



Claimed By The Orc (Orc Mate Selection #3)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: When I said I wished my life was less boring, having an orc mate was not what I expected.

The town of Destiny always felt small and suffocating, but now it was just...strange. First, there were the disappearances, and then, the most adorable man I'd ever seen showed up at my job, and then kept showing up. I should be worried, but something about Mahk drew me in, and I found myself not minding my little stalker too much. He was just so innocent, and curious about the oddest things. I wanted to wrap him up in a blanket and never let him go.

But then all that changed one night and I discovered the truth. Mahk was really an orc and lived in a completely different world than me. If that wasn't hard enough to believe, he then said I was his mate, like fated mate, but those don't exist outside of romance novels, do they? I planned to laugh it off, but despite calling Mahk my little stalker, I was the one who couldn't stay away.

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PROLOGUE: MAHK

I stared at the spot where the barrier between worlds had once lain. Just seconds ago, I could see my homeland, where I'd grown up, the only place I knew, and now it was merely a solid cave wall. I pressed against it, despite knowing it was futile, and felt nothing. Great. This was what I got for answering my brother's request. Now I was stuck in this strange world full of humans, with no way of getting out.

Lovely.

I sighed and turned away. I had a job to do. I wouldn't be going home until it was complete anyway, so I might as well focus on that.

I fiddled with the thick gold bangle on my wrist. It wasn't mere decoration, but also a magical device that gave the illusion that I looked like the humans that inhabited this land. I should have made something less ostentatious, but it was so pretty, the humans would have to accept it.

A few seconds later, I was no longer in my orc shape, as I shrunk down into the tiny bodies the humans had. Luckily, my eyesight was still the same, and even in the dim light of the cave, I could see as my skin had morphed from its normal green color to a light tan. My tattoos stayed at least. The bangle shrank so it fit comfortably around my new small form.

Kneeling, I dug through the bag I had brought with me, first putting on the human clothes I had purchased. Belzod, the country I was from, had species of all origins and from many different worlds. We were generally accepting and welcoming,

especially after my half-brother, Axum, had become emperor. There were even humans who had accidentally wandered into our realm, found their mate, and chosen to stay. One human woman who worked as a seamstress had been kind enough to make me clothing that was suitable.

Once I was dressed and armed, I made my way out of the cave. My heart hammered in my chest, and I couldn't help but wonder if this assignment would be more complicated than I imagined. Every step I took was one farther away from my home. But it was also a step closer to Koth, the cowardly scum disguised as an orc that had caused my half-brother Nash a world of problems.

I tightened my grip on my blade. I could not believe Nash had waited this long to request my help. This was what I did. I was the official assassin of the emperor. If there was a problem my brothers couldn't handle or that had to be dealt with quietly, then I was called in. But instead, stubborn Nash had waited until the issue had festered and the spineless Koth had harmed Nash's human mate. I hadn't even been aware there was a problem until after Koth had run away—again—and hidden in the human realm.

I shook my head. That was okay. I'd handle it now. I only had to find him.

Soon, I was approaching the opening of the cave, and I got my first glimpse of the human world and Forest Glen.

For a while, I walked with no direction in mind, getting my bearings and trying to come up with a plan. I had never been here before, but I'd been given the basics. I knew Forest Glen was in a small town called Destiny. I wrinkled my nose. The name was so presumptuous. It sounded like something my other brother, Axum, would come up with.

My thoughts drifted as I took it all in. I didn't have a specific destination in mind yet,

but I knew I needed to head toward town. After—well, I'd follow my instincts until Koth's blood dripped from my blade.

I had to admit the forest was beautiful. Different from the ones back home in Belzod, but breathtaking all the same. I could sense the wildlife all around me, but they gave me a wide berth. They knew a predator when they saw one, even if I didn't look that way now.

I finally approached the forest's exit and was standing on the edge of a paved road. I sucked in a deep breath and closed my eyes, allowing my instincts to take the forefront.

I had always been more attuned to my surroundings than most. It was why Axum, when he'd taken over as emperor, had asked me to be his assassin. Well, that and I was really good at killing. And would never have survived in court with all that formality and posturing. I was drifting. Focus, Mahk . Find your target.

