kai’s mouth lifted in an affectionate smile, and a low growl ripped from my chest before I could stop it. He actually jumped at the sound, looking behind his shoulder before he turned back to me with a scandalized expression.

“Friend? Is this a lover?” Another human—obviously with a mate on this side of the barrier as well. I would make him understand he belonged to me, I would…

Kai broke into laughter, shaking his head quickly. “No. God, no. I would never look at Rainn that way. First of all, he’s like my brother. And second, I’m straight .” He looked at me pointedly with the last word.

Straight.

Applied in human context, it meant…

“I don’t like guys?” he supplied. He looked me up and down one more time, his eyes lingering once again on my cock—just his gaze made it twitch in my breeches. “Definitely not into guys.”

“Into… guys?” I repeated slowly, and he frowned.

“Yeah. Like… men. You said you were someone’s brother, so…” His eyes drifted

across my broad frame one more time and he shrugged helplessly. “Not to like... offend you or anything. And I’m flattered. Seriously, my friend Rainn would be all over you, so if you help me find him...”

“Kai,” I rumbled his name, loving the way it felt on my tongue. It brought him up short, his eyes widening and his mouth dropping open slightly. I could see it—the way he felt the connection, even if he was trying to ignore it. “I do not want your friend Rainn, and I am not offended ... because you’re wrong.” I stalked toward him again, and this time he didn’t retreat. I watched him take a deep breath and square his shoulders, his brows drawing together unhappily as I moved closer. “You are my mate. Your body knows it just as well as mine.” I brought my hand out again, slow enough that he could watch the motion, but he stayed in place as I carefully brushed my fingers through loose strands of his blond hair, running blunt nails along his scalp.

His pulse jumped in his throat, and the grin that pulled across my features probably spoke depths that I dared not utter aloud and risk truly scaring him off.

“You can’t just say I’m into you and make it true. One time with a stupid toy doesn’t count.” He muttered the last part beneath his breath, then let out another sigh of pleasure as my fingers stroked through his hair again.

“Toy?”

His eyes snapped open as I leaned in, like he realized what he was allowing himself to do. Kai slapped against my shoulders, trying to shove me back. I could feel the strength behind the motion, but my fingers just tightened in his hair. It tore a little sound from his chest, a low rumble that caught in his throat and transformed into a snort of annoyance.

“Let me go. I have to find Rainn.” It seemed like he had to work himself up to say it, but once he did, he latched onto the words and shoved against me again.

“I don’t think you understand me, Kai.” I crowded him, close enough I could see the way his pupils dilated at my proximity. “You’re my mate, and that means—” There was a flash of movement, and it took me a second to realize his fist had struck out, landing across my jaw.

He hit me .

The rush of desire that ripped through me at the strength behind it, the defiance in his eyes, was nearly overwhelming.

Yes, Kai Cross was my mate, and I was going to enjoy making sure he understood exactly what that meant.

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Chapter five

Kai

F uuuuuuuck .

My entire arm hurt after my knuckles landed on Nash's face. I wasn't really the kind of guy who got into fights very often—I didn't like violence if I could help it—but I'd read this storyline before. Big brute captures unsuspecting human and they somehow fall in love.

There were just a few problems. I didn't like guys. His cock looked way bigger than the damn dildo I'd stolen from Rainn and that nearly broke me, and... fuck. I couldn't get distracted. I had to find Rainn. Even though I was realizing he probably didn't want to be found—hell, he probably thought he'd died, and this was his eternal reward for delivering the best monster smut in the industry. Like his own little Garden of Teratophilia.

That didn't mean I could leave him here.

There were obviously delusional orcs who thought they could just claim people and—

I didn't expect it when Nash's fingers in my hair tangled, jerking hard enough that it tore another sound from my throat—I wasn't about to let him know I liked it when chicks pulled my hair—and he forced my body forward until I stumbled against him.

“Struggle if you like, but it won’t change the fact that you’re mine, Little Mate.”

Damn it, and he was calling me “little” too.

Fuck.

Fuck, fuckity, fuck fuck fuck. He really wasn’t getting it through his head. And my whole “I don’t like fighting” rule seemed to be going out the window. It was obvious he had no intention of letting me go, and there was no way I could just stay here until whatever weird-ass magic he had that made me keep looking at his crotch took me over and I started believing the stuff he was spouting.

Mate.

Yeah, right. I had over a dozen girls’ numbers in my phone. I didn’t even date. I wasn’t a commitment kinda guy.

I jerked away from him as hard as I could, and noticed when he dropped his grip on my hair before he actually tore it out of my head. He was willing to be rough, but at least it seemed like he didn’t want to really hurt me.

I could use that, right? Because I wasn’t sure if I could really hurt him—he had a fucking foot of height on me... and way too much muscle.

That didn’t mean I couldn’t try.

That didn’t mean I couldn’t fight for what seemed to be my freedom.

I had to get the fuck out of here. I had to find Rainn. It sucked that the guy who’d saved me wasn’t willing to help me, but...

Well.

This time when I hit him, I felt the impact of it all the way up my arm, twisting into my shoulder, and the low grunt that tore from his chest told me at least he felt it, even if he was apparently cosplaying as a giant green wall of steel.

What was worse, he jerked my head back again, his fingers in my hair like a leash that he used to tear my body around and start dragging me forward.

“What are you doing?” I snapped.

“Taking you home,” he answered in the most nonchalant voice, like there wasn’t a trickle of what I thought was blood coming from the corner of his mouth where I’d hit him—it was blue, but...

Home.

Home.

The word echoed around in my chest like it was familiar, like if I would just calm down and really listen to it, it was the thing I’d been waiting to hear my entire life.

Nope.

Weird fucking green man magic, and I wasn’t letting it work.

I lashed out again, but this time he was ready for it. When Nash caught my arm, I used the momentum of the motion to jerk myself free from his hold—maybe trying to hit the seven-foot-tall orc wasn’t going to do me a bit of good, but I could take Plan B.

Plan B was to push myself up as soon as I stumbled back and take off through the trees again.

In the back of my mind, I knew there was every possibility that big cat from earlier would find me and make me its dinner. I was also aware that as fast as I was, as fit as I was, Nash's legs were longer than mine.

But I also knew I had to try something.

The rush of adrenaline sent me surging forward, even though I knew it wasn't safe... and the sound of footsteps instantly pounding behind me was enough to make a low little shout rip from my throat.

It wasn't a scream.

I didn't scream.

And I definitely didn't let out another one when the impact of Nash's large body crashing into mine took me to the ground—the air knocked out of my lungs, even though I was faintly aware that his arms came around me, cradling me from the worst of the fall and letting him land on top of me so I was pinned beneath his weight.

Damn it, that hadn't really worked at all... and now I was stuck underneath him... and fuck, he was big.

And warm.

And confusing.

The feel of his broad body pressing mine to the ground made something inside me freeze—or burn. Fuck, I was pretty sure I was burning. I squirmed, but it didn't do

me a damn bit of good. We'd fought, and he'd made it very clear that I wasn't going to be able to best him in anything remotely fair... and every instinct that I had told me I needed to give in to the fact that I'd lost.

To the fact that Nash had me pinned to the ground.

To...

His lips were soft when they ran along my jawline, the faintest whisper of skin pressing to skin, but it drew a shiver out of me, so violent that I was pretty sure I would have vibrated through the ground if he wasn't holding onto me.

"I like that you fight. That you're strong. But do you see now that it's useless? Do you feel the same pull I do?" The rumbling growl of his voice was too much. I shook my head, trying to get myself loose from the warmth of his breath and the way those words seemed determined to penetrate through my entire body.

"You're wrong."

He was still pressed close enough that I could feel it when his lips curved up into a smile... and some small part of me expected him to keep going. He had me trapped, and it was obvious I couldn't fight back. He could have torn my clothes off my body and me saying I was straight wouldn't have made a difference, because I wouldn't have been able to fight him off.

I'd just have to deal with being pinned down by his huge frame, watching as he exposed all those muscles before he stripped me down and...

Nash yanked back, standing and grabbing my hand to pull me to my feet as he did. I swayed on the spot, half caught in the fantasy— no, not fantasy, Kai... the fucked up possibility of what could have happened.

“Come. We need to head back to my people before they wonder why I’ve been gone so long. I can see if anyone has heard of another human coming through the portal recently,” he added, like he meant to placate me.

Placate me and help me up. So... not... anything nefarious.

He even leaned forward and ran his thumb along my jawline, wiping at dirt I couldn’t see.

He wasn’t ravishing me against my will at all and I was...

I was definitely not in any way, shape, or form... disappointed.

“Good,” I grumbled in a not disappointed tone.

I did notice that he kept my fingers firmly in his, like he was afraid I was going to fight or run off again if given a chance. And... there was every chance that would happen.

I knew there were monsters roaming around in the trees—animals I obviously didn’t have any idea about—but I was pretty handy.

I could figure it out.

And the way Nash was looking at me told me he had thoughts in his mind other than just helping me find Rainn. It probably wasn’t his priority at all.

Which meant he wasn’t my priority.

No matter how much I could still feel the line of his body pressed against mine as he started dragging me through the trees and onto a path that I’d completely missed

when I was running from the big ass cat that wanted to make me its dinner.

We walked for what felt like half an hour before I heard voices. They were all the same deep, rough tone that Nash spoke in. I could understand it because of the weird not-a-collar that definitely felt like a collar around my throat... but it still didn't sound like any accent I'd ever heard.

Not that I heard a lot of accents.

The little drawl in my voice was about as fancy as I got. I'd moved to Destiny to live with relatives after my parents died, but the twang in my tone from my southern upbringing was still there, especially when I got excited.

Or frustrated.

Or horny.

Or... well, any kind of emotion.

"Where are we going?" I finally asked, my voice a little hushed. Nash just looked over at me, and the smile on his face was so damn... happy.

He looked happy.

"To my people. My group roams the lands—I want to introduce them to my mate."

"I'm not your—"

"Nash." A voice cut me off before Nash could, though I was sure he was going to. "Did you find out what caused the sound at the portal?" The orc who strolled up to us was tall—a little taller than me. Nash really was just a freak of nature with his height,

it seemed. This one had his red hair pulled into a knot at the back of his head, and one of his tusks was broken. But...

No.

Everyone who milled around the area was an orc. We weren't in a city, though it was kind of like one—the clearing was full of tents erected a few yards apart from each other, there were fences thrown together with enormous animals I didn't recognize, the smell of cooking, and the sound of laughter.

“Yes, I found who came across the barrier. This is Kai.”

“Kai?” the other orc said, looking me over and stepping closer. The sound of a deep rumble made me jump. It took me a second to realize it was coming from beside me.

From Nash.

Who was growling at the orc in front of him—it apparently wasn't very threatening, though, because the slow grin that spilled across his face looked...

Amused.

“Vex, let everyone know the human is off limits—no touching.” Nash's voice was a deep, demanding rumble, and his fingers on me tightened before his arm slid around my waist. It made something in my stomach flip again, something in my chest feel...

Weird.

I could write it off as finally being in a situation where everyone was taller than me, but I knew that wasn't it. Nash was the biggest motherfucker here, and I'd still gotten into a fight with him.

Maybe it was just the fact that in all my life, I'd never been the person who was being protected.

No one had ever been possessive of me—no one had ever tucked me under their arm and acted like I was...

What?

Precious?

It was fucking weird—the tingles were probably my brain trying to process it.

The orc Nash had addressed as Vex hiked his brows up so high they nearly disappeared into his hairline.

“Really? A human?” But the delight on his face was obvious—he was happy for Nash.

And Nash, who'd seemed so fierce and vicious, so ready to defend me from everyone and everything just a few seconds prior, grinned like a frat boy and actually pushed me away from him enough to spin me in a circle like we were dancing.

“He tried to fight me when I found him.”

Proud .

He was proud of me.

Fuck, the weird tingles in my chest flared to life, and they stayed there while Nash led me around the camp, pointing out a few tents, where they made breakfast in the morning, a pathway to the water...

Then he led me to a large black tent at the back of the camp, and the fuzzy feelings that had nearly incapacitated me screeched to a halt.

“Nash.” I said carefully, tugging against his hold. It didn’t do a damn bit of good, though. He kept pulling me forward like I weighed nothing. I’d have tried to run again, but he’d just told the entire camp about me, and I’d heard him letting more than one of them know they weren’t to let me leave. “Listen, why don’t you show me to my tent?”

Because the one he was dragging me to was the biggest, which obviously meant it was his.

“This is your tent,” he said, pushing me through the flaps before I had a chance to protest.

It was huge—bigger than any tent I’d ever stayed in. There was space for a bed, for drawers, for a desk. It was more like a tiny house than camping, and I might have given him shit for it if it weren’t for the fact that he was trying to make me stay here.

With him.

And he’d called me his mate, and I—

I was so busy trying to figure out how to tell him there was no way I was going to sleep with him that I didn’t realize he was wrapping something around my wrists and murmuring the same strange words as before until it was too late. The fabric was soft, but it tightened across my skin at the sound of his voice.

“What the fuck?” I whipped around to face him, but he was already tying the end of the fabric to the posts of the bed, and when he turned to me he was grinning again.

“Do you think I would leave you here unattended? You would run.”

“Of course I would. You can’t just keep me here. I have to go.” Probably would have been better to lie, but...

Nash’s brows drew together, his smile faltering as he stepped forward. I wasn’t sure what I expected as I flinched from his touch, but it wasn’t the gentle way he ran his fingers along my cheek, brushing them through my hair to tilt my head back.

“There are far worse dangers in the wilds than me. Best you stay put so I can keep you safe.”

I tugged at my restraints. “What kind of danger? Like the cat thing?”

Nash shook his head. “Worse. Now... rest. I’ll be back soon.”

My mouth dropped open.

“What? You’re leaving? What about my friend?” But Nash was already retreating, and it seemed like no amount of yelling was going to bring him back.

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Chapter six

Nash

Kai was asleep when I finally came back to my tent, his back turned to the door and his arms curled around himself. It didn't exactly look comfortable, the way I'd tied his wrists together and attached them to my bed, but there was no world where I'd allow him to run off while there were enemies hidden in the shadows.

If Koth wasn't running free and threatening to spring out at any moment, there might be something interesting about letting Kai loose just to claim him. I wanted to hunt him down—I hadn't imagined the way his eyes lit up when I pinned him to the ground before, the way his hips gave the slightest little thrust forward, like he knew what he wanted even though he wasn't willing to admit it.

I hadn't imagined the draw between us—I just wasn't sure how to make him admit that he was mine .

He stayed with his back turned to me as I entered the room and sat down the tray I'd carried in with me, but I noticed the second he woke. His shoulders tensed, and the level sound of his breathing, the light snoring, stopped completely.

And then started up again, but ridiculously loud.

And obvious.

There was a part of me that wondered if Kai realized he wasn't a very good actor, or

if he really believed the obnoxious sound suddenly leaving his throat would convince me he wasn't awake.

"Little Mate, I know you're not sleeping," I murmured, and the snoring turned into a choking sound that had him coughing and sitting up. His eyes were wide, shocked depths—the sweet color of the sea... but the red that stained his cheeks was more like the sunset.

"I'm..." He coughed again, moving to raise his hands before he realized they were still tied. "I'm not little." Kai finally spat out, then turned his glare to his wrists. "And I don't appreciate being tied up."

My eyes dropped to his restraints—I'd used the softest cloth, so there weren't any marks. I didn't say anything, but I was half certain he probably could have broken free if he'd really tried. They were more perfunctory than functional, so I could hear the noise if he attempted an escape.

"Do you truly? Do you hate being here so much?" I asked as I grabbed the tray I'd brought and came to sit on the bed beside him.

"Yeah, I hate it. I need to find my friend, and I don't like being tied up unless it's by a hot chick and I..." He trailed off as his eyes caught the motion of my fingers. I brought the sweet fruit up to my lips and took a bite, aware that the juice sluiced down my chin and dripped onto my bare chest. "What's that?"

"Hm?" I licked my lips and looked down at the tray. It was filled with an assortment of fruit, meats, and cheese. He hadn't eaten since I'd brought him here, and I had no idea how long it had been before that.

Even if I meant to tease him, I wasn't going to let my mate starve out of some cruel need to make him bend to my whim. I kept him here for his safety only—I wanted

him to give me his affection freely.

“What’s... I’ve never seen fruit like that.” He finally conceded, leaning forward and inhaling. I could tell the second the scent hit his nose, because he let out a small sound and his stomach rumbled.

“Are you hungry?”

“Yeah. Can I—” He started to reach forward with the limited range his restraints afforded him, and I couldn’t help myself. I drew the tray back and felt my lips curl into a slight smirk. “What?” Kai’s gaze went dark. “Are you going to starve me?”

“No,” I said. The look on his face made it clear he didn’t believe me, then it morphed into something irritated when I grabbed a piece of fruit and lifted it up so it was hovering at his face, just out of reach of his mouth.

When he tried to lift his hands again, I snaked my free fingers through the binding, pinning them to his lap. He let out a small sound, and I arched a brow.

“No way,” he grumbled, but even as he said it, he leaned in and snagged the fruit with his teeth, jerking back instantly before he used his tongue to lap it into his mouth. The sight was pure sin, something that would have angered the gods because it was so worthy of worship.

My eyes stayed fixated on his face as he chewed the fruit and made another low sound of appreciation in his throat that went straight to my cock. I realized how easy it would be to lean forward, to run my tongue along his chin to lap at the juice that dribbled on his skin. It would be so easy to press him back on the bed and show him exactly how much I knew his body would respond to me.

Instead, I picked up a slice of meat and held it out to him. He didn’t hesitate this time,

though he dropped his gaze so he didn't have to meet mine as he took it from my hand.

Maybe it was because he wasn't looking, but his lips wrapped around the tips of my fingers, the heat of his mouth wreaking havoc across my entire body and making my cock jerk.

Because he was so focused on looking anywhere other than my eyes, he noticed the instant it happened. Instead of pulling away, his teeth scraped against my skin as he let out a low sound, and he only scrambled back when I groaned in response.

"I'm... uh." Kai's eyes darted between the food, my crotch, and my fingers. He finally took a deep breath and looked back at the plate. "Can I try the cheese now? That's... that is cheese, right? Not something weird?"

I had no idea if it was his stomach winning out, or his body realizing that what was happening between us was as inevitable as the sun rising. Whatever it was, I picked up his request from the plate and held it out to him, watching carefully as his eyes dropped to his hands and he shrugged his shoulders like he'd had a small conversation with himself.

This time when he leaned forward, I thought he'd be more delicate, careful to make sure he didn't touch me.

Instead, he nearly took my fingers into his mouth as he licked the food from my grasp, and he watched me with an intense expression as I shuddered and let out another low sound of appreciation.

"It's not like this back home." His voice was low when he spoke, hushed, like he wasn't sure he wanted to say the words aloud.

“The food?” I questioned.

“Uh...” He swallowed, then took the next piece of fruit I offered him without hesitation. “Yeah. I totally meant the food.”

Kai didn’t look at me when he said it, but I didn’t need to have a bond with him to realize he was lying. He was terrible at it.

Perhaps it was the lie that made me feel bold. I brought my hand up and carefully swiped my thumb across his mouth, catching the juices of the fruit that made his lower lip glisten. “Things here are... sweeter.”

He watched me as I brought my hand to my mouth and licked the taste of him from my skin, his breath hitching, his body swaying forward slightly.

“Seems that way. It’s not...” Kai’s lips pinched for just a second, and his fingers in his lap clenched, like he wasn’t sure what he wanted to say. “This isn’t really... how things are supposed to be. Not where I’m from.” He dragged his eyes back up to mine. “Not where I have to go back to once I find Rainn.” The second half was said with more confidence, and I had to catch myself from snarling in response.

Going back? He wasn’t going back. I wasn’t sure that he’d take kindly to me explaining that there was no way for him to go back until he took a mating bite. Unless that happened, the magic that created the portals wouldn’t let him return to his world—and the only way that was going to happen would be if he accepted what was sitting in front of him.

And if his friend was truly here, the same rules applied. There was no going back for either of them.

“But... Little Mate...” I finally spoke, choosing my words carefully as I leaned closer

to him. “You’re here now . Don’t you think you should enjoy the... sweet fruit... while you can?”

Sweet fruit. Impulses. Desire. Everything that was right in front of him.

He didn’t answer me, but he did part his lips and stick out his tongue again.

Right. Impulses and desire... and temptation. Being patient with my mate was going to be more trying, more testing, than any feat of strength I’d ever shown.

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Chapter seven

Kai

Maybe the best way to get out of the clutches of my captor was to play along with him—if he thought I was going to listen, that I believed his crazy idea that I was his mate, maybe he'd let me go, or stop watching me so closely.

The problem with that was when I played along, my body felt like someone was lighting a fire just beneath the skin. When I leaned in and took the fruit from Nash's fingers, I could taste him on my tongue more than I could the sugar. Warm and salty, a flavor that ran all the way down.

It was seriously the dumbest shit, because I didn't like this. I wasn't like this.

I didn't like big thick masculine fingers, and I didn't think about what they could do to me.

And I didn't watch weird green monster men lick juice from their skin and have to immediately imagine one of those sad puppy commercials to stop my body from having a response.

Definitely not.

At the same time, playing along was the best way I could think to make this work—in Rainn's books, it would have worked. Of course, in his books, playing along would have accidentally ended up with the guy falling in love with the monster, but that was

fine.

Because I didn't like guys.

And I didn't like monsters.

And there was still a small part of me that wondered if I was going to wake up from a really weird dream with a new idea for my best friend to write for a book.

It took an entire week for Nash to finally leave me in his tent without my wrists tied, though at least he'd stopped securing me to the bed after a few days. It was weird—I'd half expected to wake up and find him on top of me more than once. There was this strange, pent-up energy that was so fucking suffocating I was surprised I hadn't died from a lack of oxygen.

But... he behaved himself.

Even when I played along with him—even when I did my best to turn on my most charming smile when he was talking to me. He'd made it a ritual, hand feeding me every night... then he'd leave the tent, like it was the only thing that was stopping me from getting ravished.

The problem was, playing along was getting me nowhere and nothing except frustrated. It wasn't because I really wanted him or anything like that.

But I was used to satisfying my urges whenever I wanted, however I wanted, with whatever girl from town I wanted.

And now...

Well, now I wasn't even satisfying my urges with my damn hand, because Nash

never left long enough for me to find alone time with Palm Solo.

The last thing I needed was him bursting into the tent with fresh water for the washbasin while I was trying to work out some of the sexual frustration slowly building up over the endless days of little almost-there touches.

After the third day, I had to admit to myself this probably wasn't some weird dream. I had the inside of the tent memorized—I only saw the outside when I went to the bathroom.

After the fifth day, I had to start asking myself if this was going to be my life for the rest of... well... my life.

I had to ask myself if I was going to spend the rest of forever tied up in some orc's tent while he called me Little Mate and fed me fruit I was pretty sure was going to make me fat if I didn't start exercising soon.

It might have been easier to accept if it weren't for the fact that I knew somewhere out there my best friend was here too, and I had no idea if he'd been captured by some big handsome— no, not handsome, Kai —demanding, delic...

No, Kai. Not delicious. That was just the food he brought.

Delusional. That was the word. I had no idea if he'd been kidnapped by a delusional orc who insisted he was his mate and was probably making him do weird shit.

The only real comfort I had was knowing Rainn wouldn't think it was weird shit at all. He was probably halfway to heaven by now, barefoot and pregnant and living his best life.

Shit, I knew there was magic here—could they make Rainn get pregnant? The

thought left me puzzling for a good half hour while I fiddled with the collar around my throat. Nash could say that wasn't what it was all he wanted, but I couldn't get it loose. Of course, I probably didn't want to. The last thing I needed was to be stuck here and not be able to understand everyone around me.

How else was I supposed to maybe ask for help? Surely someone in this camp knew something about Rainn.

Surely someone would help me?

Or...

Maybe not. From what I heard and the little I saw, everyone seemed to love Nash. Maybe it was the warmth and strength he exuded, or maybe they were all just afraid he'd kick their ass if they didn't love him. Whatever it was, I wasn't getting the sense that anyone would want to risk their biscuits helping me escape.

Which meant I needed to help myself.

I just wasn't sure how.

The only thing I could come up with was trying to backtrack if I could somehow run again. I figured if I could make my way to the cave I came through, the answer was obviously going in the opposite direction. Rainn hadn't come this way, so he must have gone the other way.

I'd been camping in the woods plenty of times—I'd hiked off trail and never really gotten super lost. Just a little lost.

I'd be fine.

It probably would have been a little easier if I was a stealthy person, if I was small and lithe and capable of sneaking out without anyone seeing me.

But I was big, and it wasn't like my skin really blended into the foliage like the orcs did—I was all tan and blond and obvious.

I was just going to have to try my best. It was the only thing I could do.

I was quiet through our nightly ritual. I let Nash hand feed me and waited for him to come back to the tent a little later. When he curled up and fell asleep, I forced myself to listen to the sound of his breathing, to watch his broad chest rise and fall.

There was no way for me to know if he was a light sleeper.

There was no way to know if I was about to set off some kind of magical alarm—I hadn't asked enough questions about what was going on, about what was possible in this world.

I probably should have asked more questions.

Oh well... too late now.

I stood slowly, every inch almost painful as I watched Nash for any sign of movement. He rolled over in his sleep, his fingers stretching out for me like he could tell that something was awry, but his eyes didn't open.

He was still on the bed.

And... I just stood there.

Something in my chest felt... tight. Like I couldn't breathe. It was like his fingers had

stretched further than I thought, hooked into claws just beneath my skin—maybe there was some kind of magical defense that I hadn't realized, because I could feel him there. Behind my ribs.

Holding my heart.

Holding me still.

And...

Fuck, it was almost painful to move. I had to force myself to take a few deep breaths before I managed to inch backward. While I did, I couldn't tear my eyes off the sleeping orc, his brows knitting tighter together the further I went. Maybe he could feel me pulling at whatever weird, magical tether he'd put between us.

Which meant I had to move faster.

I had to go.

I had to—

A broken sound tore from my chest as I finally ripped my gaze from him and peeked my head outside the tent.

There was a patrol crossing back and forth, but they weren't looking directly at us, probably because Nash was here and they thought he could handle me. I wasn't sure where I was going to run, but I had to assume my instincts would lead me in the right direction.

I waited until the two orcs had rounded the corner and I slid out of the tent, skirting around the back and taking off at a jog.

It was really strange, but it was almost like I could feel Nash as I left him behind, and I knew if I didn't run now... hard... fast...

He'd know. Or I'd think about it too much.

My mind tried to remind me that the last time I'd run, I hadn't made it very far before he caught me.

I just had to run faster this time.

Which.... probably would have been a little easier if it wasn't so dark. If I ever needed proof I was in a completely different world, the lack of lights would have been enough. I could see the stars so clearly it was almost distracting... but as soon as I stepped beneath the leafy canopy of the trees, I was sent into a near pitch-black sea.

My mantra of run run run was instantly cut to walk, walk... walk and try not to trip on whatever I couldn't see in front of me.

That and try not to get eaten by whatever predators were hidden in the shadows that definitely had better night vision than I did.

By the time I'd gone a few yards, my entire body was so wound with tension I felt like a light breeze could probably have scared the shit out of me, but I didn't know what else to do... and I had to do something .

That didn't stop me from muttering under my breath in frustration while I blindly stretched my hands out in front of me to try to stop myself from falling in the dark. "Stupid orcs... stupid fantasy world. This is karma for stealing that dildo, isn't it? What god do I have to apologize to for fucking myself with it, because I will. I'll—"

I let out a scream that was instantly cut off by the feel of a calloused palm sliding

across my mouth—my body was jerked against something warm and hard, and for a second, I was pretty sure I was going to die.

This was it.

I'd found a worse monster, and it was going to kill me, and Nash would find me the next day gutted and dead and—

“What do you think you're doing, Kai?”

Shit . The cold fury in Nash's voice was nearly enough to make me think that I'd probably have been better off being found by a monster after all. It was worse, because his hand on my mouth meant I couldn't answer, and when I tried to jerk away, his other arm wrapped around my chest in a viselike grip that made it hard to breathe.

We stood there in the shadow of the trees for a few breathless seconds, and when he finally slid his hand from my mouth, I wasn't sure if I had the air to answer.

“I'm sorry, I—”

His mouth cut me off this time, and the low grunt that tore from my chest had nothing to do with the roughness of the kiss and everything to do with how his arms turned me until I was crushed against him.

Fuck.

Fuck .

Kissing wasn't supposed to be like this. His mouth was a hot demand that stole away whatever excuse I was thinking about making for running—not just because he cut

my words off, but because the taste of him left me completely unsure of why I'd tried to go anywhere to begin with.

In the darkness of the woods, when there was no way for me to see who I was touching—who was touching me—it was somehow impossible to deny that my body liked this. That I wanted this. I wanted Nash's arms wrapping tighter around me and holding me so close I was forced up on tiptoes. His tongue parting my lips and invading my mouth was the best thing I'd ever felt in my life.

I didn't realize my arms were wrapping around him and I was pulling him closer instead of pushing him away, until he let out a low growl that reverberated where our mouths were connected and he pushed me back, slamming my shoulders against the rough bark of a tree.

Damn, I'd never been manhandled—orc-handled?—before. I'd never felt so alive when someone touched me.

I'd never felt—

"I should put you over my knee and spank you until you have no strength to run again." Nash's growling threat took me off guard as he broke the kiss.

"I... what? Are you threatening me or flirting with me?" My voice sounded as dazed as I felt, and my question was swallowed down by the feel of his mouth pressing against mine again.

Warm.

Hot.

Demanding.

Confusing.

As confusing as his hands trailing along the length of my back, fingers digging into the skin just above my ass as he pulled me firmly against him.

“Nash.” I finally managed, his name spilling almost of its own accord from my lips. “I have to go. I can’t just stay tied up in your tent forever.” Even as I spoke, I knew the words were useless. He’d started walking with his arms around me, and I had a feeling he wasn’t taking me back to the portal so I could go home.

I could blame the way I didn’t struggle as much as I should have on the darkness, on the fact that I didn’t know the woods at all and I probably wouldn’t have gotten very far.

It had nothing to do with how good it felt to be pressed against his body—was I allowed to be attracted to a dude if I couldn’t see him?

Did that still count?

Yeah, probably.

Nash didn’t stop dragging me forward until I was back in his tent, and I was too shocked to stop him when he threw me roughly across the room so I tumbled onto his bed.

He followed after me, and my entire body felt like it was blossoming with fire—heat just beneath my skin that I couldn’t stop.

That I couldn’t control.

He took my mouth with his again, and I didn’t have the excuse of it being dark this

time when I let out another low-sounding rumble in my chest.

I was pretending—I had to be pretending. Getting out of my punishment? Trying to set him at ease so he'd let his guard down again, since I'd fucked up my first attempt at running so spectacularly?

I...

I was kissing him back. The only thing that saved me from completely losing myself was the way he had my wrists pinned above my head, though I completely lost my train of thought when his mouth trailed from my lips to press warm, rough kisses that scraped my jawline. My neck.

Distracting. And... definitely not evoking very straight feelings from me.

It took me a full twenty seconds to realize he'd slipped the ropes around my wrists again, and this time when he murmured the words, I felt the pressure against my skin. I was still half dazed from the feel of his mouth pressed against mine, caught up in whatever confusing emotions were roaring along my nerves and making me feel like my entire body was on fire.

"Maybe this will be lesson enough." Nash leaned in, brushing his lips along my jawline and drawing another violent shiver from me.

Magic.

It had to be magic.

It had to be—

"Where are you going? What do you mean lesson?" I got the words out as he pulled

back after tying my hands to the frame of the bed. I was stuck there on my back, the effects of our kiss embarrassingly obvious in the way my shorts were tented. Nash's eyes swept along my body, his brows drawing together and a nearly pained expression painted across his face.

"I can feel the way you want, Little Mate. I would give you relief unlike anything you've experienced before, but..." He clenched his hands at his sides like he wanted to show me what he meant, and for some reason, my protests of "not your mate" were caught in the back of my throat. "I think you're better left to think..."

"Think?" I tried to jerk my hands down, but there wasn't any room. The position I was in was proof that he hadn't really tried to tie me up at all before—I was actually restrained now. "Think about what?"

"You can't run from me, Kai. You're mine."

And before I could protest, or do something really embarrassing like ask him to stay and touch me more... Nash turned and left the tent.

My eyes followed him, then jerked down the length of my body. My cock was standing erect, pointed upward like it was accusing me of something.

"Oh, fuck off. This is your fault... and we don't like dudes." And like it could actually hear me, the damn thing twitched in defiance at the memory of Nash's broad body pinning me to the bed and the warmth of his mouth on my own.

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Chapter eight

Nash

“S top pacing, Nash.”

Vex didn’t sound annoyed, though. My head snapped up to find him grinning at me, a sparkle of mischief in his eyes.

“What?”

“If you are so anxious about it, go into your tent and make up with your mate.” The grin on his face grew wider. “The entire camp knows he belongs to you. Is it not time you showed him the same?”

“I—”

How did I explain to Vex that I’d left Kai in the tent to teach him a lesson—that I could feel the way his body wanted me, and I was using the chance to let him see that running from me was useless?

How did I explain to him that if I went into the tent, there was every chance I wouldn’t be able to resist the need pulsing through me so viscerally I could barely breathe around my want?

I’d been furious when I’d chased him into the trees, so sure that he’d feel the tether between us and he wouldn’t try to run. I’d let my guard down, and he’d taken

advantage of it...

And then he'd kissed me like I was the only air he knew, the only way he could breathe, and I wasn't sure if I wanted to put him on his knees and feed him my cock, or if I wanted to put him over my lap and spank him until he was sobbing.

I groaned, my hand coming up to run through my hair roughly.

"I think—"

"Well, there is your problem, Nash. You are thinking ." Vex's laughter made me glower, but when he shoved me, I couldn't really argue.

I wasn't the type of orc who thought long and hard about a situation—I functioned on the desires of my body and the instincts that drove me forward.

And every instinct I possessed was telling me that being away from Kai, leaving him tied in that tent without me when his body had so clearly said he wanted me there, was tantamount to sin against the gods.

"Quiet, Vex." I finally snapped, but I was already moving. "You exhaust me."

"Hm, yet there you go, to your tent." The warmth on his face was infectious, the smile drawing one out of me in turn.

"Because I'm tired. Not because you're sick of me pacing." I didn't look back to see if he was still smirking or not.

Honestly, a gentle breeze would have led me back to Kai. I'd lasted less than two hours.

When I pushed into the tent, I instantly caught sight of his eyes. The blue burned in irritation, but there was a low undercurrent of heat beneath the stare... like he could feel that same tether trailing between us. I knew he'd spent the last week without any kind of relief, and whatever had bubbled to the surface when I'd pressed my lips to his earlier seemed incapable of quieting now that it had fully woken.

I knew fated mates were inexorably drawn to one another even before they took their marks—once they'd found each other, it was instinct to be close, agony not to give in to what the gods themselves had laid out as your destiny.

It was that pull that brought me forward, that draw that had me sitting on the bed beside Kai and running my fingers through his hair.

He moaned before he realized what he was doing, then bit the sound off with a snarl.

“Done teaching me lessons ?” he said through gritted teeth, though I noticed he didn't jerk away when I trailed my fingers through his hair again—it was slightly damp, like he'd truly been suffering while I was away.

“It depends.” Even as I spoke, I was enraptured by the slight flush of his body, the way the sweat on his skin filled the room with the scent of him. The way he leaned into me even while his eyes flared in irritation and defiance.

“Depends on what?”

“Are you going to run again?”

He looked up at me, honey-colored brows knitting together, then sighed.

“Yeah, probably.” He said it almost helplessly, like he wanted to lie to me, but he realized it was useless.

Something roared to life in my chest at his answer—he would keep running unless he realized he belonged here. The danger with Koth roaming free was... it was too much. The thought of something happening to him, even though I barely knew him, even though he'd yet to tell me much about himself, his life, his wants and needs and desires...

It was too much.

“Maybe you need a different method to learn,” I murmured, dropping to the bed beside him, and Kai seemed so frustrated that he leaned into my touch instead of immediately jerking away when I cupped his face in my hand.

“Don't know what you're talking about.” The rumble of the words were contradicted by the way his lids fluttered.

“You fight this just as bravely as you fought me in the woods. But Kai...” I moved closer, close enough I could feel the heat of his breath against my lips, that I could watch his pupils slowly expand as he stared at me. “You can't fight fate.”

He shivered, and I wasn't sure if it was my words or the way I pressed my body closer to his. I just knew that I was drawn into him, intoxicated by the heat of his body and the way he seemed incapable of stopping himself from gravitating toward me.

“I don't want this,” he murmured in the same breath that he leaned forward, brushing his lips softly against mine like he was trying to feed me the lie spilling from his tongue so we'd both choke on it.

“Then tell me to stop, Kai.” I slid my hand around his waist, pulling our bodies flush together—it was impossible not to feel the hard length of him pressing against my erection. Impossible not to light up when his hips gave an involuntary flex, rocking

his cock against mine and drawing a little pained sound from his chest. “Tell me to go, and I will.”

Was this the lesson? A test of his own restraint, of his own desire?

As though his body was answering for me, his hips shifted, rocking against me and drawing a groan from his chest.

“I don’t want this.” He said it again, and I lifted my hand and yanked on his bindings hard enough to hear the cord snap. Though his wrists were still bound, there was nothing to stop them from dropping down.

Nothing to stop them from wrapping around my neck like I was the thing he was tied to.

Like I was the thing keeping him anchored.

“Does it feel better to say that?” My fingers on his waist flexed, and I rolled our bodies, dragging myself into a sitting position and pulling him onto my lap in the same motion. With him straddling me, there was no way to ignore the feel of his arousal, no escape from the way our bodies lined up perfectly with one another.

But this was the only way I could control myself—the only way I wouldn’t flip him over and fuck him open with my tongue, my fingers, my cock. I wanted him stuck on my knot and crying for me.

But this...

Even though he said he didn’t want it, in this position, Kai was in control.

In this position, the only real master he had was his own desire. His own need.

“Mmm...” He dropped his head to my shoulder when my hands settled on his hips, fingers biting into his flesh so I could drag his body forward. “Don’t want this at all.” Kai pressed his lips to the pulse at my throat. “You abducted me .” As he said it, he rocked forward, sliding his cock against mine and groaning at the friction, even though I was growing more and more frustrated with the fabric between us. “I don’t even know anything about you.”

“I would spend the rest of my life letting you learn all of me, if you wanted.”

He moaned at my words, and his fingers at the nape of my neck spasmed.

“I don’t want that at all.” Kai rolled his hips, grinding against me, a little harder this time, a little faster. It was like he was trying to outrun his lies, to find his pleasure before it caught up to him.

I wanted to feel him. I’d somehow already lost the plot that I came in here to teach him a lesson.

I just needed...

I needed him to need me. I needed it more than I needed air, more than I needed the next beat of my heart.

More than anything.

“Tell me no, Little Mate.” I said it again, my fingers sliding beneath the fabric of his pants and dancing along the curve of his ass. Instead of responding, he lifted his hips so I could drag the offending fabric down, and stayed shifted up so I could pull my own cock free of my breeches.

“Mmmf,” he groaned when he dropped back down and there was nothing between us.

I'd fucked more times than I could count, men and women alike, and I'd never felt anything as good as the sensation of his bare skin, hot and hard, as he rocked his hips and thrust against me.

"Tell me no," I bit out again, but I think we both knew that we were far past that point. There was no more room for no . There was no more room for anything except the desire roaring over me in such strong waves that I could barely think around it, could barely breathe around it.

When I looked up again, Kai's lids were narrowed to pleasurable slits, and he caught my mouth with his before I had a chance to question him again. Maybe he was tired of hearing it—maybe he was just as hungry for the taste of my tongue as I was for him.

Whatever it was, his fingers tangled in the long, loose tresses of my hair and he moaned into my mouth.

We found a rhythm like that, his body rocking up and down on mine, the slickness of my precum making skin slide easily against skin. I wanted—gods, did I want... and this time when I pulled back and started to speak, it wasn't to ask him if he wanted to stop.

"I would have you ride my cock just like this," I growled in his ear, a promise this time instead of a chance for him to get away. "I'd have you split yourself open on me until I was the only thing you knew."

"Fuck," he hissed, trying to drop his head to my shoulder again, like it would save him from the knowledge of who he was rutting against. The thought incensed me, and my fingers caught in his hair, tangling and yanking his head back. His eyes were wide now, his cheeks flushed and lips swollen from our kiss.

And now that he was looking at me, it was like he couldn't tear his gaze away. My free hand gripped his hip, dragging him harder and faster against me.

"I would have you ride me like this until you were crying, Little Mate. Until you were keening and begging for me to breed you." The word breed made my body give a jerk and my cock twitch in warning. I wanted this to last, but I knew I wouldn't be able to hold back.

He was my mate, and we were made for this moment, and we would have a thousand others like it.

"B-breed?" He groaned the word out, and the way it caught in the back of his throat and made his cheeks flush was too much—he knew what it meant. I leaned in, nipping his lower lip, and let go of his hair so I could drop both my hands between us. I took hold of our cocks and pumped us in time with the gasps of his breath and the thundering of my heart.

"Mmmm... yes, Kai. I want to fuck you so full of cum that your stomach swells with it... I want to fill you until your body knows who it belongs to, until you're mine." My fingers twisted and he jerked, crying out again. When he fell against me this time, I let him... and when his lips found my neck and he sucked in a sweet pantomime of a mating bite he didn't even understand, I lost it.

Pleasure flooded me and I came in a hot burst at the same time as his cock swelled and spasmed in my grip. I'd never felt an orgasm so intense, as though the words I was saying were true, and I was actually buried so deep inside him, pumping him so full of my seed that he could somehow carry my young.

The thought made me groan again, and I flipped our bodies so the last few thrusts of my hips were grinding him into the mattress, milking every little cry and whimper from his throat that I could.

I fucked against him until he started to twitch beneath me, until his fingers at my hair tugged in a silent plea for mercy.

And I would have happily refused it, slicked my fingers through our joined spill and used it to fuck him open so I could bury myself in him the way my cock wanted—the way my knot swelling at the base of my shaft demanded—but...

“Nash... fuck... I...”

He sounded breathless, and his fingers at my neck spasmed pleadingly...

It took every ounce of strength I had to pull back instead of driving into him again. I was careful when I untied his wrists, and he watched me with wide eyes as I dropped to his stomach and started to lick him clean of the mess we’d made together.

I didn’t stop until it coated my tongue and I was drunk on the taste of us... and he didn’t pull away when I dropped back on the pillows and gently tugged him to lie on my chest.

I knew he could feel the draw between us just as much as I did, even if he wasn’t ready to admit it yet.

If it took a dozen nights just like this to finally make him say the words, I realized I was more than willing to make that sacrifice.

For a while, he simply lay there, catching his breath and shivering in little aftershocks of pleasure.

Finally, he lifted his head and peeked at me through his hair.

“Uh. Thanks... bro?”

Kai's voice was cautious, like he was testing whether I was going to let him get away with brushing off what had happened as nothing more than an accident. I thought about rolling him beneath me again, milking another orgasm from him until his tongue was so loose that he couldn't help but admit it...

But the wary look that chased the pleasure in his gaze told me to wait.

To be patient.

All things I'd never done before, but I was willing to do for him.

So instead, I brushed my fingers through his hair with a soft sigh. He truly was beautiful.

"Are you going to run again?" I asked him the same question I had before, and the warmth of his body tensed for just a second before he shifted closer to me with a soft sigh.

"Yeah. Probably. I have to find my friend—"

"I can help you find your friend, Kai. There is no need to put yourself in danger to do it."

He rose up, his eyes narrowed... but he still wasn't fighting against me or the way I trailed my fingers slowly along the length of his back.

"You haven't been helping me this past week. I've been tied up in your tent and—"

I cut him off with a hard kiss, swallowing down the exasperated sound he made with a low, rumbling laugh. When I pulled back, he was still glaring.

“You were trying to run, and there are dangers that would see anything I hold dear hurt. I will help you find your friend when it is safe, and until then, I can ask others if they’ve heard anything.” When he opened his mouth to protest, I continued on. “You’d be more of a threat to him now than you would be a help.”

That brought him up short, and his eyes went wide.

“Why?”

“My enemies are close... any living creature with common sense would see that you’re mine—” I kept going before he could cut me off with a protest. “If you leave now, you’ll lead them straight to your friend.” When he didn’t say anything, I continued. “If your friend came through the portal, I’m sure he’s fine. There are guards posted across every entrance to Belzod, and I would have heard if something had happened. When it is safe, we’ll find him.”

It wasn’t a lie. If Koth was around, if he was watching, there was every chance he’d take Kai to hurt me. If Kai ran off to the cities looking for his friend, there was every chance he’d follow him there.