I took another deep breath. When I opened my eyes, I started walking to the right. I wasn't sure why, but it seemed correct. I didn't take long to see a small building off in the distance. I had to go there. I didn't sense any other magic from my realm, so I didn't think Koth was there, but it didn't matter. I could stop my feet from walking that way if I tried.

Soon, I stood in a partially paved lot, with a human carriage, staring through the big glass windows of the building. It was a store of some kind. Shelves were lined with human snacks and drinks. Some of the people who now lived in Daz Vrokrad, the capital city of Belzod, had shared some with me. There was one in particular I was excited to have again while I was here. They were fried, crunchy tube-shaped snacks that were an unnatural orange color and left stains on your fingers when you ate them. They were quite delicious, and I found myself scanning the shelves through the window to see if I could see them There!

Smiling to myself, I walked into the store, ready to pick up one of these delicious orange treats, when everything came to a halt.

He was standing behind a high counter, talking to some human male who was holding a basket of items. The other man was irrelevant to me—I barely even noticed him. I wasn't sure I would ever notice another person again after seeing the most perfect being I'd ever laid eyes on. Not just human, either. But orc, troll, orge, fairy, it didn't matter. None of them would ever compare to this man.

His dark brown hair had been shorn short on the sides but was longer on the top, and it fell down in messy waves over his forehead. Pieces stuck up in disarray like he kept running his fingers through it.

He was tan, though not as dark as the skin I was currently wearing in this body. It looked more like he spent a lot of time in the sun. His nose was wide and had a slight bend to it, like it had been broken and not fixed correctly. I frowned, not liking that thought. My human should never be hurt. I found myself drifting closer. I needed to see the color of his eyes. He glanced up, beyond the male he was helping and at me. They were a deep, dark brown. I swallowed, feeling slight arousal in between my legs.

His broad shoulders barely fit in the gray top he was wearing. He was wider than I was in my human form, and likely taller too. From what I knew of humans, he seemed to be larger, and for some reason that warmed my insides. I was small for an orc, leaner, which benefited me in my profession. I was still much larger than all the humans I knew, but I could imagine this man's thick arms wrapped around me, pinning me down while he . . .

“Do you have any more of that bait I like?” the other human asked. I growled, annoyed he'd interrupted my thoughts, but then my human flashed a friendly smile, two rows of white teeth, a small gap between the two middle ones, and one slightly

crooked and behind the others, and I was lost.

Then my human spoke. “Yessir. Let me get that for you.”

His voice was deep and grumbly. It would sound lovely speaking my language. I wondered if he would be willing to learn. My human turned away from the other male and faced shelves that were behind the counter. I got my first look at his wide back, thick thighs, and round bottom. He was wearing breeches in a rough material I had never seen before. They were a faded blue, and there was a small hole forming by the pocket. They were tighter than orc males wore their breeches, and tighter still than the bright purple ones the seamstress had made for me. I wasn’t complaining, though, because it made it that much easier to admire his body. It had to be hard to run and fight in those, though.

My human grabbed something off the shelf and turned back to the other male. He finished the transaction, and the other male handed him a plastic card that he swiped in some kind of machine. It was all fascinating, and I had so many questions. But they all had to wait. I couldn’t do anything but stare as my human worked.

“You’re all set, Mr. Johnson. I hope you make some good catches today.”

The other male laughed. “Me too. Lord knows my wife won’t be pleased if I come home empty-handed again.”

My human chuckled, full of humor, and I had another wave of arousal. I wanted to be the one to make him laugh.

“Thanks, Tanner. Have a good one.”

The other male left, but I was transfixed. Tanner. My human’s name was Tanner.

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CHAPTER 1

TANNER

“That man is in the parking lot again,” Mrs. Kennedy whispered to me as I rang up her gas and cigarettes.

I didn’t need to look through the windows of the convenience store to know exactly who she was talking about.

“I know. It’s fine.”

Mrs. Kennedy looked skeptical. “Maybe you should tell the sheriff? No good comes from an outsider lingerin’ around here.”