And maybe there was a part of me that was being selfish. If I took Kai to look for his friend right away, we might find him.

But I wanted him to realize, to admit that he belonged here—with me—first.

Maybe my need for him was my sin, but he blew out a slow breath and nodded.

“Fine. If you promise you’ll help me find him when it’s safe...”

“I will,” I said, but he kept on.

“And stop tying me up and leaving me in your tent all day. If you want me to be here, show me what here is.” His face morphed into the cutest pout, and something in my chest blossomed.

“You want to see what life I live, Little Mate? What life will be yours?”

He dropped his head back on the pillow with a snort. “Not your mate. I just... I’m not used to not doing things. If I have to wait to find Rainn, you need to at least let me do something useful in the meantime.”

Telling him that waiting in my tent, naked and ready for my cock was more than useful probably wouldn’t get me anywhere—in fact, I had a feeling it might walk back the progress we’d made. I nodded.

“Fine. Tomorrow, we will find you something useful to do.”

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Chapter nine

Kai

I was frustrated for so many reasons. What Nash said made sense, if he was telling me the truth. If he had enemies and they saw the way he acted so protective of me, it tracked that me running off and finding Rainn could just get both of us hurt. He seemed so sure that he was safe, too. If there were guards posted at all the portals, there really was every chance Rainn was living his best life at the moment, bouncing on orc dick and coming up with a million new book ideas.

And...

It was getting harder for me to deny that there was something about Nash that made me want to stay near him. I was still torn between blaming it on orc magic and some weird karma for stealing that dildo, but I was starting to realize how useless it was to fight it.

So... I could be his friend.

A friend who slept next to him and got off frothing, apparently. But... that was pretty friendly, right? Way more friendly than I'd been with anyone else. So maybe I could be his best friend.

With benefits.

Right.

I had to do something, because apparently I couldn't lie to him. For some reason, when he was so close to me, it had been impossible for me to tell him I didn't want him to touch me. Him chasing me into the woods and catching me felt like...

Shit, it felt like something . Something big that I couldn't quite wrap my head around. It was the second time he'd done it—catching me when I ran—and it felt like every time it happened, the feelings inside me were wound tighter and tighter.

And last night, those feelings had snapped. It was the only explanation I had for letting him touch me—the only reason I had for it feeling better than anything I'd ever felt in my life.

Nash was just... frustrating.

My eyes slid to the man in question—because as much as I wanted to keep calling him a monster, he was more than that. He had his arms wrapped around me tight enough that I couldn't really move.

He'd promised not to tie me up, but hadn't said a damn thing about holding me all night.

His chest was rising and falling slowly, and I had to admit there was something about him that made it nearly impossible for me not to look at him. I was dizzy with the image of him now, soft and sweet and relaxed, and the image of him hovering over me last night, his eyes burning and his expression so possessive I was caught up in the absolute filthy shit he was saying to me.

Breeding. Filling me up? That was baby-making talk.

Fuck, I'd wondered before if there was some kind of magic that could make that happen, but I totally wasn't a morning sickness kind of guy.

So why had I been so caught up in the moment?

I didn't want to think about it too hard, so I shifted up on my elbow and slapped Nash's chest instead. His body went rigid for a second before a small sound tore from me as he flipped me over, pinning my body beneath his in a swift movement that seemed more instinct than intention.

The alert and dangerous expression on his features slipped away the second he focused on my face, though, and the heat of his body pressing against mine melted.

"There are less dangerous ways to wake a warrior, Kai." His voice was rough with sleep, but he leaned down with his intentions written clear on his face. I had to turn my head to stop him from kissing me, but he didn't seem deterred. He just pressed his lips to my neck and nuzzled there...

Which might have been worse, because it sent little tingles of pleasure all along my body, and he was pressed close enough to me that I knew he'd feel it if I didn't get him to move.

"Up." I shoved him as hard as I could, using his loose posture against him to send him tumbling off the bed. The shocked sound that escaped him was enough to tear a laugh from my chest. "You said you'd let me be useful today."

"I could think of many uses—"

"Not that kind of useful." I cut him off and shot off the mattress before he climbed back onto it. "Come on. Show me how you live, orc man."

I could do this. I could be friends with Nash. If he were human, he'd be the exact kind of buddy I'd make to work out with.

Of course, I'd never looked at my workout buddies' abs bunch and contract as they lifted themselves from the floor, or found myself fascinated with the way their arms flexed and bulged as they got dressed.

Orc magic and dildo-stealing karma. There really was no other explanation.

Chapter ten

Nash

Kai truly was... perfect.

Perhaps his survival instincts weren't very helpful, and I'd had to stop him from picking poisonous plants more than once... but he'd sat with my men earlier and spent the better part of an hour repairing one of our broken carriages.

As soon as he had tools in his hands, the confidence that filled his body made him shine like the sun—his fingers were sure and talented, and I could see the way my people were impressed with his skill.

More than that, the smile on his face told me he was happy to have helped. And when he was finished and one of the workers from the kitchen instantly dragged him off to see if he could fix a broken furnace, he went willingly.

Kai spent the entire day fixing odd things around the camp that we'd intended to have mended the next time we came around to a city. By lunchtime he was sweaty, dirty, and the smile that spread across his face was so intoxicating I felt drunk from just the look of it.

"Besotted," Vex murmured in my ear as I watched Kai carefully constructing something he called a fort for a group of our young ones, who'd been fascinated with him from the get go. They were small enough that they weren't used to humans, but innocent enough they could sense he was good.

“Hm?” I couldn’t tear my eyes away from Kai to look at my second in command.

“He moves as though he has been here all along. You know...” Vex’s voice was soft. “I always thought you were a bit foolish, the way you talked about fated mates like the world around us would shift when we found them. But it looks like you were right after all.” I finally managed to tear my gaze away from Kai to look at Vex. There was a soft wistfulness to his expression, but affection chased on its heels as he turned his eyes from Kai back to me. “You deserve this happiness, Nash.”

My hand landed on Vex’s shoulder, and I smiled at my friend. He’d left with me when I told Axum I meant to strike out and live with my people as nomads, and had never questioned our life—we’d been friends since we were children. And this was the first time I’d ever seen him look... vulnerable.

“You’ll find the same happiness, Vex. We all have mates waiting for us.” I pulled him to me in a half hug. “Shall we hunt yours once the matter with Koth is settled?”

His laughter was a warm thing as he returned my embrace briefly before pushing me away.

“I don’t know that Koth is the true danger here. I may be murdered before I have a chance to find my one. ” It took me a second to realize what he meant. When I followed his line of sight, I saw Kai staring at us.

No, not staring— glaring at the place where Vex’s arm was still around my shoulder.

Vex pushed me away from him with a short laugh, and Kai’s cheeks instantly went crimson at being caught.

“Go to your mate, before he comes over here and rips my arm off.” I wanted to tell Vex he was safe—he was a warrior—but... the stormy expression on Kai’s face and

the strength I'd felt told me that anything was possible.

Food was apparently the perfect way to shift Kai's mood. Though he'd not-so-subtly asked me about Vex and what his job around the camp was, the sullen tone in his voice melted the second I brought him a bowl from the kitchen.

I wasn't sure if it was the steaming soup, or the fact that we were eating with everyone instead of sitting in the tent with his hands tied. My entire group had warmed to him through the day—his sweet smile and willingness to work, along with my obvious claim to him, was more than enough to earn him acceptance. I knew he could feel it, because I could too.

It was... perfect. The way he fit in just as Vex said—like he'd been here all along. Like he'd been born to be at my side, and he was finally in his place.

And like he could sense it too, Kai kept bumping his shoulder into mine. Every time his body brushed against me, it made something inside me wind tight—he was perfect, and he was warm and solid and here ...

And every drop of blood running through me, every inch of my skin and the bones in my body screamed that I hadn't claimed him already as my mate. The bond between us was there, ready to be sealed, ready to tie us together forever... and it seemed tantamount to torture that I hadn't done it yet.

But that bond had to be taken willingly, and even though his body unconsciously swayed toward mine, even though he'd carefully made sure to sit between Vex and myself without realizing it, I wasn't sure that he was ready for my mark.

I wasn't even sure if he was ready to hear that there was no way for him to return to his world without it.

“Fuck, I’m sweaty.” Kai drew me from my thoughts as he pushed his plate back, and I watched his eyes glance around the camp slowly. “Uh, you don’t have... like... portable showers here, do you?”

“Portable... showers?” My eyes glanced at the band he wore around his neck—the collar he wore. I wondered if there was some way to improve the magic so it let me know what the strange words he said meant, because there was still so much lost in translation.

“I need to actually wash off. You know... hot water? Coming out of a shower head? Rinsey rinsey, get all clean?” He wiggled his fingers in a raining motion like that could somehow paint the picture of what he was saying.

At least I understood what he wanted. There was a basin in the tent and fresh water was brought in daily, but after a hard day’s work, something more was in order.

“There’s a lake at the edge of camp that borders the cliffs. It’s safe to use.” It was part of the reason we’d come to rest here. We were protected from one side by the drop off.

“That sounds cold. Also...” I watched Kai visibly pale. “There’s a cliff?”

I knew what he was thinking when I stood, holding my hand out to him. He took my outstretched fingers and let me pull him to his feet. “Do you feel brave that you stumbled around in the dark now?”

Even though he would have had to swim the lake to get to the cliff, the thought of him accidentally falling made me twist my wrist, linking our fingers together instead of letting him go.

He looked between our joined hands with a small frown, but he didn’t pull away

when I started walking.

“You could have warned me.”

“I told you it was dangerous.”

“Still,” he grumbled, but he kept pace with me as I guided him down the small pathway that led to the water. We’d set up a patrol around it, but the look I slid to the guards as we passed them was more than enough—I wanted this space as my own. They could watch the paths while keeping their distance.

We were silent until we came to the edge of the lake—the night was warm enough that it would feel good to bathe. Kai stripped out of his shirt and shorts, and was waist deep in the water before he realized I wasn’t following him.

My eyes were fixated on the sight of his body, muscled and perfectly golden. He had a few tattoos with symbols I didn’t understand painted across his flesh, and little scars dancing here and there.

There were sweet brown freckles that danced along his shoulders like little maps to entire worlds, universes I’d been waiting to see my entire life.

He truly was perfect.

“Uh...” His fingers snapping pulled me out of the way I was drinking down the sight of his body. “Aren’t you coming in? I know I’ve been the one doing the heavy lifting today...” He actually raised his arm, flexing the muscle with a broad grin. “But you could probably use a bath too.”

“I...” How did I tell him that if I followed him into the water, the small amount of self-restraint I’d somehow summoned through sheer willpower, and perhaps a little

magic, would dissolve?

Just looking at him, I could feel the fissures starting to form. I wanted to go into the lake after him.

I wanted—

“Come on. You can’t just sit there. Besides,” he smacked his hand against the water, sending a fan of droplets out to splash against my hot skin. “I have to sleep in the same room as you—not fair if you’re all...” Kai pursed his lips, his eyes glancing up and down my tense frame. “Stinky or something.”

Temptation.

Temptation .

My little human was trying to break all the resolve I had.

“Later.” I said the word through gritted teeth, and watched as Kai’s brow furrowed while he took a few steps back. The water slipped around his body, lapping against his collarbone in a way that made me jealous. He dipped beneath the surface, and I wondered if it would be long enough for me to find some semblance of sanity and resolve before he came back up.

It wasn’t, though, and the sight of his hair slicked back, gone dark with moisture and clinging in curls to his skin was too much.

“Okay. Fine,” he said, submerged to his chin while he watched me watching him. He went through the motions of scrubbing himself clean, using the leaves I directed him to. By the time he’d managed to wash himself, my cock was so painfully hard in my breeches that I thought I might die, and his face was stormy.

He looked...

Angry.

“Are you nearly finished?” I couldn’t figure out the expression, and I didn’t think I could last much longer watching his lean muscles twist this way and that while he got himself clean.

Kai’s eyes darted up to me, pale blue in the moonlight, and he looked me over slowly.

“No. I can’t get my back clean.” He made no move to reach it, though, and my fingers clenched at my sides. This was a test—this was recompense for all the trouble I’d ever given my brothers when we were younger. It was truly punishment from the gods, watching him and not touching him.

“I am sure you’re plenty clean. You can—”

The sudden wave of water from him splashing me cut my words off, and when I wiped my eyes clear of the liquid, he was glaring at me. “Jesus Christ, and people call me dumb. Get in the water and touch me, Nash. Before I change my mind.”

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Chapter eleven

Kai

Damn it, this was my idea . I couldn't even tell Nash I didn't want it this time, because I was the one who'd told him to come into the water with me.

But... fuck, I'd felt good all day. I spent so much of my life going from job to job, from thing to thing. Everything felt so...

Transitional. My jobs, my friends, the people I slept with. None of it was solid, or real .

The only constant in my life had been Rainn—nothing else had really mattered.

But today, even though it was weird and everyone was green ... they all smiled at me while I helped them.

It felt like I was doing something right—like every little thing I'd ever learned to fix, every skill I'd ever picked up, had been for this moment.

That, and I'd felt something weird and ugly twist in my chest when I'd noticed Nash hugging that other man. He was big and broad and...

Yeah.

I didn't get jealous... but up until a week ago, I also hadn't got boners for dudes,

so...

Live, laugh, love or whatever, right?

Did that apply to experimenting with monster sex?

Live, laugh, love... fuck an orc?

Sounded... plausible.

I was going to say yes.

My eyes stayed fixed on Nash as he slipped into the water, my body backing up of its own accord—I didn't know why, but every instinct I had wanted me to run just so he'd chase me.

Wanted me to get caught.

Wanted—

“If I touch you, Little Mate, I'm not sure I'm going to be able to stop until I feel all of you. I want you too much to listen to reason.” Nash's voice was a deep, rumbling growl, a warning laid out with all the flashing lights and caution tape I could possibly have asked for.

It was like him asking me to tell him no—for someone who'd abducted me and kept me tied to a bed against my will, he sure was a fucking consent king.

Kinda sexy, if I was being honest.

“If you keep talking, I'm going to change my mind. So why don't you shut up and get

in the water?”

His eyes flashed in the moonlight, and then he dove below the surface without warning.

For such a big guy, he was great at not making waves, and my eyes tried to focus on the dark shape of him beneath the glassy surface, but the moonlight dipped behind the clouds just as I caught sight of him.

Apprehension poured through my body, that same delicious slice of danger that kept pounding at my nerves to run run run.

Only this time it was swim swim swim, and I didn't know what direction to go in. Nash's warning of a random cliff drop-off played in the back of my mind, and by the time I figured it would probably be easier to head to the shore and hope that I didn't traumatize the camp streaking back to his tent, it was too late.

Warm arms slid around my waist, and the heat of his mouth sliding over my dick in the cool water tore a shout from my chest.

My fingers dipped beneath the surface and found his hair, tangling in the strands where they floated in the water. My cock had already been half hard, even with the cool temperature of the lake. Enveloped in the heat of his mouth, I could feel myself go from half-mast to painfully stiff with a few practiced sucks.

Fuck, he was good at that.

And apparently, he wasn't an orc... he was a goddamn fish. He stayed under the water, sucking me to the back of his throat and swallowing around me until my knees felt weak and I was pretty sure I was going to blow my load before I ever saw his face.

That would be better, wouldn't it? If I wanted to keep acting like I didn't want this, like I didn't want him? Coming without seeing who was sucking me, I could pretend that it was just some hot chick...

With tusks.

It was shocking, the way I could feel them playing against my skin, but he was so gentle they never scratched or pierced the flesh. Of course, he'd had them his whole life... and I was getting the best blow job of mine from an orc . With a dick.

I probably couldn't pretend anymore... but it was more than that.

I wanted more than this.

I wanted...

When his tongue flattened and licked along the base of my shaft again, the tip of it teasing into my slit, I let out a low groan and twisted my fingers into his hair, forcing him above the water. The only indication that he'd been struggling at all was the way he gasped for air, and maybe I was punishing him when I spilled forward and caught his mouth with mine before he had a chance to catch his breath... but whatever.

His broad arms wrapped around me, and he crushed me against him.

I want you too much to listen to reason .

Fuck, I wanted him too. It didn't make sense, but maybe it didn't have to. I was in some weird magic world. With some weird magic collar... and fucking orcs .

And I'd wanted Nash since the second I saw him. I could always explain it away later, but for now...

For now, I didn't want to think at all. I just wanted to feel.

I pulled back from the kiss with a low groan, using the weightlessness of the water to wrap my legs around his waist. It lined our cocks up again, gave me purchase to writhe, to rock my hips against his frame.

Fuck, it felt good.

He felt good.

And then his arms around me were holding too tight for me to move.

“Wha—”

“I told you, I would have all of you.” He pressed his mouth to mine again, licking into me so I could taste the faintest hint of salt—my precum—painting his tongue. He leaned back just enough to growl against my lips. “All of you.”

Before I realized what was happening, he'd lifted me—apparently Nash didn't need the weightlessness of anything to hold me, because he carried me bridal style out of the lake and laid me on the grassy shore. The chill of the night air felt good against my burning skin, against the way I was pretty sure the orc above me was using some kind of magic to light little fires all along my nerve endings.

The problem was, the fires were targeted—they'd burned away my free will, my self-defense, my totally straight thought processes. It was all ashes around my feet, cooling against the damp ground.

I looked at him through wet lashes and felt almost helpless as he crawled up my body, his broad frame easily making space for itself.

I half expected him to just do it then and there, to fuck me—shit, he'd probably break me in half, wouldn't he? He still had his pants on, but it was pretty obvious from the wet outline of his hard cock that he was even bigger than that damn toy I'd bounced on.

“I—”

Nash stopped short of covering my body with his, instead skating his hands up along the back of my calves until he drew a little sound out of my chest when he pressed a kiss to my damp skin. I was pretty sure I couldn't say it was a sound of protest anymore, especially when I spread my legs to give him better access as he trailed his mouth from my knee along my inner thigh.

Nothing had ever felt like this—it was a weird as fuck time to realize that fucking had been just like everything else. A thing I did because it was a thing you did.

It had never been...

This.

And this was apparently me letting out a shout that everyone back at the camp could probably hear, when Nash suddenly shoved my knees up hard enough to knock the breath from me and laved his tongue along my exposed hole.

“Oh shit, Nash. Wait, I—”

His fingers bit into my thighs and he pressed his mouth harder against me—and apparently wait meant “I'm going to put my fingers in your hair and pull you against me like a fucking whore” because that's exactly what I did.

I'd had my cock sucked enough times to know that felt good, but I'd never had

anyone eat my ass like they were having their last meal. Nash licked into me like he could find the center of me somewhere and force the word mate across that place so I couldn't deny it. He worked his tongue against my hole until I was seeing stars, and the warmth of his mouth and slickness of his saliva had my cheeks drenched, had my thighs trembling.

It actually took me a bit to realize I was babbling nonsense.

“Fuck... I've never felt anything like... mmm... I... oh... mmfh. Nash .” I moaned his name, and I knew I sounded like a complete slut doing it, but I couldn't bring myself to care.

The only thing I cared about was digging my fingers tighter into the warmth of his hair and wriggling my body down so I could rock my hips against the feel of his tongue as he stiffened the muscle and played against my entrance.

Another loud cry tore from my throat when he brought one hand up and wrapped it around my cock. The pressure of warm, calloused fingers wrapping around my length and stroking me in slow, sure movements was enough to make me dizzy.

It was enough that I knew I was going to completely lose my shit if I wasn't careful.

And I...

Damn it, if I was going to do this, if I was actually going to let this happen.

“Nash, wait... wait, wait.” I tugged at his hair, and when he pulled back and I caught sight of his saliva slicked lips in the moonlight, I nearly forgot what I was going to ask him.

“You ask impossible things, Little Mate.” His voice was a low growl, rumbling all

along my bones and making the thoughts that had been trying to form completely fly out of my head. “I want to work you open with my tongue. I want to make you release all over my fingers so I can fuck it back inside you. I want to open you up so you can ride me right here in the moonlight. I want—”

Dirty. Absolutely filthy, fucking dirty bastard. I knew exactly what I wanted.

“Lie back.”

My voice was a firm demand, even though I realized I sounded completely wrecked. When he didn’t move, I shifted forward, shoving him hard—I wondered again if he’d only been with small, delicate people before. The sudden tackle sent him flying back, and I heard it when the air knocked from his chest. I would have felt guilty about it if I didn’t know what I was going to do.

If I didn’t know that I was about to cross every line of the “ I’m totally straight ” barrier I’d erected... well... yeah. He was getting the good end of the deal, even if he didn’t realize it.

“Kai?” His voice was a question, but he didn’t stop me when I found the string to his breeches and pulled it open, and all he did was wiggle his hips up and lift them so I could peel the wet fabric down his body. If I were back in the human world and with someone I’d been vehemently insisting I was straight to, they’d probably ask me if I was sure.

They’d pull me back and look me in the eyes, touch base and touch grass and all that shit.

But not Nash.

He looked at me like I’d finally opened a window and let him see the stars for the

first time in his life. He didn't question me, but he did spread his legs for me when I kneeled between them.

Of course... knowing that I wanted to touch his dick and seeing it in front of me were two different things.

He was big.

Huge.

Bigger than anything I'd ever seen, and that was saying something since I'd seen Rainn's dildo collection.

He was like those videos that people made on the internet where women made fun of cock-size descriptions in books because they were impossibly big. He was...

"Oh, fuck it," I grumbled, because he was long and thick, a deep green that blushed darker at the end... and I suddenly realized that I'd probably die if I didn't at least try to get him into my mouth.

With how big he was, those may very well have been the last words of a very, very stupid man.

I dropped down, running my hands up his thighs slowly, like that could somehow help me figure out what I was doing. When I hesitated above his cock, biting my lower lip, Nash's fingers spilled through my hair—he took his cock in one hand, wrapping his fingers around his length so I was suddenly left with a much, much more manageable amount.

It was still really thick.

And still... a dick.

Which I'd never had in my mouth.

So...

My eyes rolled up to meet his, and the heat, the need, the desire and want on his face was enough to get me almost as drunk as the feel of his saliva still slicking between my ass cheeks.

I wanted this.

I wanted him.

I wanted him to look at me like that while I strangled myself on his cock.

I took a deep breath and trailed my fingers up, cupping his hand where he was holding himself with both of mine, and then parted my lips and dipped my head down.

The first taste of him was unexpected—warm, wet from the water, a little salty from the sweat that hadn't washed from his skin. He tasted...

Good.

Good enough that I lolled my tongue out and lapped experimentally along the head of his cock, the slit at his tip... and above me I heard him let out a low string of words that I didn't understand. I'd have to ask him what he said later, because I was suddenly too entranced with the task in front of me.

This was like the Mount Everest of dicks, and I really loved a good challenge.

Without hesitation, I opened my mouth wide and took as much of him as I could between my lips. As soon as he hit the back of my tongue, my throat spasmed and I felt myself gag.

Well shit, that didn't happen in the books. Wasn't I supposed to be the absolutely amazing virgin who had no gag reflex?

Superpower: sucking dick.

I... realized I really didn't care when Nash let out another low rumbling growl and the taste of precum hitting my tastebuds was fed to me as a reward.

I groaned at the flavor of it and pulled off his cock until nothing but the tip of my lips were on the head again... then I dove back down. This time, Nash's hand pumped his length, rising up to meet me so I didn't have to take him quite as deep. He was teaching me how to suck his dick without saying a single fucking word, and his hand in my hair was a gentle guide so I could find a rhythm that left me room to breathe, even though I wasn't sure I wanted to.

I sucked him until my jaw was aching and I wondered if I was going to be able to talk the next day. When he started to groan, I figured talking was overrated. When another burst of precum hit my tongue, I guessed that maybe I could just get so drunk on the taste of him that talking didn't matter at all.

And then suddenly, I was moving.

I was not used to being manhandled, but I was too focused on my task to properly pull back and fight. Once I realized what was happening, fighting was the last thing on my mind.

Nash lifted me and flipped me around, so my face was still pressed to his cock but my

hips were straddling his shoulders.

I didn't have to ask him what he was doing this time. It was pretty obvious when the heat of his breath hit my length and he suddenly swallowed me whole.

If I'd had any brain cells left, I might have wondered if he was the magical main character with no gag reflex. I didn't have any, though, because he was sucking the few that I possessed straight out through my dick, and I had to use the little awareness I had to lower my head so I could take him back into my mouth.

I did the best I could, wrapping both of my hands around the thickness of his shaft and pumping him in time with the motion of my mouth the way he'd shown me. It wasn't perfect, and I was still a drooling, gagging mess on his cock, but none of that mattered with the taste of him on my tongue and the feel of him sucking me off like he wanted to strip me of my soul with the orgasm he was trying to pull out of me.

It wasn't his tongue playing against my slit that pushed me over the edge. It wasn't the way the feel of his mouth was tight and hot, perfect in every fucking way. It wasn't even the scrape of his tusks against my pelvis, sending little flitters of chills up and down my spine that did it.

It was when he lifted his hand and trailed one finger between my cheeks, pressing against my hole with just enough strength that the tip of his digit slid inside.

The sensation tore along my body and made my mind instantly picture what it would be like if he was fucking me—if he was splitting me open. If he was doing exactly what he said he would and filling me so full of cum that I'd be leaking it, that my stomach would be swollen with it...

I wanted him to breed me until I couldn't see straight, until I couldn't walk. Until I really believed in magic, and that things like fated mates existed.

I wanted him to own me.

And that thought was what made me come on a shout that forced my hips to stutter and buck into his mouth. The splash of my cum against his tongue apparently destroyed whatever self-restraint Nash had left, because he took me to the back of his throat and swallowed around me... and then his cock in my mouth gave a twitch and flooded me with the taste of him.

Hot, liquid, warm on my tongue... and fuck.

More than I thought.

More than should have been possible... but...

Well, shit, he was huge, wasn't he? Which meant he had a bigger load than anything I'd ever worked up.

It spilled past my lips, down my throat. It choked me when I tried to swallow, slipped from the edges of my mouth even though I tried to keep it all in. He completely flooded me, and I was so drunk on the taste of him and the feel of the whitehot pleasure ripping along my entire body that I couldn't think straight. I could barely process how hard he was, how his cock just seemed to get thicker beneath my hands the longer I licked and choked and tried to breathe through his orgasm.

Fuck... Could you drown in cum?

Was I about to be the first person I knew who died from jizzphyxiation?

Maybe.

But what a way to go.

Nash's hips rocked a few more times before he flipped me over again, and I didn't have any bones left in my body to fight him. They'd all gone liquid—he'd sucked me dry. I just went where he put me, my shoulders hitting the grass, my body loose and floating. My vision was blurry, and I was faintly aware that there was cum on my cheeks, my chin. Probably dripping down my neck.

I was also faintly aware that Nash was still sucking my cock, licking along the place where my thighs hit my pelvis, nosing over my balls... and then bringing his tongue back up to lick my shaft again like he intended to get every last drop of pleasure possible.

I was staring up at the sky and wondering if we had the same stars when he trailed warm kisses up along my stomach, and a low groan tore from my lips when his mouth found my neck.

He licked the mess I'd made from my throat, then moved to my cheeks, kissing and sucking, licking me clean...

And when he brought his mouth to mine and kissed me, I could taste the difference as he fed me back our combined pleasure.

He was warm and spicy... and I was all salt and musk.

And fuck, we tasted good together.

When I moaned into his mouth and caught myself sucking on his tongue, I finally slapped Nash's chest to push him back.

I wasn't even sure I was trying to stop him, really. I just needed a second to learn how to breathe again.

And lying there, waiting for my heart rate to return to normal, I realized something. It was a big something, but it was something I couldn't really deny anymore.

As much as I'd tried to fight it...

And as much as I was positive it had been something weird that Nash was doing to me...

Fuck, I wasn't sure I could blame the mind-blowing orgasm I'd had on stealing a sex toy anymore.

"Okay. Probably not dildo-thief karma." I murmured the words against Nash's chest, and his fingers running through my hair were the only thing that managed to lift my gaze to meet his own.

"What?"

The confusion in his voice reminded me that he probably had no idea what a dildo even was, and I wasn't sure if I was ready to tell him about the way I'd stolen an orc-shaped cock off the porch once and rode it like my life depended on it. Honestly, I probably should have realized—when that was the best orgasm of my life—that I liked dick.

Or, orc dick?

Was it possible to be orc- sexual?

Of course, that dick had nothing on Nash, so...

"Nothing... I just..." I lifted my gaze, searching his face with a soft sigh. "I guess... maybe..."

At my reluctance, he lifted one hand, running his fingers gently through my damp hair. “Maybe what?”

I dropped my head down, nuzzling against his neck so I could speak my words against his skin like it would somehow make it better. “Maybe I’m not so straight after all.”

With the taste of his cum on my tongue and my ass still dripping with his saliva, it was probably one of the most obvious statements I’d ever made in my life.

Chapter twelve

Nash

I opened my eyes slowly, half expecting to find the bed beside me empty. Instead, I was instantly hit with a warmth at my side that sent a measure of calm I'd never known before pooling through my body.

Kai was wrapped around me like he was afraid I was going to escape in the middle of the night, and his nose was buried against my neck.

He was warm and solid and real .

It was strange to think that it was only days earlier that he'd hit me and tried to escape, but I knew the draw of the bond that existed between us. I'd spent my entire life wanting exactly these emotions, this connection. This inevitability.

I wasn't going to question the intensity, or how he curled closer to me in his sleep, as though he could sense that I was thinking about our bond.

It was almost a shame for me to move—I could have spent the rest of the morning wrapped up in the way he was wrapped up in me... but there was too much to do. I tried to detangle myself from his hold, and the low grunt of irritation that pooled from his chest tore a laugh from me.

The sound made his eyes shoot open. There was a second where panic tried to flit across his face and fill his expression, and then he settled back and glared at me.

“Were you seriously trying to leave me here? Listen, bro ...” He drew the word out slowly. “I’m not the kind of guy who fucks and runs. You could at least get me breakfast before you leave me tied to your bed again.”

I glanced between the stern look on his face, his tousled, tawny hair, the stubble growing on his cheeks... and the way his fingers were biting into my skin.

He didn’t want me to leave—maybe he wasn’t the best at expressing it, but it was obvious. The thought made me smile, and the smile drew my lips down to his. I brushed a gentle kiss on his mouth, and when I pulled back, the edges of his scowl had softened.

“Kissing me isn’t going to—”

I cut him off before he had a chance to keep ranting.

“I’m not tying you to the bed. Come, there’s too much to do around the camp. Besides.” I stood, pulling on a loose-fitting shirt. “I’m sure you have questions.”

That seemed to catch his attention. He sat up, his brow arching as he stretched and started feeling around for the shirt that he hadn’t bothered pulling back on. When he didn’t find it, I tossed him one of mine with a grin.

He slipped it over his head, glancing down at the way it looked entirely too big on him—I wasn’t going to tell him I would have him in my clothing all the time if I could.

“Questions?” he finally said, and I nodded.

“I’m sure there are things you want to know—and it’s not as though you’ve taken much opportunity to ask.”

“I was plotting how to escape—”

My sharp expression cut him off. “Well, ask me now. Maybe if I fill your curiosity, you’ll change your mind about trying to leave.”

He looked me over once, like he wanted to say more. It was almost endearing, the way he seemed incapable of lying, too sweet to be convincing even if he tried. Finally, he nodded.

“You’ve kind of kept me chained to your bed and spent the entire time we’ve been together hand-feeding me. There hasn’t been a lot of time for talking.”

As much as I wanted to tell him that wasn’t true, I knew it was.

For someone who seemed clueless about survival and better with his hands than the eloquence of speech, Kai was full of questions. He wanted to know about Belzod, about my family... asked about our magic while he helped build a new table that could be easily broken down for travel.

When he started pointing out plants and questioning me about the kind of animals that were in the woods, there was genuine curiosity and excitement in his tone. The only time the expression fell was when he asked about other people entering the barrier, and if there was an easier way for me to get the question about his friend around. I hated that he was still so intent on finding this Rainn. It was time for more truths—the only way I could steer him from the thought was to tell him there was no way his friend could have entered through the portal unless he had a mate, and there was no way for him to leave unless he was claimed.

That seemed to catch his attention. We’d wandered to the edge of the tents and settled beneath one of the sprawling trees that bordered the clearing we’d set up in. In the shade, with his skin slightly red from the sun and the white shirt I’d given him dirty

from the work he'd done throughout the morning, he looked good.

I was nearly drunk on the sight of him, and just the curiosity he had about mating made my cock stir in my breeches. I was fairly certain he'd notice if I didn't take care.

"So, there's no way for me to get home until someone marks me?"

"Until I mark you," I corrected him instantly, and for the first time, he didn't snap back about how I wasn't his mate. There was just the faintest hint of pink that touched his cheeks, and he darted his eyes away from mine.

"Okay. So until I'm marked, I... what? Just keep bouncing off the air? That's what happens to anyone who crosses through the barrier?"

I was caught up in the way he sounded genuinely curious, and the way his fingers were toying with the blade of grass he held, tying it into knots with delicate precision. It took me a second to answer him.

"We're not sure when the portals first appeared, or why... but they lead between worlds. Our land protects itself, though, or at least the magic of it does. No one who comes here comes without purpose. Anyone who can cross the barrier has a mate on the other side." I watched as his eyes lifted, trailing across my face slowly before landing on mine.

"Everyone?"

"Yes. And until that mate claims you, there's no way for you to leave. Just as the magic protects the land, it protects its people. It would be cruel, don't you think?" I said, plucking the grass from his hand, flipping it over so I could trace the lines of his skin and revel in the way he shivered beneath my touch.

“What would be cruel?” Kai’s voice was soft, a little throaty, and the flush of his cheeks deepened every time I stroked slowly against his palm.

“To have your mate so close to you without the ability to keep them. To feel the draw...” I trailed my touch slowly along his wrist, tickling up his arm. “That line between you, that tether... and never know what it was like for it to truly be fulfilled.”

“I...” Kai bit his lower lip, his brows drawing together. “I don’t...”

I saved him from having to answer by leaning forward and pressing my mouth gently against his. His body instantly relaxed, his hand lifting to slide along my chest before wrapping around my neck. For someone who’d fought so hard against it before, he seemed more than willing to touch me now.

When I finally pulled back, his gaze was slightly out of focus, but he still managed to speak. “So... how does it work, exactly?”

“Hm?” I had to fight to make sense of what he said, and his fingers trailing back and forth against my nape didn’t help.

“Mating? Is it like marriage? You say some shit and boom, connected?”

“No,” I answered. “You join together—I would fuck you, fill you up, bite you, and you would bite me in turn...” Kai’s gaze darted to my face, his pupils slightly dilating at my words. “And when I was buried so deep inside you that we were one, I would knot you.”

“Knot?” His eyes went wide and I couldn’t help but stare at the morbid fascination I saw cross his expression. “You have a knot ? Holy shit , is that what I felt the other night?”

From the way he said it, he knew the word... and I knew he'd never been to this world before, so... "You know what that is?"

He had the grace to blush as he looked away with a sheepish grin. "I read a lot." I wanted to question him more, but he prompted me to go on with a gentle nudge. "What happens after you knot me?"

Hearing him say the words was nearly enough to make me lose myself, to show him what would happen. Instead, I took a breath to steady myself and continued. "The bites would take, and the connection between us would be unbreakable." When I leaned closer, he tilted his head like he couldn't help himself, and I pressed a kiss to his throat, right above the place my teeth would set into the tender skin—I gave the softest nip that drew a sound from his chest.

"Unbreakable?" The word came out on a moan, and I nodded against his skin, placing one more kiss before pulling back.

"We would fade without one another, until we were nothing. We would be each other's home, no matter where we were, no matter what world we were in."

When Kai's lids fluttered this time, the smile that touched his face was soft. Sweet. Almost euphoric.

"That sounds nice."

I cupped his cheek gently, brushing my thumb along his lower lip. "I've dreamed my entire life of finding my mate, my home. I've traveled all the land, and I've always felt restless, half empty, like my purpose was unfulfilled."

Those blue eyes shifted to look at me again, and for the first time, it felt like he was really seeing me.

Like he really understood.

“Nash... I...”

But whatever he was going to say was interrupted by the sound of footsteps as two children—our healer’s twins—spilled around the corner with a giggle.

“There you are! Mama is looking for you.” When I made to stand, Elia, the younger girl, shook her head. “Not you, Nash.” She pointed to Kai. “Him. She said our tent is broken and he can fix it.”

Kai bit his lower lip, a small smile blooming across his face. “Yeah, I can fix it.” He stood, but he didn’t let go of my hand. I came to my feet with him, and he threw me a smile over his shoulder. “Come on, Nash. Maybe I can teach you to be useful.”

The children giggled louder, Elia’s brother actually covering his mouth at the quip. They weren’t used to someone being so brazen with me, and even less used to the way I slid my arm around Kai’s waist and pulled him to me in a quick hug. I spared them anything more than a gentle kiss pressed to the corner of his mouth that still made him blush.

“Lead the way, Little Mate.”

And instead of arguing or telling me the words weren’t true, he gave my fingers a squeeze and trotted ahead so he could join the twins. When they each caught one of his hands, I felt something in me nearly break with longing at the image of Kai walking just the same with our children and loving them with that fierce warmth that was so unique to him.

He might truly be the death of me before I ever felt our mate bond. My heart had never been so full.

Chapter thirteen

Kai

“They still have not found Koth, Nash. Have you asked your brother for full permission to hunt him down?” The hush of Vex’s tone flitted in and out, and I forced myself to stay still. Even though my mind was clouded with sleep, I was still aware enough to realize that whatever they were talking about was important.

And honestly, I was curious. If there was danger lurking around, I wanted to know... I wanted to help.

I wanted to make sure Nash was okay.

Damn it, it had only been a couple of weeks, and I was really, really in over my head with these feelings.

“I did, though you and I both know that I do not need his permission to take care of issues within our own group.”

Vex laughed. “You say that because you know he will tell you yes. Axum rarely denies you anything.”

Nash’s answering chuckle wasn’t as warm as usual, and the sensation of him tensing made me shiver. I opened my eyes slowly to look at the worried expression on his face. “Maybe... but still. I don’t like the idea of Koth causing trouble because of me. I want to handle it sooner rather than later—his answer will be all the permission we

need to lead a hunt to the death.”

At the sound that tore from my throat, his eyes shifted to me.

“Death?” I’d seen the weapon he carried. I’d experienced exactly how strong he was, how well trained he kept his body.

But still.

Death?

“Don’t worry, Little Mate.” Nash’s fingers brushed along my shoulder gently as I pushed myself into a sitting position. “I’ve handled worse than Koth in my lifetime, and I’ll deal with worse after he’s food in the ground for the worms.”

It was the first time he’d ever spoken like that, and the first time I’d really had to acknowledge that Nash was... dangerous. All the times when he’d chased me, even when he threatened to spank me...

None of it was real. He was always soft and warm and teasing.

There was something about his tone that was dangerous now. Deadly. I didn’t question that he could do exactly what he said—that he’d probably done it before.

Hunt someone down.

Kill them.

“I’m allowed to worry about you,” I finally said, pushing completely off the bed and crossing my arms. “Especially if there’s some weirdo orc out there wanting revenge and you’re going to go hunt him down.”

I hated the thought of it so much that I actually felt something ugly twist in my chest, a little spark of anger that made me want to do something.

“I will... see myself out.” Vex’s eyes were wide, and he scurried out of the tent before I had a chance to really get myself worked up.

It was worse, because Nash was smiling at the way my arms were crossed over my chest.

Like he thought it was cute or something.

I didn’t know how to remind him that where I came from, there weren’t many people who could look down at me the way he did, let alone call me cute.

“I’ll be fine, Kai.” He said it again, and this time when he slowly ran his fingers through my hair, I let myself relax slightly into the touch. “I’ll have all of my men with me. Koth is simply... a threat that has been allowed to run free for too long. I let it go because it didn’t matter. But... things are different now. They’re...”

He trailed off, but I realized what he wasn’t saying.

“I’m here now?”

He didn’t try to deny it. “Yes. You’re here... and for the first time in my life, I feel like I have something I could truly lose. So...” Nash leaned in, pressing a soft kiss to my lips. “I’ll hunt him down, and anything else that might pose a threat to you.”

I sighed against his mouth before leaning back to look at him. “You know, someone threatening to murder things for you shouldn’t be attractive.”

He was too quick for me, though, because he grinned as he leaned in again, pressing

another kiss to my forehead before moving past me. “And yet you didn’t say it wasn’t.”

I followed him out of the tent, raking my fingers through my hair as I did. “I didn’t say it was either. You’re not attractive at all. ”

We both knew I was lying.

I was pretty sure I knew where I was going. I’d been spending every second I could learning about things around the camp. That included the plants I could and couldn’t touch.

Maybe it was stupid, but the way Nash seemed so ready to pretty much go to war to protect me made something in my chest spark, and there was no way I was going to just sit around and not try to do something to show him I appreciated him.

Since his entire group moved pretty regularly—they were actually talking about packing up so they could do just that within the next few days—it wasn’t like I could build him something practical, like a porch for his house.

I could suck his dick again, but that wasn’t exactly as sentimental as I wanted it to be... even though I was pretty sure he’d definitely appreciate the gesture.

Which meant...

I needed to do something else. Something that I could feel good about.

And if I’d learned anything in my extensive background of dating... it was the fact that girls liked presents.

Nash wasn’t a girl, he wasn’t even human ... but I was going to apply the theory and

cross my fingers that it would still work with him too.

Which was exactly why I glanced over my shoulder once to make sure his guard wasn't looking before I slipped into the edge of the trees. I didn't feel bad about it this time because I had no intention of running off. I wasn't even going to go far enough that they couldn't hear me if I yelled.

Apparently there was some bloodthirsty orc out there wanting to fuck with Nash... and honestly, as much as I wanted to find Rainn, if he was having anything near the same kind of time that I was right now, there was every chance he'd stab me with a pen and use my blood to write his next book if I tried to rescue him.

I was still going to find him, and I was still waiting anxiously for Nash to help me... but I wasn't as worried about him as I had been when I'd first gotten here.

And that definitely had nothing to do with the big orc and his big orc dick waiting for me in our tent.

"Our tent? Jesus," I muttered to myself, my eyes scanning the area in front of me. It had been dark the last time we'd walked out here, but I was pretty sure I'd spotted some purple flowers off the trail that Nash had said were great for calming people and good to crush into a paste and treat wounds with.

By that logic, I figured they'd be safe to touch, and that meant I could use them. I didn't want to calm him or treat his wounds, but they were the same color as his eyes.

I glanced over my shoulder one more time to make sure no one was watching me and could spoil the surprise, then I stepped off the path.

And... of course...

It took me less than three minutes to realize I'd probably picked the wrong direction... and by the time I'd spun in a few circles trying to figure out exactly where I'd meant to go, I wasn't even sure what direction the path was on anymore.

I really wasn't sure why I'd been so convinced that I was good with the whole "nature and survival" shit before now, but I was proving myself wrong on more than one occasion.

My jaw set and I let out a small grunt.

"Okay. Deep breath, Kai." I closed my eyes and tried to listen. Maybe if I could hear where the water was, I could make my way there and follow it back to the lake. It wasn't exactly perfect, but I knew there was a trail that led from there back to the camp.

Ah, fuck. The camp. I'd already been gone for too long. Nash was probably going to—

A hand sliding around my throat cut off my train of thought, but the panic that welled up in my chest came to a screeching halt at the scent that hit my nose and the voice that rumbled in my ear. "Are you trying to run again, Little Mate? I thought you knew better?"

"I wasn't. I was looking for—"

He shifted his hand over my mouth and started to drag me back through the woods before I had a chance to explain.

I was pretty sure I fought back on instinct more than anything. I hadn't been trying to run this time, and it wasn't really my fault if I apparently had no sense of direction in his world.

Because whatever faults I'd been about to admit to myself, I was taking it back now that he was treating me like a child. I was completely capable. He was just being an asshole. And I wasn't sure why I'd thought I needed to do anything nice for him.

Especially when he led me straight back through the trees and half dragged, half threw me into our tent like he'd never needed the path to begin with.

“You can't just throw me around any time you—”

I didn't get a chance to get worked up, though, because he was coming in after me and dragging me to the bed. For a second, I thought we were going straight back to square one—that he was going to tie me up and show me that whatever had been happening between us over the last few days had just been some weird orc-dick magic, and the warmth that I'd been feeling, the sense of home was all a bunch of bullshit.

Fuck... Thinking that hurt more than it should have, but the pain washed away when Nash dragged me over his lap and brought his hand down on my ass with a loud smack that ripped a shout from my throat.

“What the fuck , Nash?” I snapped out as soon as I caught my breath, but he'd already raised his hand up and brought it down again on my other cheek.

The pain that reverberated where his palm met my ass spilled all across my thighs and shot straight to my cock.

Oh.