I forced a smile. The last thing we needed was Sheriff Johnson snooping in my business. He’d never liked me ever since I punched his son in the 10th grade for harassing this girl. He tried to sweep it under the rug, and I wasn’t gonna let that happen. After that me and my whole family had been on his shit life. I sure as fuck didn’t want him messing with the guy in the lot.

“No, really, it’s fine. I think he’s just lonely. There’s no reason to get the sheriff involved.”

Mrs. Kennedy raised an eyebrow and studied me, like she was trying to get juicy gossip that didn’t exist. But I guessed that was what happened in a small town with a person who’d known you since the day you were born.

“If you say so. Just be careful.”

I managed to avoid the eye roll. “Always, ma’am.”

That got a smile out of her before she picked up her pack of smokes and walked to the door with a wave. “You take care, Tanner!”

“You too, Mrs. Kennedy.”

I didn’t move until she got in the car, glaring at the poor man, and then drove off.

He waited until her headlights disappeared and then walked into the store, his hands shoved into the pockets of his sunset orange pants.

“Hi, Mark!” I said too brightly, but I couldn’t fucking help it. There was something about the guy that had gotten under my skin since the first time I’d seen him watching me by the drinks cooler a couple weeks ago.

He startled like he always did when I said his name. “Me?”

This was always how our conversations went. I’d say hi to him, and it would somehow surprise him even though he was the only one in the store.

“Yeah, that’s your name, right?”

He blinked, those long lashes framing those beautiful eyes. “Oh, um, yeah. Right. That’s me. Mark.”

I grinned. “How are you today? You’re a little later than usual.”

“Oh, I had . . . a business associate to follow up with. I got here as soon as I could.”

I hummed politely, purposely ignoring his odd choice of phrasing. That was pretty much standard when it came to Mark, so I'd learned to just roll with it.

When he first came into the store, I'd kind of figured he was homeless. He was clearly new to the area, and his eclectic clothing had me thinking that maybe he didn't have much choice in his style and had taken what he could find or what was given to him. He wouldn't be the first person who'd camped out in Forest Glen when they had nowhere else to go.

Now, though, I wasn't sure. Obviously, you could have a job and still be unhoused, but I didn't get that feeling from him. The way he talked, it seemed like he did have a home, but maybe it was far away.

I probably should've been more freaked out because I was like 95% sure he was stalking me, but, and this is fucked up—if anyone called me on it, I'd deny it with my dying breath—I kind of liked walking into work every day and knowing that this adorable man with blue eyes so dark they were almost purple and ridiculous, out-of-season, brightly colored outfits would be there, waiting for me, watching me.

It made me feel alive for the first time since I'd moved back to Destiny. I got here as soon as I could .

Gah.

That should have me running for the hills, or at least following Mrs. Kennedy's advice and calling the sheriff. Instead, I grinned like a fool and hoped Mark didn't notice me blushing.

"That's okay. You're here now." Mark grinned and rocked back on his heels, like I'd said the best thing in the world to him. He was so fucking adorable, I couldn't stand it. He was around 5'9""", the top of his head coming just below my nose. It was

perfect. I could easily tilt my head up to kiss the top of his head.

Which I didn't. Obviously. Because that would be weird. Why would I want to kiss my stalker in any way at all? But just saying, if I did want to, it would be easy.

His hair was so dark that it was almost black, thick but silky smooth. There was one light-blond streak toward the front that fascinated me. It was so light, it was almost white. I thought at first that he'd dyed it, but the more I stared at it, the more I was sure it was natural.

That thick, silky hair, that was probably so soft to the touch, fell to right below his shoulders. The first few times he'd shown up, it had been loose, falling in natural tangles like he'd forgotten to brush it. But lately he had it pulled back in braids on either side of his head. It was so different than the way any man in this tiny fucking town would ever wear his, and I was obsessed. It looked so good on him.

His almond-shaped eyes tilted slightly to the side and stared with such an intensity, it had to freak most people out. Mark didn't miss anything. His skin was tan and smooth, his body narrow but lithe. He wasn't big, I could probably wrap my hands around his waist and they'd almost meet—though, I had massive fucking hands—but there was something about him that screamed dangerous. I didn't know what Mark did for a living, but I wouldn't be surprised if it wasn't strictly legal.