Oh.

Well then.

Learn something new every day, huh?

“Nash.” I panted his name again, aware that my voice was more of a moan than protest now—and I knew he was aware too, because I could feel his cock getting thicker beneath me. The sensation made me squirm against him, and my squirming was apparently enough to earn me another slap that made my ass sting and the fire slowly catching in my stomach blossom across my chest. I was pretty sure I was going to choke on non-existent smoke.

“Did I not tell you what would happen if you ran again?” He rumbled the words behind me as he trailed his fingers along the places he’d hit to soothe the sting. I risked looking at him over my shoulder, and I saw it—the heat in his eyes. The want.

The desire.

The need.

The fact that he liked this just as much as I did.

And fuck it, I was really, really liking it. Maybe I’d never been this turned on before because no one had ever thrown me around like this. Whatever. I was into it.

Into it enough that I intentionally wriggled against him again, which earned me another slap before Nash dragged my shorts down my hips and threw them across the room.

The cool air stinging against my skin told me the next hit was going to really, really hurt if I didn’t do something, so I cried out his name again.

“Nash, wait!” His body was tense, but he didn’t swing his hand down. “It’s... uh... only fair that you take your pants off too, right?”

The tension didn't leave, but I felt his cock twitch beneath me. He shifted me off his lap just long enough to kick his boots off and slide the soft leather he wore down his legs, throwing it to the side. Nash's fingers were so fast stripping me, that I didn't realize what he was doing until the cool air kissed my skin.

Suddenly, we were both naked, and he was pulling me back across his lap...

And it was way, way hotter than it should have been. I could feel the sticky trail of precum leaking from his cock and along my abdomen where it dragged thick and heavy between us, and a small part of me wanted to beg him to lick me clean again like he did the last time he came on me.

I wanted...

Fuck...

His hand smacked my ass again and I let out another low sound, something between a moan and a shout. I felt his hips spasm this time, grinding his cock against my stomach.

When his fingers moved to smooth over the burn that the slap left behind, they dipped lower, running between my cheeks so he could apply the lightest pressure against my hole.

Just that touch was enough to nearly make me come there on his lap—but... no.

I wanted more.

I needed more .

And we were in his tent now, so there was no reason for us not to do everything that I

could possibly think of.

And part of that everything was me getting more up close and personal with his cock now that I had more time to explore it.

I wanted to see his knot. To feel it. I'd been vaguely aware of it the last time I'd touched him, but I'd been so cum drunk—which I couldn't believe was a thing, but I didn't have any other words for it—that I hadn't even thought about the way the base of his shaft had pulsed under my touch, grown thicker. When he'd told me about it after the fact, I'd actually been a little mad that I hadn't realized at the water's edge.

But I could see it now . I could see it and I could touch it. I could have it.

“Nash...” I shifted so that I slid between his legs, dropping to my knees on the floor in front of him—he didn't try to stop me. When I ran my nose along the length of his cock, he let out a low groan. “Can't you think of a better way to make me say sorry?”

His lashes fluttered in dark half-moons against his cheeks before he fixed me with the hottest, most arrogant stare I'd ever seen in my life.

“You're already on your knees for me, Kai. Why don't you show me just how sorry you are?”

Fuck yes.

I stuck my tongue out and leaned forward, running a slow line along the length of his cock from root to tip. Exactly how did you give an “ I'm sorry I scared you, but I'm not sorry I wanted to do something nice ” blow job? Were there some kind of rules and regulations?

Did I just do my sloppy best and hope it was enough?

The only other time I'd done this, I was half out of it and completely drunk on wanting him. I was already on my way to being in that exact place again... so I wanted to make it count.

I wanted to experience all of this.

I wanted to experience all of him .

“Look at you...” Nash’s voice was a soft, deep rumble. The fingers that had been so practiced smacking against my still-stinging ass were soft as he threaded them through my hair. “So eager. So willing.”

It was weird how right he was. I'd gone from adamantly denying that I wanted anything to do with a guy to happily getting on my knees so I could worship a monster dick. But... how was I supposed to resist when he looked so mouthwatering?

I couldn't resist when it felt so good to watch the way his expression went hazy as I licked along the length of him again, then tried to unhinge my jaw like a snake so I could take him to the back of my throat.

As soon as I felt his head hit against the roof of my mouth, I gagged around him, and Nash's fingers in my hair tightened.

God, he liked watching me struggle, didn't he? Even though I knew he'd probably wrap his hand around his shaft to make it easier on me if I let him, he liked watching me work for it.

I thought back to the blow jobs I'd had and realized... I'd never really thought about it. It felt good, and I was happy to return the favor, but... I'd never really paid attention to every micro expression on the face of the person I was with. And maybe that meant I was a bad lover.

Or maybe it meant it had never really mattered like it did now. I know I'd never watched anyone's face when I was between their legs to see the moment their pupils shifted, when a flush of color came up on their cheeks. I never would have willingly put myself in danger of suffocating because it made my partner gasp and shudder, made them tighten their fingers in my hair and urge me down another inch...

Probably because none of my partners had another inch for me to go down before this, but still.

I was so wrapped up in the way he was looking at me that it took me a second to notice when he started to grow thicker beneath my fingers again. We weren't in the low light of the woods this time, and I wasn't so cum-drunk that I couldn't pay attention to what was happening. I licked Nash eagerly, sucking on him harder than I had before because I had a dual purpose now.

I wanted to make him come his brains out so he'd forget that he was angry at me... and I wanted to see his knot. It was a really weird fascination, but... well... the dick I had in my room certainly didn't have one, and I could only imagine what the orgasm would have been like if it had, since the other one had nearly put me in the hospital.

And as Nash shivered above me and pushed me off his cock, I realized I was going to get my wish.

"Open up, Little Mate. I would see your tongue coated in my spill. I want to watch you fill yourself with it." He slid two fingers between my lips with a rough insistence that let me know how sensitive they were from being stretched around his girth... but it didn't matter. My tongue shot out obediently and I took hold of his shaft and pumped him once... twice...

And then groaned as he shuddered above me and started to come.

It was hard to keep my eyes open to watch, hard to concentrate on the feel of his shape changing around my hand. There at the base of his shaft, he started to swell. It made my eyes widen, nearly made me choke on the load he was painting my lips and chin with... but...

Fuck, it felt good in my hands—hot, thick. Tight. I swallowed and leaned forward without thinking, uncaring that I was disobeying his order.

“Kai, wh—oh, gods.” He cut off whatever he was about to say, because my mouth was on him again, and this time I was running my tongue across the length of his knot like I could find a way to get it between my lips the same way I’d tried to take his entire cock down my throat.

The skin there was hotter, tight and taut. The texture beneath my tongue was strange, and when I dipped down to the base of his shaft where the swelling started, and sucked, I felt a stripe of his cum splash across my back as he spurted again.

That was good . I raised my hands and squeezed the knot experimentally. Above me Nash growled, and I realized exactly how much my cock was aching between my legs. I wanted to touch myself, but I didn’t want to let him go. I wanted to climb on top of him and force his dick into my ass the same way I’d done with that dildo, but I was pretty sure he’d completely wreck me from the inside out if I did that.

So I mouthed at his knot again, running my tongue all along the curve of it like I was trying to memorize every inch.

Nash snarled again when I slid my tongue down, lapping at his balls for a second before rolling my attention back to the girth in front of me that wasn’t going down .

He wasn’t going soft.

He was—

“Up,” he snapped, and for a second it seemed like my dick was taking the direction better than my body because it twitched so hard it nearly slapped against my stomach. He didn’t give me time to try to process what he was saying. He used his hands in my hair and pulled me to my feet, yanking me into his lap so I could suddenly feel the press of his cock against me, slick with saliva and cum.

“Nash.” I whined. Actually whined . Jesus, it was like I was in heat or something. Like if I let him stick his dick in me right now, he really would fill me up until it actually took .

The thought made me groan again, and I rolled my hips, voicing it aloud. “If you fucked me right now, d’you think you’d get me pregnant, Nash?”

“Careful, Kai. If you tempt me further – ”

I didn’t want to hear it.

“Fuck me like it could actually happen.” It wasn’t a question, or some sweet ask. It was a demand that I emphasized by sliding my fingers through some of the cum dripping from my chin and lifting myself so I could play against my hole with it.

My body went tense from the touch... because as much as I wanted it—and fuck, I really wanted him—I was still pretty sure there was no way I was going to be able to take him without dying.

And... I was pretty sure it would be worth it. They could write it on my tombstone...

Kai Cross

Died riding the biggest dick of them all.

Proof that apparently no one is straight in the face of orc cock.

I'd take it.

“Do you think your little body can handle that, Kai?” Nash asked, but he was already shifting around to grab a bottle of some clear liquid that I hadn't noticed beside the bed. He dribbled some onto his fingers so I could see the shine of it in the dim light of the tent. “Do you think you could take me filling you up?”

No, I didn't think I could at all, but I wasn't going to tell him that, because I really, really wanted to try. More than I'd wanted anything. No... I didn't just want it.

“I need it,” I murmured, and realized how true it was. Maybe it was that whole fated-mates thing he kept talking about... because it was getting harder and harder to deny that being around Nash and not being able to touch him was pretty much torture.

I needed him more than I needed air, more than I needed food or water. I was pretty sure if he didn't fuck me tonight, I might die.

“Kai...” He drew my name out slowly, like he was giving me one last chance to change my mind, one last chance to get out of this with my body intact.

Fuck that, though.

“Fuck, Nash, do you need me to beg? Fine. Please . I need it.” I leaned in and ran my tongue slowly along his lower lip. “I need you.”

I gave him credit for trying to be good, because it was obvious he had... but trying only got you so far when you'd been sleeping in the same room as someone for days

on end, feeling their body so close to yours...

Feeling how right everything would be if you just let yourself touch one another.

No more running.

No more denying.

Just... this.

Just us.

He slid his fingers along my spine, trailing oil down to the swell of my ass and teasing against my crack. It was strange, but everywhere it touched my skin, I felt the softest tingle.

“What is that?” The question came out on a gasp when he dipped his hand further and his digits tapped against my hole. My body tensed at the sensation, and he leaned forward, sucking against my neck until I shuddered and pressing wet kisses against my stubble.

“It’s a special oil made so small bodies like yours can handle sex with bodies like mine.”

“I’m not small, I’m—”

He rocked his cock against my ass, and just the feel of his fat head pressing against me was enough to make the words cut off in my throat. He didn’t even say anything, he just arched his brow and looked at me like he was daring me to finish my sentence.

What an asshole.

I pressed my lips together, but that didn't last for long, because he took that opportunity to slide his finger around the rim of my ass again. The slow, teasing circle drew my breath from my lungs in a punched-out sound that I fed into the curve of his neck. He wasn't even inside me, and I was already trying to picture exactly how good it would feel to ride him the way I had that damn dildo.

This really was all that stupid thing's fault.

When I opened my mouth to tell him that, he cut me off with the tip of his finger dipping inside me, just enough to let me feel the tingle that was slowly spreading along my skin catching fire beneath it, tickling my nerve endings and promising me that this was going to be good.

That this was going to be better than anything I'd ever felt before.

He took his time, thrusting just that little half inch in and out of me until my body was squirming and I was the one who rocked back against him, forcing him in deeper. The satisfied grin on his face told me he'd been waiting for that, for me to take charge—like he wanted me to dictate my own pleasure. Lucky for him, I wasn't the kind of guy who usually gave over control when I was in bed, and I wasn't about to start now.

“Do you see how good it feels?” he murmured, and I answered by rocking my body back again and forcing his finger in to the knuckle. It should have burned. In theory, I knew it should have burned, but that oil he'd slicked his hand with was doing something magic in my ass, because all I could feel was the way he was stretching me, the way his finger glanced against what I could only assume from a hundred romance novels was my prostate, because I lit up like a damn firecracker and shouted, wrapping my arms around his neck and tangling my fingers in his long hair so I could keep myself steady.

“I want more.” The demand came out as a low groan, edged on by the tug of my fingers in his hair. Nash seemed more than happy to oblige—he didn’t stop to check in on me, he didn’t ask me if I was sure. He just trusted that I knew my body, and when I rocked back, there was a second finger there with the first. It almost ached, it was almost too much. It felt like he was already filling me up, and I knew that I was nowhere near as full as I’d be when I asked for his cock... because fuck, I was definitely going to ask for his cock. If playing around with that orc dildo had been some kind of warning, I really should have listened.

Nash’s fingers in my ass felt so fucking good, I was pretty sure I was going to get addicted. Scratch that—there was a real possibility I already was, and we’d just gotten started.

I was pretty sure if I didn’t get to have this for the rest of my life, I would actually wither away and die.

Dramatic, maybe? But still true.

I was careful when I tested the way it felt to rock myself up and down on two thick fingers, lifting my body slowly and feeling the burn in my thighs where they bunched as I shifted my weight. When I took him in to the knuckle again, I dropped my head to his shoulder, pressing my nose to the curve of his neck so I could inhale his scent.

“Are you going to fuck me, Nash?” I asked in the softest voice I could. “Are you going to do what you said and fill me up? I don’t think I can fit your knot inside me, but if you try hard enough, maybe we can figure it out. I’d let you split me open if it meant I could feel all of you.”

Dirty talk I could do—dirty talk I’d done so many times before. And maybe it had all been practice for this moment, because Nash let out a low growl that reverberated through my entire body and flipped me over onto the bed.

He came back with three fingers this time, and the feeling of him stuffing them inside me until my ass stretched around the digits was enough to make my eyes roll back in my head. I was all talk—fuck, I was all talk. If it weren't for the magic oil he was using, I'd probably be crying for him to slow down. Instead, I brought my eyes up to meet his.

“Is it good?” There was that moment of concern, but he kept fucking me like he already knew my answer. His fingers crooked, so every time he pulled back he ran over that bundle of nerves that I definitely should have been playing with all along, because it tore the truth from me when I'd intended to keep it to myself.

“You're the only one I've ever done this with... the only person who has ever been inside me.” My body nearly exploded when I felt him add a fourth finger. It stretched me wider than I thought possible—it felt better than anything ever had in my life. “Oh, god... fuck... I... mmmfuck. Yeah, Nash. It's good. So fucking good... I need to feel all of you.”

Apparently that was enough to push him to the edge of his limits, because he withdrew his fingers and brought the bottle back, upending half the contents of it onto his cock and coating his entire length with it.

God... god, damn it. He was really, really big.

Big and slick and ready to split me open... and fuck me, that was exactly what I wanted. I drew my legs up when he crawled on top of me, and his fingers gripped the back of my thighs to spread me even wider. It took me a second to realize what he was doing—he was staring down the length of my body where he'd fucked me open, where my hole was probably slightly gaping, slick with the oil... waiting for him. Instinctively, I clenched on air and he let out a low groan, rocking forward and pressing the fat head of his cock against my entrance.

“Breathe for me, Little Mate. I will try to be gentle, but you’re too tempting, and I—”

I leaned up, and pressed my mouth to his. “I’m not delicate, Nash, and I’m going to be pissed if you treat me like I am now. I won’t break. Now fuck me with that big monster dick before I tie you down and do it myself.”

He took me at my word and thrust in, and I had to wonder if I was actually the biggest liar that had ever lied. It didn’t hurt—the oil really was magic—but I could still feel the way he was pressing into me, the way I seemed to stretch impossibly around him. The way he was filling me more than anything I’d ever felt in my life. I clenched my body again, and he actually let out a low snarl that vibrated through me where his chest was pressed to mine.

“I want to fill you, to fuck you so hard that my knot forces its way through your tight little hole, Kai. But I will save that...” He thrust in one inch at a time until I could feel the swell at the base of his shaft playing against my entrance, wreaking havoc on my nerves because I could imagine exactly how much more the stretch would be when I had it. “I’ll save it for the day we mate. When I can bury myself inside you and stay there for hours, filling you over and over again until you faint on my knot.”

He started to move while my mind was dancing with the thought of him doing exactly what he’d said. His slow, shallow thrusts still felt like they were burning straight through me, hitting behind my ribcage, threatening to split me wide open even though his knot kept him from bottoming out. As filthy as his talk was, I could tell he was still holding back. He worked, lifting my leg slightly so the next time he thrust in, his cockhead pressed firmly against that little bundle of nerves again when he dragged himself out.

“Fuck... right there. That’s good.” My fingers tangled in his hair again, and my other leg lifted like I could wrap it around him and pull him closer. I wanted more. I wanted so much more. He was still holding so much back, making sure my first time

was good, that it was everything I could ever want.

That it was everything I'd never known to dream about until I met him.

This time, when he rocked forward, I canted my hips up, so the pressure of his knot was even more firm against my already stretched entrance—I wondered if I really would be able to force it through some day if we fucked enough.

Because I wanted to fuck him again.

And again.

So many fucking times.

“Harder,” I finally panted, ready to beg if I had to, and I think he knew it. This time when he fucked into me, I felt that pressure tighter against my ass. He brought his oil-drenched fingers up and wrapped them around my cock, and my lids fluttered shut when he started to pump me in time with his slow, steady thrusts.

“There’s so much more I will give you, Little Mate. So much more I want to show you.” His voice was a low rumble against my skin, playing havoc on my senses as he thrust into me harder, faster, like he was keeping perfect pace with the thundering of my heart and the way my body seemed to demand more.

More.

“More.” I said it like he drew the word out of me, and he squeezed the base of my shaft, then dropped his head to catch my mouth in a filthy kiss as he gave in to my demand.

I didn’t realize how much he’d been holding back until then, because the next thrust

caught me off guard, punching the air from my lungs and making me scream against his lips—it was like he'd planned it, because he drank the sound down hungrily.

Nash kept up a relentless pace, fucking into me over and over and over until I was a whimpering, writhing mess beneath him and I was pretty sure I was going to blow my load.

“Nash... Nash, I'm almost there, I want... mmm... fuck... more.”

More.

If he gave me any more, I might actually fly apart, but he took me at my word and stopped, pressing his dick as deep inside me as he could, so the swell of his knot was so much pressure I was seeing stars... and then he pumped my cock until my body spasmed around him and I came on a shout.

My vision was hazy when I realized he'd stopped working my shaft—it took me a second to focus on why, and when I did, I nearly lost it. He held his cum-drenched fingers up between us, licked a small stripe along his thick digits, and then dropped his hand back down. I thought he was going to take hold of my dick again at first... but he kept going lower.

Lower.

Lower, until I felt the press of one digit against the tight stretch of my ass.

“When my knot is in you, it will be so much more than this... but Kai... mmm... I love the thought of us mixing inside you.” Nash rocked one finger forward, sliding just the tip of his digit in alongside his cock and I completely lost it—my back bowed and I felt my body spasm in some kind of orgasm aftershock that shouldn't have been possible, but apparently orc dick magic didn't care.

When I felt a splash of heat against my stomach, Nash started to move again in slow, shallow thrusts that worked his finger in alongside his cock.

I couldn't take it.

I couldn't take it anymore.

“Fuck... come... I wanna feel it. Nash, I need to feel it.”

I wasn't sure if it was the feel of his finger adding the extra bit of tightness or my begging, but Nash came on a roar I was pretty sure everyone in the camp could hear. It was a good thing I didn't care—better that I couldn't think of it anymore when the sudden wash of heat filling my ass completely pushed me over into absolute orgasm nirvana. My body clenched and spasmed while Nash pumped his seed into me, curling over me and kissing me so hard I was pretty sure he drew blood.

I didn't care.

I couldn't breathe.

I couldn't move.

All I could do was feel ... and all I could feel was exactly how right this was.

Exactly how perfect this was.

Exactly how my body had been made to fit against Nash's.

I didn't realize he was slowing down until he rolled off me, pulling his cock free from my ass, though he kept his finger buried inside. He gave me a few more quick, shallow thrusts, rocking the tip of the digit against my prostate until I raised my arm

and weakly tried to slap him.

“You’re going to kill me.” The words came out in a slur, and I lolled my head to the side to get a look at him.

Pleasure was painted across his features, but underneath that was a warmth... affection I’d never seen directed toward me before him.

That look made me feel like I was floating even more than the orgasm had.

Shit... this felt an awful lot like...

Fate.

Chapter fourteen

Nash

I 'd worried I was too rough with him, that I'd somehow broken my sweet human when he'd urged me to let go, to give him everything I could... but he was still curled against my chest, and the low sound he made when he stretched and I knew he could feel how hard I'd fucked him didn't seem angry.

It seemed like he liked it. He'd made the same noise when I carefully laid him out on the bed after we'd finished and cleaned him up, first with my tongue and then with a cloth.

He'd made the same sound when I crawled back into the bed beside him and wrapped him up in my arms, refusing to let him go now that I had him exactly where I wanted him.

That damn sound could bring a god to its knees.

It was nearly enough to make me roll him beneath me again, but instead, I bent and pressed a gentle kiss to the side of his neck. It made him turn, and he smiled at me as he tilted his head.

“Uh, does that mean you forgive me?” His expression was so sweet I nearly melted into it, and I couldn't quite summon up the irritation I knew I should have felt. The only thing I could feel was the warmth of his body, the way he was curled so close to me.

The way his fingers kept tracing the lines of my muscles, the dips on my stomach, like he was trying to memorize them.

“I was... worried. That’s all.”

Kai’s expression fell. Guilt, written in clear lines across his features, came out in his tone. “I really didn’t mean to scare you, Nash. I wasn’t trying to go anywhere. I just...” He made a slight face, blowing out a breath. “I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but as handy as I am when it comes to fixing things, I might not be the best when it comes to the whole... you know, wilderness survival shit.”

The embarrassed look that crossed his face was enough to pull a small laugh from my chest.

“I think I’ve noticed, between you banging your head on a barrier, running from predators, and getting lost in the woods when you were...”

“Trying to find flowers,” he grumbled. “See if I do anything nice for you ever again.”

It took me a second to realize what he meant. He’d mentioned going out to look for something when I’d found him, but I didn’t realize...

“Why were you getting flowers, Kai?”

Red chased across his cheekbones, but he lifted his eyes and glared at me almost defiantly. “I know you aren’t used to things that humans do, but when we like someone... we... fuck, we get them flowers, okay? I just wanted...” He trailed off as I rolled him over, and the sight of his confused and angry expression framed by my hair falling around his face was almost too beautiful, too much.

Too perfect.

“You were getting me flowers?”

“Nash, I swear to God—”

“Because you like me.”

I didn’t think he could get more red, but he somehow did. He clenched his eyes shut and tried to turn his head, but I caught his face in my hands and leaned down while he muttered under his breath.

“I’m really questioning if I do right now. You’re about to get hit with a third act breakup, Nash.”