Today, he was wearing those sunset orange parachute pants with a white tank top with a sparkly unicorn dabbing on it. He had his usual golden band around his wrist that somehow accentuated the tribal tattoos up and down his arms. He was also wearing a collar today. Well, it was probably a choker, but it looked a whole lot like a collar, and it was distracting as hell. It framed his neck perfectly, and I could easily imagine him kneeling at my feet, those almost purple eyes watching me through his thick lashes and that collar around his throat.

Fuck . . . Maybe I was the creepy one in this relationship, or whatever you wanted to call it.

“Have you eaten today, Tanner? You only had one of those soft pretzel things for dinner last night. I looked it up. They are delicious, but they don’t have all the nutritional value a human needs to be healthy.”

And there he went. It was one of those statements that any normal person would freak out about, but all it did was make me swoon. Maybe I needed therapy. I should check to see if our insurance covered it?—

Mark was waiting patiently for me to answer. He always did that. He never nagged or hurried me up. Being the oldest of five with a single mom who had been battling health issues most of my life, I was used to being rushed or just straight up ignored. I also wasn’t used to someone worrying about what I’d eaten for dinner and its nutritional value. I was the worrier. I made sure the kids were fed and my mom took her meds. Not the other way around. I scoffed at myself. Then I wondered why I found Mark’s attention nice.

He was still waiting, and I found my cheeks heating. “Oh, um, I grabbed one of the breakfast sandwiches from the counter when I came in. I’m fine.”

Mark frowned, looking up at the ceiling as he thought. I waited with bated breath, wondering what his thoughts were. Finally, he shook his head.

“You should eat again. I’ll stop at Todo Los Tacos. I know you enjoy their tacos.”

I wracked my brain, trying to remember if I’d ever told Mark that. It was possible. After two days of him lingering toward the back of the store watching me, I’d initiated a conversation with him, one that had been ongoing ever since. We might have spoken about my love for Todo’s tacos. Or he might’ve just known. I decided

not to worry about it because now that he'd mentioned it, I was kinda hungry.

"Can you get chips and guac too? Oh, and a side of queso."

Mark rolled those pretty eyes. "Of course." Like that wasn't even a question.

"I will be right back, Tanner," he told me seriously.

"I know." I smiled softly at him. "I'll be here. Thank you."

He grinned again, his whole face lighting up. "You don't need to thank me for taking care of you. It's what we do."

I didn't get to question who he was talking about before he was through the door and out of sight.

CHAPTER 2

MAHK

My pace was a little faster than a normal human's. That was one of the first things I'd learned when I'd crossed the barrier into their world. They walked very slowly. I tried to match their pace, and normally I was very good at it. But today, I had a big brown bag that was soaked in grease and filled with tacos that I needed to bring back to my Tanner. It was making it very hard to move at a human speed.

For someone who had been human his whole life, Tanner wasn't very good at it. They were very vulnerable. So many things could kill them! It had been terrifying when I'd first started researching everything I'd need to know to keep Tanner safe. Did you know they could trip on the sidewalk and break their wrists? Or their ankles? Simply touching paper the wrong way could cut their skin and cause them to bleed. I didn't understand how this entire race of very vulnerable people walked around every day like they were oblivious to all the ways they could die. That wasn't even taking into consideration all the factors they needed to heed to stay healthy on the inside.

That seemed to be what Tanner struggled with. Humans could get very sick if they didn't have a certain amount of vitamins and nutrients and many other things that had overwhelmed me when I'd read it on the Google, and Tanner barely got any of them. He was very good at taking care of other people though. His siblings always had vegetables with their evening meal. But Tanner would make do with a bag of chips he'd purchased at work, and it was simply unacceptable.

I thought he believed I only watched him while he was at his job, but I watched him

all the time. I couldn't help it. Tanner had to be safe. So, I'd sat outside his small home he shared with his family and observed as he'd made sure his mom and siblings had their evening meal, then bathed them in the very narrow bath they called a shower. I'd seen him wash their clothes and comb their hair and pack food in colorful bags for a midday meal. It was clear Tanner knew everything a human needed to survive. He only seemed to forget about it when it came to himself.