There was something so sweet about Kai and the way he wouldn’t look at me, the pink dancing across his cheeks... and the fact that he’d tried to find a way with his strange human custom to show me he cared about me. I knew the draw between us because I could feel the strength of it... but still...

I leaned in, nuzzling against his neck until the tension in his body went loose, and he looked up at me with a grumpy expression.

“Next time you want to go pick flowers, ask me and I’ll go with you.”

He blew out a breath, slapping my shoulder. “That ruins the whole... I don’t know, element of surprise. I wanted...” Kai trailed off, shaking his head again, like the words he wanted to say caught somewhere just beneath the surface, at the back of his throat—too big to utter aloud, too complex to grasp.

I understood. There were a dozen human words to express affection, hundreds more in the languages I knew... but I still wasn’t sure any of it measured up to how I felt about him.

I'd known the moment I met my mate I wouldn't be able to resist them, that I wouldn't think twice about what I wanted.

But I still wasn't sure Kai even believed in mates—I wasn't sure that he'd truly accepted everything about himself when it came to what was between us.

At the thought that he might still try to leave, something in my chest twisted, and apparently the pain spilled into my expression.

“Hey, wait.” Kai sat up, fingers impatiently pushing through his hair so he could look at me. The concern in those two words was something I couldn't ignore, and I let out a soft sigh before he even asked. “What's wrong?”

“I worry that you will want to leave this world.” I spoke carefully, because it was on the tip of my tongue to promise him anything, to tell him I'd go back with him... but I couldn't do that. I couldn't abandon my people any more than I could leave the problem with Koth unsolved. He was out there somewhere, and I knew he was probably planning something—he'd been quiet for far too long.

We just had to wait to see what that something was.

“I...” Kai's brows dipped, one little line of worry pinched between them. “I don't... I don't want to leave?” He said it like he wasn't even sure of it himself, and then he sat there for a second like he was tasting the words on his tongue. “Yeah... I don't want to leave, Nash.”

The confidence in his voice the second time he spoke made my heart race.

“You want to stay?”

He nodded once, and the corner of his mouth lifted in a smile. “Yeah. I think I do. I

mean... I still need to find my friend—” He gave me a pointed look at that, but I wasn’t going to let guilt overtake me. Things were too dangerous to go to the city, and any man with half an eye would see how gorgeous he was... gorgeous and unmated and... “But yeah. I want to stay here. With you.” The last two words were spoken in a soft whisper, and he dropped his gaze when he said it.

It made me move forward, roll him until he was pressed to the mattress beneath me and I could cup his chin to bring his eyes back to mine. They were wide, just a little afraid, but they were defiant too.

Full of determination.

Emotion.

“With me?”

“Yeah. I mean, I’ll need to go back to my world sometimes, I’m sure. I have tools and stuff there. Books. Things that I could use to help, so...” That fear spiraled almost out of control, bursting across his features like glass shattering into a thousand tiny pieces, reflecting the light of the sun, the moon, the stars.

But he was still looking at me.

“Kai?”

“That means you need to mark me, right? So...” He tilted his head to the side, like it was that simple, that easy. Like what he was saying wasn’t the only thing I’d been waiting for my entire existence, my whole life. “Claim me, Nash.” He bit his lip and looked at me through his lashes. “I want you to.”

Chapter fifteen

Kai

As soon as the words came out of my mouth, I realized two things. I was scared shitless, because this was more than just fucking a guy. It was more than just dating someone. Nash had explained it to me—the way we’d be tethered together forever, the way we’d fade without one another. It wasn’t just getting married, or tying yourself to someone. It was entwining your entire destiny, your entire fate ... your life and soul with someone... and...

Fuck, I wanted it.

I wanted him.

That was the other thing I realized. I was scared as fuck, but I wanted this more than I’d wanted anything in my entire life.

“Kai.” The rumble of his voice had gone deeper, a near growl when he said my name. When I looked up at him, his violet eyes were all pupil, like my words alone were enough to get him into a feral state. “You can’t just say things like that.”

I blinked up at him slowly. Nash looked like he was barely holding himself together, and I had to admit that I liked it. I liked the fact that it was so easy to make him lose his cool. I liked the fact that he wanted me so much that I could feel the heat of his body and the way his cock was getting hard from my words alone.

I liked the fact that he wanted me here with him so much... that he knew this was my home, my place to belong, just as much as I did.

I liked him.

Okay, maybe more than like.

“I’m not just saying it,” I finally murmured, but I was still cautious when I brought my hand up and pressed it gently to his chest. His heart was thundering beneath my palm, and I let out a startled laugh.

It was going the same rate as mine.

“What?” he asked when I laughed again.

“Twinsies.”

The confused expression on his face made it worse. I was at least somewhat aware that it was probably because I was nervous. I’d just told a guy that I’d met less than a month ago—who was also an orc—that I wanted to pretend we were like... penguins or something.

Mating for life.

“Like they do on the Discovery Channel,” I said, then dissolved into an actual giggle fit. I didn’t stop until Nash brought his hand down to mirror my own, placing his fingers to my chest, over my speeding heart. He moved forward, pressing his forehead to mine so my world was suddenly swimming in a sea of violet and warmth, and he smiled.

“Are you sure you haven’t gone mad, Kai? You seem—”

“Nervous.” I filled in for him before he questioned it. “I’m nervous. I was like... pretty sure I was straight a few weeks ago. I was going to spend the rest of my life going from job to job, and eventually my best friend was going to find a boyfriend or kick me out so he could fill my room with dildos and I’d be living alone in an apartment... and... I don’t know.” I turned my head, the intensity of his stare almost too much for me. “You changed that. I didn’t ask for it, but you did it anyway.”

His lips brushed my cheek, along my jawline, his tusks scratching against my skin, but his mouth was still so soft when he kissed at the wet sting I hadn’t realized was caught in my lashes. “You were never meant to be alone, Kai. You were just waiting for this. For me.”

I swallowed hard, but I couldn’t stop myself from nodding.

“I know. That’s why I’m telling you, I’m sure. I want this. I want you... so... I don’t know... whip out your dick and bite down, baby?”

Shit. There was probably a sexier way to say that, wasn’t there? The thought of him knotting me was nearly enough to make my entire body go numb with need and fear all at once. The thought of him biting me until he left a scar...

It was all overwhelming.

Intense.

And it sounded so good.

“Kai...” He said my name again, and this time he actually pushed up from the bed, and I was still laying there in a daze by the time he’d stalked halfway across the room. I knew what he was doing—he was putting distance between us so he wouldn’t just act on impulse and instinct. It was ridiculous, because that was exactly what I

wanted.

“Come on, Nash. What’s the point of waiting? You want it, and I want it. So—” I stood, stalking after him, and he moved in a blur of motion that stole my breath. His hand caught my throat, and he pushed me to the edge of his tent, so my hips hit against the heavy wooden table he had set up. His eyes were a blaze of fire when he looked at me.

“What I want, Kai, is to send you running into the night undressed just as you are now. I want to hunt you through the woods...” He leaned in close, and his tusks scraped against my neck as he dragged his teeth in a slow line over my pulse. “I want it to be like the days of old when we claimed our mate through fierceness and demand. I want to fuck you where I catch you, knot you until you’re screaming for me. I want to bite you and claim you under the moonlight for the stars to witness and the gods themselves to envy.”

The pressure of his teeth on my pulse was almost enough to make me collapse, and the heat of his breath, the way his fingers were so tight on my skin I was pretty sure he was going to bruise me, pulled an answer from my chest before I thought it through.

“Yeah... no... totally that. All of that.”

Annnnnd... I was pretty sure that broke him. For a good half hour, all he could do was murmur almost unintelligible words and kiss me. It had taken exactly fifteen minutes for him to cave, and he’d taken both our cocks in his hand and jacked us off until I came so hard I was pretty sure I’d melted every bone in my body.

And then he’d spent the next half hour licking me clean and pressing gentle kisses along every inch of skin he could touch until I was floating on a cloud.

Only after that, when I was on the verge of sleep, did he press his lips to my ear and whisper softly, “I will mark you, Little Mate. When we’re in a place where I know it’s safe for you to run, when I know it’s safe for me to hunt you... I’ll make you mine.”

And then... Nash acted like nothing had happened. We woke up the next morning and he pressed a warm kiss to my mouth that left my toes curling and had me wondering if we could go for round two. My body was sore, and my ass felt like it had taken more than just a spanking... but nothing felt broken.

Nothing felt like I wouldn’t be able to do exactly what I wanted.

Which... was why it was weird when he just rolled me under him and took both of our cocks into his hands and pulled an orgasm out of me that way. He licked his fingers clean of cum and kissed me again, feeding me the flavor of us both... then pulled me up and got me dressed so we could get breakfast, like he hadn’t fucked my brains out so hard the night before that everyone knew what I sounded like when I orgasmed.

At least no one acted like anything was different, other than a few knowing glances I got every now and then.

And... Nash didn’t say anything at all about how I’d propositioned him. We went about our day as usual, though I noticed he kept me firmly pressed to his side, probably so I couldn’t run off to go find flowers for him again.

I wasn’t going to do that, though. Obviously, I wasn’t exactly good at the whole sentimental gesture thing.

Which was why I’d thought the whole offer to be his mate would have gotten a better response.

But we carried on like I hadn't said anything, and at the end of the day, he came into the tent and fed me fruit and cheese from his fingers like he had the first few nights I'd been here... then he kneeled between my legs and sucked me off so hard I nearly blacked out. By the time I came to, he was tucking me into bed and disappearing from the tent.

I was asleep by the time he came back, and I didn't wake up until the next morning, when he had his lips around my cock again and two fingers buried in my ass, slicked with oil. I woke up orgasming, and when I tried to return the favor, Nash simply pushed me back down and straddled my hips, then stroked himself off until he came all over my chest.

This time he didn't lick me clean... he just rubbed the cum against my skin until I was pretty sure everyone in camp was going to know exactly what he smelled like.

Once he was satisfied, he cleaned me up and helped me get dressed, brushing me off when I tried to bring up the whole mate thing again.

If I didn't know any better, I'd wonder if he'd gotten what he wanted, and now he wasn't going to follow through on his end of the deal.

If it wasn't for the fact he was obsessed with me, only letting me out of his sight when he disappeared at night, I'd probably have accused him of it.

And on the third night, when he finger fucked me and tried to leave me asleep, I forced myself to sit up. I waited until he came back, with my arms crossed over my chest, and the second he walked into the tent, I spoke.

“So, are you going to fucking bite me or what?”

There. Straightforward and to the point.

And it was like I'd lit some kind of fuse. Nash stalked forward and his fingers found my throat, like he was picking up exactly where he'd left off when I asked before. The low sound that ripped from my chest was half protest, half moan. This was what I was missing—the feral look in his eyes, the heat and passion and need.

It was back now, and I wanted to push him over the edge.

I wanted—

“I’ve been doing my best not to break you before tonight, Little Mate.” The low growl of his words caught me off guard, and he released me just long enough to grab another bottle of that magic oil. “I needed enough time for your body to recover so you could run—and I needed to make sure it was safe. Now...” He pressed the bottle into my fingers. “I want you to prepare yourself... fuck yourself open, slick yourself for me like you’re an animal in heat. I promise you, Little Mate, when I catch you—and I will catch you—I won’t be gentle.”

My entire body tensed, and I felt that fuse I'd lit in him go off and send me sparking into flame. I intentionally opened the bottle and drizzled some of the oil on my fingers, watching the way his eyes widened as I did it.

“Good. Let’s hope you’re fast enough to hold up your end of the deal then.”

Shit. I was all talk and I knew it—I knew he was going to catch me. That was what I wanted, though.

Fate.

It all felt like fate, and I didn’t care if it didn’t make sense, or if it was way too fast. I didn’t care if I was crying straight boy a few weeks ago, or if this was all weird orc magic.

I just knew I wanted him to do exactly what he said.

I wanted him to hunt me, to catch me, to fuck me.

To mate me.

Chapter sixteen

Nash

I'd been consumed with thoughts of this since the moment Kai told me he wanted me to mark him... and now that I finally had the chance, I wasn't sure if I was going to be able to control myself.

I wanted to fuck him so hard we were fused together. I wanted to chase after him as soon as I heard his footsteps retreat into the woods. We'd spent the better part of an hour scouting and making sure there was no one and nothing near, and then I'd set up guards along every path of entry where anyone could possibly come and disturb what we were about to do. We'd even walked a mile-long perimeter, and I'd had our members most skilled in protective magic set up a barrier that would warn us if anyone crossed over it who meant to do harm.

I took every precaution possible, and every second I'd had to wait felt like an eternity of torture that was finally leading up to this moment of pure bliss.

This moment that I'd been waiting for my entire life.

The moment when I would finally get to claim my mate.

Kai was running, and I was certain I wouldn't need long to catch up to him—as long as his legs were, as fast as he was, as strong as he was... I could feel him along every inch of my skin, and I knew exactly where to go.

I took off at a sprint, well aware that the sound of me crashing through the trees could be easily heard by my prey. My prey. The thought sent a wash of heat pooling just beneath my skin, and I knew exactly when he heard me because a low sound that was a mixture of a shout and a groan came from my left, and the sound of branches snapping as he ran harder hit my senses.

He was trying—he truly was trying, but there was no way he was going to get away from me.

“Kai.” I snarled his name, and the sound of him stumbling over something made me smirk. “You can’t run from me. I’ve told you so many times. You’re mine...” I kept up my pace, and I was pleased that he did too. My fit mate, my perfect mate.

Mine.

Mine, mine, mine.

The word kept perfect tempo with the pounding of my heart, and it forced more filthy promises from my chest. “I’m going to catch you, and I’m going to fuck you until you can’t see, until you can’t think... Until the gods themselves see how swollen you are with my cum and the skies break open in rain with their jealous tears.”

In the distance, Kai stumbled again. I heard him collide with something heavy and the low curse that ripped from his chest when he did. I didn’t waste it this time—I put on an extra burst of speed and spilled through the trees, coming out in time to see him scrambling over a fallen log. He looked back at me as I came into view and I saw it on his face.

Fear mixed with arousal, desire and terror intermingling. His entire body shuddered when he caught sight of me, and I wondered if I looked the same.

A predator.

A beast, ready to claim its mate.

I wanted him.

“The more you run, the harder I’m going to fuck you.” The threat came as I cleared the log he’d fallen on with one leap, just in time to see him whipping around a tree. Either he was slowing down on purpose, or he was running out of stamina.

I wasn’t sure which answer I wanted to be more true, because as much as I loved the feel of hunting him through the trees, my cock was so hard it made it almost impossible to think, and the sound of his breath coming in sharp, fast pants just made me jealous.

I wanted to make him make that sound.

I wanted to completely wreck him.

As I came around the tree, I caught sight of him trying to hide behind another. The low rumble of satisfaction that ripped through me was almost too much to hold back... but I managed to quiet my footsteps and circle around him.

In the silence, as I held even my breath so he couldn’t figure out where I was, Kai’s whispered curses came through clearly.

“Fuck... fuck, this is so stupid. I... oh, shit.” And then he took a shuddering breath like he was preparing to take off again.

I moved before he had a chance, spilling around the tree and catching his fist to my face. The pain that rocked through me was nothing compared to the adrenaline, and

the sound that came from his throat when I tore his shirt up and over his head was a balm to whatever injury he might have left behind.

Kai struggled, trying to fight me off like instinct alone was driving him... but the second I ripped his pants down his hips and flipped him around to press him against the rough bark of the tree he'd tried to hide behind, I felt his body go quiet.

Still.

Like he knew this was right—that this was fated, that it had been from the moment we were both created.

“Oh, fuck. Fuck.” The low hiss of his curses spilled out when I tore the clothes from my body and rocked my hips forward. I hadn't been lying to him when I told him I wasn't going to be gentle, and judging by the oil practically slicking his thighs, I could tell he'd been generous in prep.

Good.

I wanted to take him hard and rough.

I thrust forward in one quick, smooth motion, and Kai's hands slammed onto the bark of the tree. The low moan that tore from his throat felt like it coated the night air, thick and sweet and trying to drown me.

I wanted more.

I needed more.

I pulled back and drove into him harder, and that sound tore out again. Kai slapped the bark one more time, but by my third thrust, he'd brought his hands back to wrap

them around my neck, tangling them in my hair. With his body pressed against the tree and his shoulders dropped back, I had perfect access to his throat.

Perfect access to everything I'd ever wanted, and I could see his pulse jumping just beneath his skin like it was begging me to take it. My hips bucked into him again, a forceful motion that sent the air punching from his lungs in the sweetest symphony and he gasped the words more and harder when he could manage.

"I'm going to fill you, Kai. Fuck. I'm going to knot and fill you, breed you until your body knows who it belongs to."

In a sudden burst of strength I hadn't expected, he shoved off from the tree. It sent me spilling backward, but Kai was on me before I hit the ground. He crawled up my thighs and slid across my dick, rocking his hips and lining himself up so he could take me back inside him.

"Damn it. My body already knows who it belongs to, Nash. So stop being all talk and fuck me until I can't breathe."

The demand was given with blazing eyes and fingers digging into my hair, and I took him at his word. I flipped him so his back was to the ground and started to fuck him in earnest. This was exactly why I'd been taking my time the past few days tasting and touching him, because I knew tonight would be hard and fast, primal and brutal.

And judging by the way Kai's eyes widened and his body surged up to meet mine when he took my mouth in a vicious kiss, I knew that was exactly what he wanted.

I fucked into him until I could feel the pleasure starting to trickle and tingle through my body, until I knew I wouldn't be able to hold on any longer. When I lifted my head, Kai was already baring his neck to me, like he knew exactly what I wanted.

What I needed.

What had to happen next.

The sensation of my teeth elongating and growing sharper was a pleasurable tingle, but when my bite connected with his neck, everything in me blew wide open. It was like I was breathing for the first time, like the world around me shifted and aligned. I'd been walking on uneven ground before this moment. I worked my mouth on the mark I'd left until my tongue was coated in his blood, until he was all I could taste, could smell, could feel .

Beneath me, Kai spasmed as orgasm overtook him. The hot wash of his cum spilling between us felt like fire on my skin, and his ass clenching around my cock drew me to the edge.

I pulled back, but Kai's fingers in my hair didn't let me go far. He jerked me to him and his teeth—sharper from the magic of fated mates finally finding one another—sank into my neck. The feel of our bond finally falling into place overtook me, and I lost control. My hips snapped, and I fucked him hard enough that I felt him growling and groaning against my skin where he sucked, hard enough that his fingers bruised my shoulders where he held on.

“I'm going to breed you, Little Mate. I'm going to fill you up until you're swollen with my seed. Until you can taste it. Fuck... fuck .” I snarled the promise against his ear, and it made him squirm, rocking up against me harder, his already cum-slicked cock jerking against me.

“Do it... fuck. I'm yours... your mate .” He dug blunt nails into my shoulders. “Now show me you're mine too.”

His demand was hot and sharp, a rumble that tore straight to my bones. I came in a

burst of pleasure that was almost too much. The shout that tore from me echoed off the trees, and Kai wrenched back as another flood of heat spilled against my torso when he climaxed again. His legs wrapped around me as my cock began to swell, my knot expanding and locking us together as my cum flooded him.

“Fuck... fuck, oh, fuck . Nash. I can feel it... I can... god damn it. ” He whined in my ear, dragging me closer as my hips gave shallow thrusts, forcing my length deeper and deeper into his ass until my knot was fully locked in place—our bodies joined, incapable of being separated.

It was everything. Pure bliss. All I’d ever wanted as my hips continued to give little spasming twitches so small spurts of cum filled him. I held Kai as my cock fed him every drop of pleasure I had. I could feel it trying to spill from his entrance, wanting to escape, and it made my hips rock forward again to press us even closer and keep it all trapped inside his heat.

“You’re so full, Kai. So warm... mmm...” I leaned down and licked the line of blood I’d left behind from his neck. His fucked-out expression was everything, and his fingers trailing up to trace along the bite he’d left on my skin made me shiver.

“I can feel it... all inside me. I can feel you everywhere.” His lips slowly lifted into a soft smile. Sweet. Warm. My Kai. “Mate, huh? Is this what it feels like to be whole?”

The tenderness in his words was everything, and instead of answering, I responded by leaning down and pressing my lips to his own in a soft kiss that spoke words I didn’t have the language to express.

Whole. Complete. This was everything.

He was everything.

I kissed him until we were both breathless, until our heartbeats had slowed just to speed up again when I licked into his mouth and the taste of our blood mingling together hit our tongues.

I kissed him until my knot slowly started to go down and the cum on my stomach started to cool.

Reluctantly, I pulled out of his ass. My arms were greedy when I drew my mate against me, my slowly softening cock hungry to nestle between his cheeks so I could feel the mess I'd left behind there as it slowly slicked out... and Kai seemed more than happy to let me, though I wasn't sure if it was out of a need to touch me or because he was trying to catch his breath.

Kai was still shivering in my arms when I finally shifted so we were sitting up. His back was to my chest, and it was easy enough to drop my head to his throat and run my tongue along the mating bite that I'd left behind. That connection spilling between us was perfect. It was everything I'd ever dreamed of... everything I'd ever wanted.

And as Kai lolled his head to the side and looked up at me, I knew he thought the same, because I could feel it.

"That was..." He bit his lower lip to hide a smile, but the flush on his face gave him away. "Wow..."

"Mmmm... just wow?" I murmured, wriggling my hips to slide my limp cock against the cum oozing from his hole like a threat. If he gave me a few minutes, I'd get hard again—I'd fuck the spill back into him.

"More than wow. It was..." He winced as he moved, shifting to straddle my hips so he could face me. In the moonlight, I saw a long scratch across his face where he'd

probably caught it on a branch while running. The long golden tresses of his hair were disheveled... but his eyes were bright and alive. “Like... do orcs redo their mating bites like humans redo their wedding vows?” I had no idea what he was talking about, and it seemed like he realized it after a second because he leaned forward, brushing his lips slowly across mine so I could feel it when he smiled. “I mean... can we do that again?”

Oh.

My fingers trailed up along his back and I pulled him flush against me—the heat of his body was so perfect, every curve of well-defined muscle fitting against me like a piece of a puzzle.

“Little Mate...” I pressed another kiss to his lips and nipped the lower pout with a groan. “I’ll chase you through the trees every night and fuck you under the stars if you want me to. Forever.”

It was a promise I would do anything to keep, and the shiver it elicited from him made me want it all the more.

“That... mmm... yeah.” He looked up at me again and trailed his fingers through my hair to draw me in for another kiss. “That sounds just about perfect.”

Chapter seventeen

Kai

If it was possible, Nash was even more protective and insatiable than he'd been before, now that we were mated. If I was being honest, though, I was too. Whatever reservations I might have still had about staying here were gone—whatever worry I might have had that I was making the wrong decision when I told him I wanted to be with him didn't exist.

When the camp packed up to start moving a little closer to the city so Nash could be in easier contact with his brother, I helped everyone. It felt good, spending all day breaking down tents and packing everything into carts so weird critters that Nash called Rhinoppek could haul everything for the journey.

When I asked Nash how often he moved, he gave a slight shrug. “Whenever we feel the need—I have a home in the north where I could settle if I wished, but this...”

I smiled at him before he could finish, threading our fingers together. “This is better.”

And it really was.

And when we settled down to camp that night, Nash laid me out on his bed and took me apart with his tongue, then fed me his cock until he came. I spent ten minutes running my tongue and hands over his knot, fascinated with the way he pulsed under my fingers, completely enraptured with the low groans of pleasure that me touching him tore from his chest.

He was so... responsive. I'd always enjoyed making my partners come, but it was different with Nash.

It was different because I could almost feel his pleasure pouring through me, to the point that I'd gotten hard again after touching him for a few minutes. He'd happily flipped me over and filled me with his cock. The sensation of his knot smacking against my ass, and me being too tight to take it now that it was already full, was almost as hot as mouthing against it.

Monster fucking. I'd listened to so many books, but none of them did a damn thing to really convey how good it was. Especially since Nash seemed to have an inhuman amount of stamina. He wore me out every night, and for someone who'd been sure they were fit as fuck before, I was so sore the next day I was pretty sure he'd discovered muscles I'd never known I had until he fucked them ragged.

And... I was happy with it.

I was happy with him.

I'd never been so happy, and I only felt a little guilty that I wasn't as worried about finding Rainn as I had been when I'd first come here. We were making our way slowly toward the city, so I'd get my answers. And...

Well...

I knew if my best friend knew how I was feeling, he'd want me to stay exactly where I was, being exactly as happy as I was.

He'd want this for me just as much as I'd want it for him.

It kind of made sense, when I thought about it. We'd both been so listless, both

without partners, both looking for something—Rainn with his words, and me with the endless jobs, the endless hookups, the endless books I read and lost myself in.

We'd both been looking for a world we'd never seen before. We just didn't realize it until we got there. I was more than sure now that he'd come through the same way I had, and I was trusting my instincts when they told me he was probably just as happy as I was right about now.

Maybe I didn't always have the best common sense, and sometimes I did a shit job of telling time, or keeping appointments... but my instincts were never wrong when it came to my feelings.

And my feelings were telling me the world was finally spinning on the right axis, that everything had pivoted.

That things were right . Maybe for the very first time in my life, everything was right.

Chapter eighteen

Nash

“Nash, your brother’s letter has finally arrived.”

My head snapped up—Kai’s fingers running idly through my hair, braiding the loose strands, were half putting me to sleep. I was in a daze, still half drunk on the feel of our connection like it had happened minutes instead of days ago. I had to pull myself from the warmth of his touch so I could concentrate.

“Perfect.” I started to stand to take it, and Kai’s hands slid around my chest, drawing me back against him.

“I’m not done yet,” he hissed in my ear, tugging on another strand of my hair before he started back to work—the feel of his lips pressing against the back of my head soothed the sting and made me want to give him whatever he asked for. My eyes lifted to Vex, who shook his head as he glanced between us.

“Read it to me?” I asked, because it was clear I was the one being held captive now. Kai’s fingers were gentle as he kept working.

“He was apparently attacked by some of Koth’s men.” Vex’s voice was soft, and I felt my body tense—though I’d half expected something like that to happen. Before I had a chance to ask, my second in command continued on. “Axum is perfectly fine. A few of his men were injured, but all the wounds were superficial. It seems things have been quiet on the front here because Koth went north to recruit any dissenters he

could find in an attempt to grow his army.”

“Is Axum taking care of them?”

Vex’s eyes continued to scan the letter, and I leaned back fully against Kai’s warmth. His fingers were still combing and working through my hair, but his thighs were squeezed tight around me now. It was like he could sense that this was something important—he could probably feel the tension running through me, if not through our bond, then through the places our bodies touched. Having him here, having him so close, probably made the news settle better than it would have otherwise.

Before Kai, I would already have been out of my tent and preparing to ride to war against Koth for daring to threaten my family, for even thinking about hurting my brother, even if he hadn’t managed to.

“He’s given you permission to handle the matter however you see fit. Apparently...” Vex’s eyes widened, and I didn’t understand the shock on his face until he spoke. “He’s found a mate.”

My jaw dropped.

“What?”

The grin that broke across Vex’s face was full of delight. “A human mate who came through the portal recently.” Kai’s fingers in my hair stilled, and he leaned forward as I held my hand out for the paper Vex held. He kept reading, though. “I think he gave you the go ahead to handle Koth however you please because he... and I quote, ‘ is busy fucking his human mate.’”

I understood Vex’s mirth—Axum had been my biggest doubter when it came to fated mates, and even more sure that he’d settle down some day with an orc of his choosing

who could help him rule.

He'd been adamant about it, and any time I'd brought up the concept of fate and destiny, he'd scoffed.

And now...

"I have permission to go to war and I get to hold this over Axum's head? Perhaps the day isn't completely ruined with news of Koth's attack."

The knowledge that he'd tried to hurt my family was there, burning in the back of my mind... but obviously if Axum was telling me about his newfound mate, he wasn't so wounded that his fingers couldn't admit how wrong he'd been in letter form.

"Everyone's okay, though?" Kai's voice behind me wasn't as amused—his concern was sweet, even a little touching, seeing that he'd never met my brother before.

"There is no mention of casualties in the letter, except the ones we will make when we catch up to Koth and his men." Behind his amusement, I could see the satisfaction on Vex's face. Koth had been closest to him... and now...

Well, now he'd probably be by my side when we led the charge to kill him.

I might have felt guilty for it were it not for the fact that I sometimes thought Vex felt remorse for not realizing what was going through Koth's mind sooner.

"When we settle again, we'll figure out our next move." My hand lifted, fingers catching Kai's where he'd stopped combing through my hair. "Fear not, Little Mate. We'll move further from the city until I resolve this." I brought my attention back to Vex. "Tell everyone we'll be taking the Southern road when we come to it. I'm sure Koth is still close by—I want to stay near, but not so near that everyone is in danger."

Not so near that Kai would be in danger . I knew why I was pivoting, why I was changing directions. It wasn't as though I'd been looking forward to being amongst the throng of people that the city offered, but now...

Now, I wanted to hide Kai away in the safest place I could while I went on a warpath to make sure Koth could never hurt anyone I cared about again.

Then I'd see about my brother and his human fated mate.

The thought made me chuckle again, and I was still laughing as Vex left the tent and I heard his voice shouting to the others.

"Do humans come through the portal very often?" Kai asked after a second, and I shook my head.

"It's somewhat rare. Maybe a few times a year. Do people often go missing from your little town?" There were portals all throughout our world, but the ones directly connecting to my brother's kingdom were few and far between.

"Not really. There's been a few stories, but people always chalked it up to runaways. Or bears." He dropped his chin to my shoulder and nuzzled against my neck. "You're kinda a bear, I guess."

"A bear?"

"Big, furry, sharp teeth. Could probably kill you if it wanted."

I grinned and turned, catching his mouth with mine. "Yes, I suppose I am a bear. Now... come with me. I need to speak with our messenger so I can reply to my brother."

Kai nodded, his expression a little confused as he stood and we made our way out of the tent.

By the time I'd dictated a response to Axum and sent our messenger, Mol, on his way, the sun was hanging high in the sky.

"Are you hungry, Little Mate?"

Kai shook his head. The expression he wore was odd.

"No. I'm not... I just..." He trailed off, and his frown deepened.

"Are you okay? I can get the healers if—"

"No, it's nothing like that." He waved me off and actually pushed my shoulder. "Why don't you go grab something to eat? I'm going to go back to the tent. My head just... hurts." The expression he made when he said it looked like he was in pain. "I think I've probably been doing a little too much to try to prove myself. Well..." He looked me up and down. "That and I've had this big orc pounding me every night, so..."

The soft accusation pulled a laugh from me as I responded. "I'll bring you something to eat. Go rest."

He nodded and started to turn—before he did, he leaned back in and pressed a soft kiss to my mouth.

I probably should have realized then that he had something else on his mind as he took off back toward the tent.

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Chapter nineteen

Kai

It was better to ask forgiveness than permission, right? That and I was pretty sure I'd go crazy if I didn't do something now that I knew where Rainn was. We weren't so far from the city that it would be that hard to find it... and I knew Nash wasn't going to take me there until after he'd found Koth and killed him.

I was halfway to packing up all of my stuff so I could take off at a run toward my friend when I realized something...

I couldn't leave Nash. I was pretty sure if I up and completely disappeared, he'd probably end up waging an entire extra war to find me. That and... from the sound of the letter, even though Nash's brother had been attacked, Rainn hadn't been.

Fucking my own human mate. One who came through the portal around the same time I did. I didn't believe in coincidences that big.

Yeah. He was probably safer where he was than if I found him and dragged him back here with me. Nash's warning about me leading danger straight to him was still stuck in the back of my mind too. Rainn was safer without me there.

Especially if Nash was going to go after this Koth dude and not hold back.

But I still needed to do something ... and by the time I realized that "something" wasn't running away, it was probably too late.

The best I could do was compromise. I knew the road the messenger had taken, because it was the road we were traveling... and he'd only left a few minutes ahead of me. As long as I stayed on the road and not in the trees, I couldn't get lost.

It did take me a little longer than I wanted to write up a quick letter for Rainn—telling him I was here, that I was blaming this all on him and all the smut he'd made me beta read... and letting him know that I was happy.

Fuck , I was happy.

But still, he needed to come and find me ASAP. If he was fucking the Emperor of the whole land, I was pretty sure he'd be able to manage a little request, right? Maybe he could talk his newfound royal lover into coming to help Nash so no one got hurt.

For the third time, I glanced around the camp to make sure that none of Nash's guards were watching me, and then I slipped out and took off at a jog down the road.

It didn't feel good, leaving without telling Nash, but I had a feeling he wouldn't really appreciate me asking Rainn for help—he was stubborn, and he thought he could do everything on his own.

And...

As I continued to jog in the direction of the messenger Nash had dispatched, I realized he sounded exactly like me.

Not asking for help. Doing what he thought was right, what he thought he had to do to take care of the person he... loved.

“Fuck, I really love him, huh?” The words came out soft on my tongue, and they didn't sound strange, they didn't feel wrong .

They were just... there. And real, solid enough that they'd kept me from running off again, weighty enough that they were going to keep me here in this world, by his side.

I was ready to leave everyone and everything behind, because I'd finally found where I actually belonged.

And that place I actually belonged... was probably going to try to spank me again if he found out I'd run off without telling him. As much as the thought made my cock twitch in my shorts, I would probably be better off hurrying up and getting back before he noticed instead.

The good news was, I'd actually gone in the right direction for once. I saw the back of the messenger's head as I rounded the corner.

"Mol!" I shouted his name and let out a small snicker as his head whipped back and his eyes went wide.

"No. No! Back to the camp with you, Kai. If Nash thinks for a moment that I helped you in another escape attempt, I—"

His words cut off, his eyes going wide... and I didn't realize why until his body fell forward with a knife sticking out of his back. His gaze lifted to me—at least he wasn't dead—but...

"Mol?" My attention turned to the trees—to the orc standing there with a grin on his face and another knife in his hand. His eyes were all for the injured man on the ground.

And...

I realized I couldn't let him hurt him.

If Mol was one of Nash's people, he was one of mine, and... he was already hurt because I'd distracted him.

"Kai, no..."

But I was already running forward and tackling the asshole standing there with every bit of force I had. It sent us both falling back, and I realized with the smallest ounce of regret that we were at the top of a hill.

Well, we had been at the top of a hill. We were going down now.

At least I'd gotten the fucker away from Mol.

That didn't stop me from getting the wind knocked out of me as we tumbled into the trees. I landed hard on my back with a painful thud.

I was trying to get my vision to stop swimming when the low grunt of a voice to my left let me know that the guy I'd tackled had obviously landed a little better than I did.

"This is Nash's human?"

Nash's human.

I clutched my fingers in the grass beneath me and glanced up through my hair as I forced myself into a kneeling position. I was close enough to the asshole now that I could get a good look at him—the side of his head was shaved, and his eyes were a hard, dark blue color that made me shiver when he looked down at me.

Because he was looking at me like I was some prize he'd just found, some leverage he could use.

Maybe I didn't always know what was going on, but I was pretty sure this was the guy Nash was hunting down.

The one who he'd been worried about finding me.

The whole reason he'd refused to let me go anywhere out of his sight and the safety of his camp.

"Fuck. I'm about to be Nash's dead human if he realizes what happened." I muttered to myself as I tried to push back a few feet to put some distance between me and the danger that was obviously standing in front of me. "You're, uh... Koth? Yeah?" I tried for a winning smile, but I was pretty sure it failed. What I wanted to do was stand up and swing on him for hurting Mol, for trying to hurt Nash. But... well... I needed to buy some time until I could catch my breath.

I needed to pretend I was just a dumb, helpless human.

"Yes, I am Koth." He'd lost the small knife he was holding at the top of the hill, but that just gave him room to unsheathe a larger blade he'd strapped to his back—the same kind of machete-sword thing Nash carried around. He tipped it beneath my chin, forcing me to look up at him. "And you are correct. You will be a dead human by the time Nash finds you."

Fuck. I knew Nash was being protective, but I'd kind of thought he was being overly protective.

It was weird—I'd been here for a few weeks and I still wasn't used to the fact that I wasn't the biggest guy in the room.

“Look.” I held my hands up, trying to channel my inner helpless maiden that I was sure was buried somewhere deep inside me. “I’m sorry that I tackled you, but I thought you were... uh, trying to rob us up there? I’m just trying to get to the ci—” The sharp feel of metal pressing into my chin cut my lie off before I’d had a chance to get started.

“I know who you are. I know what you mean to him, and I know that you will be the perfect lure to bring Nash to his knees. He would do anything to protect his mate .” From the way the orc in front of me scoffed the word and the snarl on his face, I half wondered if he was some kind of scorned lover, pissed off that Nash hadn’t picked him. He sure as shit was giving off those vibes. “I will make use of your death to make sure his is a long, drawn-out thing.”

I frowned. There was no way I was going to let this fucking asshole use me to get to Nash.

Not when I’d been the dumbass who got myself into trouble even though he’d warned me over and over not to go out alone.

Fuck... not when I was in love with him. Orc magic, dildo-thief karma... whatever it was, I knew it was true.

I loved Nash... which meant I’d do whatever it took to keep him safe. And maybe the asshole in front of me didn’t realize that he wasn’t just dealing with some helpless little human who wasn’t going to fight back.

I’d spent my entire life protecting the people I cared about, and I wasn’t about to stop now.

I jerked away from him and felt a sting of pain along my throat. I wasn’t some hardened orc warrior, and I wasn’t trained in machete-sword orc fighting, or whatever

magic Koth probably had.

The thud of something hitting the ground and the sudden garbled, snarling sound that came from Koth's throat made me look down.

The collar I wore—the one Nash had slapped on me when we first met, the one that let me understand what he was saying—was on the ground. And it was spattered with blood.

Koth's eyes dropped to my neck, to the hot liquid I could feel sluicing down along my skin, and he smiled .

Shit. I was probably in trouble.

Chapter twenty

Nash

I somehow knew before I got back to the tent that Kai wasn't going to be there. I wasn't sure why I hadn't thought of it—he'd finally gotten word of where his friend might be. It took me longer than it should have to connect the pieces together, though. The human my brother was talking about was the same human that Kai had come into this world to look for.

The timeline made sense—the arrival, the sudden change in my brother's tone.

If I weren't so worried about Kai, I might have found the entire situation to be just as strange as fated mates itself... because, of course, someone who was like a brother to Kai was meant for my brother.

But... those weren't my concerns at the moment. Axum had been attacked, and I knew Koth hadn't done it in some bid to steal the entire land from him. He'd done it in an attempt to taunt me, to hurt me.

He'd done it because he was so wrapped up in his anger and jealousy of me, he would do whatever he had to in the name of revenge.

And I'd always spoken freely about my belief in fated mates, in my desire to have my own.

If Koth had even a single ear in the camp, one person who'd traveled from my group

and spoken of how their leader Nash was tethered to a human with hair like the sun...

Kai wasn't an easy person to confuse for any other once you'd heard of him.

The thundering beat of my heart only grew harder, jumped into my throat, and nearly choked me when I asked the patrol if they'd seen him leave. While they hadn't, one of the children interrupted, mentioning that they'd seen him jogging down the main roadway toward the city.

Running from me again .

But no... I couldn't be angry with him for it.

Not now.

Not when I had no idea if he was safe.

And like a demon manifest, the fear that I'd felt came full circle when I found Mol sprawled in the middle of the road, his eyes half closed and his breathing labored. It took me a few seconds to rouse him, and I silently cursed myself for not asking Vex to come with me, for not bringing a healer with me. I'd run without thinking, without preparing.

"Nash, your human... he..." Mol grunted as I helped him sit, but I couldn't pause to take stock of his wounds.

"Kai was here?"

"He saved me." Mol's eyes were wide, just a little fearful. I understood—Kai had saved him, but that meant he'd put himself in harm's way in the process. Inadvertently, Mol had put him in danger.

But... there wasn't time for anger or blame. There was only time to find Kai.

"Where?"

He didn't say anything, just raised a shaking hand and pointed toward the edge of the road. My eyes flicked to his injury, to the area surrounding us. I needed to get him back to camp, but...

"I will be fine, Nash," he said, using my shoulder to pull himself to his feet. He stumbled, but his eyes looked determined. "I only wish I could help you hunt down Koth." He looked like he might still try it, so I waved him back to camp.

"Go. Tell Vex to gather a group so we can hunt them down." The fury burning through my chest felt dangerous, a liquid inferno. "This ends today."

Mol nodded, the determination in his gaze outweighing the pain still streaking through his expression. My entire camp was fierce and loyal—Koth's betrayal to me had been a betrayal to all of us.

And now this.

And if Kai had risked his life to protect him...

"We will find your mate, Nash." With a determined nod, he started back to camp.

As much as I wanted to help him, I couldn't. I had to find Kai.

It was easy to see where he'd fallen through the brush—the impression of two large bodies rolling through grass and snapping branches was enough of a trail that I could easily follow it. That, and I could almost feel the pull of him now that I was close. That tether, our mate bond, drew me forward like I was on strings.

It led me into a clearing, where a broad body I recognized was standing like he'd been waiting.

Koth's shoulders tensed the moment he noticed me, and the grin on his face when he turned was full of a vicious joy that made my stomach drop.

My eyes weren't for him, though. They were for the thing he held in his hand. Slicked with blood—the same blood that was probably spattered on the ground—was the translator I'd put on Kai's neck the moment we met.

The collar, as he called it sometimes when he was irritated with me.

I'd never seen it off him. It was never meant to come off.

The low, growling snarl that tore from my chest was enough to make Koth's eyes widen, but when I started forward, drawing my blade, he held the material up between us like it was a barrier.

In a way, it was.

“Careful, Nash. Do you not wish to see your little human again?”

My little human.

“What did you do to him?”

Koth's expression blossomed, his grin growing as he swiped one booted foot through the blood on the ground.

“I will give it to you that he tried to fight valiantly, all golden hair and bravado.” He watched my face as he spoke, but it was impossible to keep my expression neutral.

There was no way that he hadn't seen Kai, that he hadn't touched him, hurt him. Not with blood on the collar.

Not when he described him so perfectly—all golden hair and bravado.

“Where is he?” I snarled through clenched teeth, wondering how I was managing to keep still when every muscle in my body was bristling with pure fury and anger.

“What would you give for him, Nash?”

What would I give for him? The answer was simple, easy—and it was the leverage that Koth had needed all along, the only way he would ever best me.

“I would give everything.”

The expression on Koth's face, so smug and full of delight, deepened.

“Then that is exactly what you will give, if you wish to see him again.” He studied me for a moment before stepping forward... and I had no choice. I lowered the blade I held between us as he lifted the collar.

At least he gave me time to slip it over my arm and murmur the words to bind it to my skin before he lifted his own blade and pressed it to the center of my chest. “Let us move. I want to show all of Belzod that you would give it up for a human.”

He didn't understand, though—and how could he? Koth had never believed in mates. He'd scoffed at me for my unwavering determination to find mine. He couldn't know that I would give up everything... that I would tear through this world, every world connected to us... that I would raze everything to the ground as long as I could keep Kai safe.

Which meant he had no way to understand that if he hurt Kai, if I found my Little Mate harmed when he finally brought me to his camp... there was no world he could run to that could save him.

Chapter twenty-one

Kai

I was pissed... One minute, I'd been ready to square up and face off against an orc, because it was clear he wasn't going to leave my mate alone, and the next, there'd been a sharp blade pressed into my back and I realized Koth didn't fight fair.

I wasn't sure if I should have been more flattered or annoyed that he had to call in backup when it came to dealing with me. I landed firmly on the side of annoyed, because I had my hands tied up before I had a chance to try to do anything.

Koth leaned in close to me, his eyes narrowing as he looked me up and down. When he spoke, I didn't recognize what he was saying—of course I didn't. He had my collar gripped in his hand... and fuck, I felt really, really weird without it on.

I did hear him say the word Nash at least three times before I finally cut him off.

“Fuck, you really are obsessed, aren't you?” I snarled the words, knowing he could understand me while he held the collar. There wasn't really a point in trying to struggle—not when my arms were bound and there was an orc at my back with a knife pressed against my skin.

It didn't stop me from letting out a low grunt and head-butting Koth when he leaned in closer.

The spatter of blue blood that spilled from his busted nose was almost worth it when

he flipped the blade he held and hit me hard enough that my vision blacked out.

By the time I realized what was going on, I was being dragged through the trees in a direction I didn't know... not really a shocker, though.

I could finally, maybe... maybe admit that I was pretty directionally challenged.

Just a little.

The orc behind me had my arms in a tight grip, but when I glanced over my shoulder, I only had to look up a little to meet his eyes.

Hm.

There was every possibility that I could do this, if I was careful. Or quick. Or reckless.

I knew which option I was going to choose before I'd even finished thinking of them.

"You probably can't understand me, can you?" I said, and in response, the asshole behind me jerked my arms. "Cool. See, the thing is... I really need to get loose, because I'm pretty sure Nash is going to kill you and then me if he thinks I tried to run off again." Another sharp tug to my arms and a frustrated growl let me know that he'd at least picked up a few of the words that time.

Probably the name Nash.

Maybe the word kill .

Good.

“You could just let me go.” I threw a smile over my shoulder and was rewarded with a punch to my side. As much as it hurt for the asshole to try to kidney shot me, it was what I’d been waiting for.

After all, if you wanted to hit someone, you had to let go of their arms.

And when he let go of my arms, I threw myself back as hard as I could and felt my head collide with his mouth and nose.

I guess he hadn’t been paying attention when I’d done it to Koth just a few minutes ago, because the low snarl of pain that escaped him came from the ground instead of from above me, and I whirled around before he had a chance to get up.

The smart thing to do at that point would have been to run, but my admission that I really had zero sense of direction in tandem with my need to make sure that there was one less person out there who wanted to hurt Nash seemed to war with the smart idea.

Since I didn’t have my hands untied, I kicked him as hard as I could in the side. He rolled over, trying to get to his feet with a low gasp of pain—it left him with his face at the perfect level for me to kick him again.

This time when he hit the ground, he did it with his eyes rolled back in his head and blood slowly oozing from the side of his mouth. His chest was still rising and falling, so I hadn’t accidentally killed him.

Which was probably good.

Even though that left me in a pretty precarious situation when I had to lean down and carefully grab the knife from his belt. It took me longer than I wanted to get my restraints cut, and by the time I did and had repurposed them to tie him up, he was already starting to squirm.

Thankfully, I wasn't trying to get him anywhere. I used his knife to cut strips from his shirt and tied his legs together too. Then I stuffed a piece in his mouth for good measure.

I'd probably be able to figure out where I left him.

Probably.

That whole sense of direction or the lack thereof might come into play later... but...

Well, that was his own fault for capturing me, now wasn't it?

With that handled and the only sound coming from him being low grunts of annoyance, I gripped the knife I'd used and spun in a slow circle.

Fuck... I was pretty sure Nash had told me something about directions and... flowers? Or trees? Or...

I glanced down at my would-be captor. "I don't suppose you'd tell me how to get to the road again, would you?"

A sudden snarling sound in the distance snapped my head up. Obviously, it wasn't the road I was looking for anymore. It had never taken Nash very long to catch up to me when I'd run off... this just wasn't going the way it usually did.

I'd thought maybe he'd find me on the road and drag me off somewhere so we could fuck in the woods—maybe he'd spank me again and I'd get to suck his dick.

I didn't think it would be...

Well. This?

But it was, and there wasn't anything I could do to change that now, so I headed off toward the angry voices as quietly as I could. Something in my chest was pulling me in that direction—something caught behind my ribs like an invisible line leading me to where I needed to go.

To Nash.

It was ridiculous, and it didn't make any sense. Neither did I half the time, so I went with it.

It took a good ten minutes of trailing after the noises before I finally caught up to them, and that was only because they'd stopped a few minutes before I did. Light filtered through the trees in front of me, and the noises were closer now.

Close enough I could make out that I couldn't make out a damn thing they were saying.

Close enough I could still recognize the tone of one of the voices, even though I had no idea what the words were.

Except one.

My name.

Nash was saying my name, and all I wanted to do was run through the clearing to save him like we were in some kind of action movie.

That would probably be a really bad idea, especially since I didn't know how many people were in the camp ahead of us, so I slowly made my way to the edge of the trees instead.

My eyes caught his form right away—he was tied in a sitting position to some kind of pole on the opposite side of the little camp. The only good thing about the situation was the fact that it looked like there were only a handful of enemies... because that's what they were, wasn't it?

Enemies.

People who wanted to hurt Nash.

People I would hurt if I had to, if it meant protecting the man I loved... because I still hadn't actually told him I loved him, had I? We'd fucked, and he'd marked me, and we'd called each other mates, but somehow that word had never really come up.

I wanted to tell him.

I needed to tell him. Which meant that I needed to get him untied.

It was really more a question of how I was going to make that happen without alerting everyone in the camp to the fact that I was there. They were probably going to get curious anyway when their buddy didn't show up with me. For all I knew, I hadn't tied him up well enough, and he was going to show up and ruin everything.

I needed to do something, and I needed to do it now .

And somehow, I knew that meant I needed Nash.

It really was lucky that Koth seemed to be more interested in himself than anything happening around him. He was standing with a small group of orcs—three, from what I could see—and there was a smirk on his face. He was probably telling them some huge lie about how he'd captured Nash, but judging by the familiar band of fabric I saw around Nash's arm—streaked with my blood—I knew exactly how he'd

actually done it.

He'd come because he thought I was in danger.

He was probably standing still because he thought I was tied up somewhere.

Which meant the first order of operations was to make sure that he knew I was fine.

I stepped forward, trying to make sure I didn't get into Koth's line of sight while I wiggled just outside the tree line. Nash's eyes were all for the men to his right, but I saw his shoulders tense. When I shimmied again, feeling like a bit of an idiot for practically dancing while there were people with sharp blades close by who wanted to take my head off, his gaze turned in my direction.

The second his eyes made contact with mine, I saw emotions flood across his face—fury, shock... and then the sweetest relief I'd ever seen.

He didn't have to say anything for me to realize this wasn't one of those typical situations I read about in books.

He wasn't trying to valiantly tell me to go so I could save myself and leave him behind.

He wasn't jerking his head and struggling, willing to sacrifice himself because I was some little damsel who needed help.

Once he looked me over and realized I was fine, his eyes moved to the left.

To the pile of his belongings that had been stripped from him.

To the blade I'd seen him take off so many times before he went to bed.

I pressed my back to the tree I was peeking around and nodded. He wasn't telling me to go—he was showing me where I could help him... and as much as I would have liked to charge in and grab the blade and start swinging...

Well, I knew better. Obviously I'd gotten my ass kicked once by Koth already—if I tried to fight him again, especially when he was in his own space with backup...?

Well, that wasn't going to do me a damn bit of good, was it?

But if I had Nash to help...

Well, shit. I wasn't sure there'd be a damn thing we couldn't do.

His eyes stayed fixed on me for another second and then I nodded once, hoping he'd realize that I had no idea what I was supposed to do, but I was going to do it to the best of my ability. The only thing I could think of was to slip back into the line of trees and make my way across the clearing as quietly as I could. There was just one problem... That drop-off Nash had mentioned before, the one that apparently traveled for miles where a river had cut deep into the earth a long, long time ago, ran all along the left side of the camp.

There was no way for me to get completely behind him. Which meant there was no way for me to sneak across and cut him loose before someone noticed me.

Some of the assholes in the group had bows, and I was pretty sure they'd shoot me without hesitation if it meant they would keep me from rescuing a furious Nash. So... the best I could do was...

Well...

Improvise.

It was probably a good thing I'd read so many books after all, because at least I was slightly prepared for this situation, even if my preparation wasn't exactly realistic.

I moved as close to Nash as I could, and every time I peeked through the trees, his eyes were still on me. Now that he knew I was here, he could probably sense me just as much as I could sense him. There was almost something comforting about that, knowing that no matter what happened, we weren't going to get ripped apart again. I had a feeling Koth wouldn't let us live that long if things went south anyway.

In theory, it would be good if I could get something to him so he could get himself loose before I came charging in as backup. I wasn't exactly sure how to do that, so the best I could manage was to slip around the last tree in the clearing and try to judge the distance between us.

It wasn't perfect.

None of this was perfect...

And I realized if I went through with the plan forming in my mind, there was every chance Nash might just kill me when all was said and done anyway. But if they saw me cutting him loose, they'd probably kill one of us.

If they thought I was coming in to rescue him with guns blazing, they'd probably still kill me... but they'd do it slower.

I had a feeling from the look on Koth's face and the sadistic edge to his expression that he'd want to draw it out if he was given the chance. Especially if Nash had to watch it happen.

I was putting a lot of faith in maybes and the fact that I believed Nash wouldn't let anyone hurt me... but what else was I supposed to do?

I think Nash could tell that I was about to do something either really brave or really stupid, because he shook his head... but...

Well.

Permission. Forgiveness. The same thing still applied.

I tossed the knife I'd lifted from the other orc and silently patted myself on the back when it landed right by his bound hands. I was lucky they'd tied him up in a sitting position, because I didn't trust myself enough to lob the blade into the wooden pole he was tied to. As it was, it only took him a little bit of squirming before he had it concealed behind him, and I was more than confident that he'd be able to get himself free undetected.

Well.

If he had a distraction.

Yeah, he was definitely going to be mad at me later.

I made my way back around through the trees, so when I popped out this time, it turned everyone's attention fully away from Nash. That meant when I let out a really loud and obnoxious yawn with my hands above my head so they could all see I clearly wasn't armed, no one was looking at my mate when he started to cut his hands free.

I was the only one who saw the way his eyes were as wide as dinner plates, and the pinch of his mouth that told me I was in serious trouble when this was all over with.

As long as we both got out of this alive so I could be in trouble, I'd call that a win.

“Listen... I know you probably can’t understand me... which... I’m not actually sure if that’s a good or a bad thing. It means when I call you names, you aren’t going to be able to understand what I’m saying. At the same time...” I shrugged, keeping my palms out because the asshole with the bow had it raised and pointed straight at my chest now. Just like I thought—I would have totally gotten sniped if I’d tried to come out guns blazing. “I really wish I could call you some names you’d understand. I should have asked for a language lesson, I guess.”

And then, because I figured it was pretty universal when given with the right gusto, I lifted my middle fingers and flipped them off.

There was a faint snort behind them, and I started walking forward so Nash and his damn noises didn’t catch their attention before he was free.

“Listen, Koth. Buddy...” I turned to him and raised my hands, trying to pantomime the best I could what had happened in the woods. “Your guard was pretty shit. I just... headbutted him into oblivion.” My eyes trailed to his slightly swollen nose, and I gestured to it with a grin. “Kind of like I did with you, right?”

That seemed to get through to him, because he let out an angry snarl and started stalking toward me.

And I really, really hoped that Nash was good at cutting ropes, because I had a feeling he was going to beat my ass for taunting him... and if I had to, I’d take it to make sure that this all went smoothly.

But I really, really didn’t want to have to.

I took a step back and held my hands up innocently, but I didn’t dare look over his shoulder to see what Nash’s progress was. Instead, I pouted. “What’s wrong, tough guy? Sad that a widdle biddy human got the better of you? Aw, fuck you.” I dropped

my eyes to his injury again and gave my best charming grin before I blew him a kiss.

And Koth charged at me.

Maybe Nash had been waiting for that, or maybe it was the sight of it that gave him the adrenaline he needed to get through the rest of his ropes. Whatever it was, there was a sudden snarl behind the group as the orc with the bow fell to the ground with a loud snap.

I'd only knocked my guy out; Nash had broken a neck with ease. His eyes were filled with murder, and they were all for the orc coming straight for me.

Chapter twenty-two

Nash

I 'd killed plenty of times before. I'd killed in battle, and to protect my brother's lands, though few rarely spoke of that. I'd killed when a fight had broken out and it was either that or be killed. There were no laws of the land that said I couldn't protect myself.

But it wasn't something I went out of my way to do. In truth, for as vicious a reputation as I had, I more enjoyed the times when my group could travel in peace, finding places like the clearing by the lake to take rest.

But now...

Now I wasn't going to be satisfied until I had the blood of every orc in this clearing painting my body. I wasn't going to be satisfied until I knew that each and every one of them who had the slightest bit of a hand in hurting Kai was rotting in an unmarked grave.

He was bleeding. That blood soaked my skin where I'd fastened his collar.

And there'd been a moment, one truly painful moment when I'd arrived at Koth's little camp and found it empty, that I'd wondered if he was dead.

But no—the bond between us still existed. I could feel it.

I knew he wasn't gone from this world.

But I didn't know if he was hurt. I didn't know if he was dying or being tortured. I knew nothing of what was happening to him, and it had driven me to madness to sit there and wait while Koth recounted his great capture of the Orc Lord to his companions.

Which... I had taken note that there were far fewer now than there had been when he'd initially left. I wasn't sure if they were off in other camps, or if they'd left him because his desires were foolish. Attacking Axum had been tantamount to suicide. Whatever the answer, it would make what happened now easier.

At first, I thought I'd have to run straight to Kai and take whatever blade or bow the others had... but he let out a shout and lowered his body, slamming into Koth and landing a punch across his jaw.

"I swear if he has a scratch on him, I'm going to absolutely wreck you." Kai's threats were vicious, even if they were completely lost to Koth's ears. The device around my arm let me hear the way he snapped, the way he'd so casually put himself in danger to make sure that he was a good distraction for me.

It let me hear everything, and every part of me was burning to get it back around his throat where it belonged. Seeing him without it now, seeing his mating mark on full, naked display, was almost too much.

That burning desire to protect him went in direct contradiction to the way he leaned back so he had a better angle to hit Koth again—Kai wasn't delicate, or dainty. He wasn't like any human I'd ever met.

He was strong, and he seemed hell bent on making the orc beneath him beg for mercy.

So as much as it pained me, and as much as it went against instinct, I turned my attention from Kai and Koth to the two others who were still standing. I knew them. They'd been among my people once... and as much as I would have granted them mercy if they'd gotten on their knees and begged for it, they had their attention on Kai and their would-be leader fighting on the ground, and I wasn't going to give them a chance to betray me again.

I moved forward without hesitation, wrapping my arm around the throat of one of them so I could cut off his air supply. His body went limp almost instantly, and I used it as a shield when a dagger flew in my direction.

It was hard to concentrate, though, because Kai and Koth were standing now. When they were matched like that, my mate was smaller... and they were fighting so close to the cliff side.

The feel of something slamming into me, followed by a sharp stabbing pain, let me know I'd taken a little too long watching their fight. My eyes darted down to the second dagger now embedded in my shoulder, and with a snarl, I threw the limp body I was holding, sending him crashing into his friend.

They both tumbled to the ground, and I ripped the blade from my skin and drove it downward as I came to my knees, slamming it into the throat of my assailant. His eyes went wide, and for just a second, I saw it there.

Regret—regret that he'd ever crossed me, regret that he'd ever tried to hurt me and mine.

Regret, because if he'd stayed under my protection, I would have kept him safe with the same ferocity that I was now protecting Kai with.

I had to look away from his face as that expression faded and the light left his eyes.

He'd chosen his side, and now he was suffering the consequences—guilt and remorse, my own regrets, had no place here. Not when there was still Koth to deal with.

Not when...

"Nash!" Kai's voice was pitched up slightly, a little panicked, and as soon as I darted my gaze up, I realized why.

They were both by the cliff side, and even though Koth's lip was split wide and there was a cut above his brow pouring blood into his stare, he still had his blade to Kai's throat.

I froze where I stood, my eyes all for Kai's wide, anxious expression and the anger that was still boiling just beneath the surface.

"You said you would give everything for your mate, Nash. Do you still believe that to be true?"

My eyes narrowed. "What do you want?" Because I knew the answer. I would give anything.

I would give everything.

"Would you die for him?"

"Yes." The word came out before I thought about it, and Koth's smile spread across his face, even though it caused the split on his lip to bleed more.

"But what fun would that be? I thought I wanted to kill you, Nash. But maybe what I really want is to know that you suffer."

It took my brain a few seconds too long to connect what he meant, and by the time I started forward, I was too late. Whatever strength Koth had, he used it to throw Kai behind him.

Over the edge of the cliff side.

And then, like the coward I knew him to be, he ran.

Before, I would have chased him—instinct still wanted me to, because even though he'd gotten a head start, I knew I could easily outrun him.

But that was before, and now my entire focus was on Kai and the way I couldn't see him anymore. I ran to the cliff side and felt something in my chest squeeze tight.

He was there, a few feet down, clinging to a branch with his face gone a little pale. There was every chance Koth might return and drive a blade through my back... but I didn't care.

I couldn't think of anything but flattening myself to my stomach in the dirt and reaching my hand out to Kai.

The second his warm fingers slipped into mine, I felt like I could breathe again. It was only a slight struggle to pull him up and to safety, and by the time I did, Koth was long gone.

I needed to track him down.

I needed to take off in the direction he'd gone.

Instead, I took Kai's face gently in my hands and tilted his head up so I could meet his gaze.

“Little Mate, are you okay?”

Kai’s expression drifted over a spectrum of emotions. Anxiety, fear, a small pulse of misery, before it finally settled on relief. “I’m fine... I was...” It sounded like he couldn’t quite catch enough air in his lungs. “I was going to give Mol a message to take to the city, but we were attacked. I... fuck, I...”

I cut off whatever he was trying to say with my mouth against his, warm and hot and demanding. I didn’t know if he was trying to apologize, or to tell me he hadn’t been trying to run off at all—it didn’t matter. I didn’t care why he’d left, only that I’d found him, that he was here and whole and okay . My tongue slid between his lips, and licking into the taste of blood with the sweet undercurrent of his own flavor was nearly enough to send me over the edge.

It was nearly enough to make me forget we were exposed, in a place where Koth could easily come back while I was distracted to kill us both. I stood, dragging Kai with me as I did, our lips still connected.

His arms were tight around me, and I practically had to pry him off so I could step back.

“Are you okay?” Kai’s fingers were already answering his own question, carefully searching along the cuts and bruises I’d gotten during my capture. When he was satisfied, he looked over my shoulder. “And where did that asshole go? I wasn’t through with him, I was—” His curses faded into a garbled mess of human language as I murmured the words to make the band fall from my upper arm. When he realized what I’d done, he trailed off... then he tilted his head back for me as I strapped it carefully around his neck and pressed my lips to the seams of it to say the words again.

“If I ever see this off your throat again, I may lose my mind.” I murmured the

confession against his skin, and felt it when his heart started thundering against my lips.

“I love you, Nash. I don’t think I said it, and I don’t know if you really understand what it means... but fuck, I love you. I don’t even like fighting, but I’d totally wreck anyone for you.”

Kai lifted his head, and his blue eyes were wet . This time when I leaned in to kiss him, it was less fire, less demand.

It was all sweet want... adoration. It was the human word he used called love . The word I knew to mean mate... It meant we were fated to be together for all life, through death. Forever.

“I love you too, Kai. I would give the worlds for your safety, to have you at my side. I would give all and everything for your smile.”

The smile in question blossomed over his face now, and he leaned in closer, pressing his body flush against mine and making me forget for another moment that we were open and exposed in a place where there were dead orcs to our left and a fugitive rogue somewhere in the trees.

“I’ll give you anything you want. I—”

I cut him off with another swift kiss and took his hand in mine.

“Once we’re back at camp and I’ve sorted Koth’s escape, you can give me your tears of apology for running.” He opened his mouth to protest, but I kept on. “Your cries of pain when I spank you...” At that, he bit his lower lip, and the heat in his gaze was nearly scorching as I finished. “And your sweet, swollen stomach when I breed you.”

He stared at me for a brief second, then nodded once. Twice... and tugged me forward. "That... okay. I think I can do that. But, uh... you lead the way." Kai looked up at me almost helplessly. "I'm pretty shit at directions, Nash. I think I'd be lost without you."

From the expression on his face, I knew he meant more than just in the woods... and in truth, I knew my answer was the same.

I would be lost without him too.

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A Few Days Later

“Can we go now?” I was pretty sure Nash was going to throw me off a cliff again if I asked him one more time, but when he came out of our tent, he had a bag slung over his shoulder.

“Yes, Little Mate. We can go, if only so you’ll stop asking.”

I knew he wasn’t exactly excited about the prospect of going to the city, but I was practically bouncing out of my skin. We’d had to wait for a few days while the healer’s magic took hold of our cuts and bruises, and Nash got in contact with his other brother.

Apparently he wasn’t just related to the Emperor—he was also related to the Emperor’s Assassin. As much as he wanted to chase Koth himself, he refused to go without me, and I refused to go anywhere until we found Rainn... though truthfully, I just wanted to make sure Nash was safe.

And instead of arguing, he’d sent a letter to his other brother with information on where Koth had run, the portal he’d gone through... and he’d waited.

When he’d gotten a response this morning and I’d asked him again if we could go, he’d finally said yes.

I grinned, half running to him and tackling him—he took my weight like it was nothing, his arms wrapping around me and some of the sullenness melting from his expression.

“You’re truly so excited?”

“I haven’t seen Rainn in forever .”

Nash’s brows dipped. “It’s been weeks.”

“Forever,” I insisted, but I leaned up on tiptoe to kiss him. “I can’t believe he found your brother of all people.” We’d asked around after we’d come back to the camp, and Nash’s scouts confirmed that the new mate to the Emperor matched the exact description of my sweet, lost friend.

Of course Rainn would manage to stumble into a magical world and land himself the Emperor of the whole place. Made perfect sense.

Then again... I hadn’t really done too bad myself, had I? I looked up at Nash with another soft smile, leaning up to press a kiss against the visible mark on his neck that let me know he was mine. Touching it made my own tingle, and his arms tightening around me was the only thing that kept me upright.

“He’s never going to believe this,” I murmured against Nash’s skin. “Last he knew, I was really straight. And... you know, in the human world.”

“I’m sure he’ll understand.” Nash pressed a kiss to my hair before pulling back. “Now, come. You’ve been bothering me about this for days. I want to head out before you start up again.” He sounded so put out, but the grin that tugged at the corner of his lips let me know he didn’t mind.

Still, I couldn’t stop myself. “Don’t act like it bothers you, bro .” I drew the word out slowly, and he rolled his eyes. I’d finally explained to him that it wasn’t a term of endearment while we were both laid up in his bed recovering from our run-in with Koth.

He'd spent the next two hours making me moan and call him everything but bro while he milked so many orgasms from me, I was pretty sure I was still walking funny from it.

His eyes narrowed now that I said the word, and his hand slid to my ass, tracing my crack over my shorts and tapping in a gentle threat that drew a shiver from me.

“What was that, Little Mate?”

I bit my lip and grinned. “Nothing. I said I love you, Nash. That's all.”

He smiled then, the sweetest expression that I'd come to realize was just for me—I'd never seen him give it to anyone else. He dipped his head and pressed his mouth to mine, and I melted into the kiss. When he finally pulled back, I was the one who chased his lips for another soft peck before he shoved me back with a gentle slap to my ass. “That's what I thought , bro . Come on.” He tugged on my hand. “Let's go.”

That expression, that sweetness... it was all for me. I'd claimed him just as much as he'd claimed me. Nash was mine.