But that was okay. I was here now. I'd learned how to use the Google and knew all about human nutrition and their well-being. I'd take care of my Tanner now.

Which meant I had to hurry up and get him his tacos.

When my half-brothers, Nash and Axum, had found their mates, I'd been happy for them but had also thought they were being a little ridiculous. They were mesmerized by their mates, like they were more important than the air that they breathed. Simps. It was a word I'd learned since being stuck in the human world, but I thought it fit them.

At first, I'd been worried when the portal had closed. I hadn't wanted to be trapped here, far away from my brothers and the only life I knew. But it hadn't taken long to figure out why it had happened. Not once I'd seen my Tanner. Nash always bored Axum and me with stories about fated mates. He was a romantic at heart, my brother. One of the tales he loved to share was how our world only opened up to those who had their perfect match on our side. Their fated mate. Many humans had crossed over throughout the years, and they would not be able to get back into the human realm until they accepted their mate. Axum and I used to laugh at Nash and how strongly he believed that.

That was, of course, until it had actually happened to them. Then I'd crossed over to the human world, disguised as one to find Koth. As soon as I laid eyes on Tanner, I knew the stories were all true. Fated mates were real, and Tanner was mine.

Everything in my soul had just settled and made perfect sense. In the same way a human couldn't leave our world until they accepted their mating, the same would be true of me. Tanner was mine. I had never been surer of anything in my entire life.

Now, I understood my brothers' obsessions with their mates. In fact, I believed it wasn't strong enough. I thought they were simps? It was nothing compared to me. I was the biggest simp to ever simp. If the humans that posted videos on the internet saw me, I'd be the subject of them as they teased me for my obsession. I wouldn't care either. I was proud to be a simp for Tanner. I was proud to feed and care for him. I would be the best mate he could ever hope for. Once I figured out how to tell him I was an orc, that was.

I was nearing the convenience store that employed Tanner when I sensed it. Magic. Magic very similar to the one that formed the illusion that made me look human. Magic only someone from my world or who had been in my world would have access to.

I held the bag of tacos close to my chest as I scanned the area for my target. There was an old automobile that Tanner always called a truck pulled next to the gas station pump in front of the store. It looked like many of the other trucks that I had seen in this town over the last few weeks. Nothing about it should have set off alarm bells, yet I walked toward it cautiously, expecting the worst.

No one was inside. I tried the handle, only to find it locked. I glanced inside the store, but I couldn't see anyone, not even Tanner. I didn't like that. I knew he didn't spend all his time behind the counter. He sometimes went into the back to restock or had to go help a customer, but when there was the scent of magic so strongly in the air, I needed to have eyes on my mate.

My hands curled in frustration. Not my mate, not yet. Because I was too cowardly to tell him the truth. I wished I had a way back to my world. My brothers would know

what to do. Or maybe their new human mates could talk to my Tanner. That would be the easiest way to explain everything, right?

I got a stronger whiff of our magic as the ding of the front door opening reached my ears. Two people walked out, one behind the other. One was an older woman. She was holding cigarettes and a coffee and went right to the truck. Behind her was a man, his hands full of human snack food and one of those frozen drinks in neon green. He hummed to himself and was not paying attention to his surroundings at all. His mistake.

He took two steps toward the cracked sidewalk before he froze, one foot still raised off the ground midstep. Our eyes met, and all the air was sucked out of the room.

He looked as human as I did, but it was impossible to ignore the magic coming off him in waves. I knew he could sense it on me, too, with the way his eyes widened in fear and his Adam's apple bounced rapidly.

For a moment, neither of us moved. We were locked in place. I could not be rash. We were in broad daylight in front of a human convenience store on a somewhat busy road with my Tanner just inside the doors. I had to be careful not to make a scene.

Clearly, Koth had no such worries. Once he got over the initial shock of seeing another orc where he thought he was safe, he reacted. His armful of snacks crashed to the ground as his grip tightened on his frozen, neon drink.

"Koth," I growled in our native language. My blade that I had sheathed on my side, and cloaked under an invisibility spell so no humans saw it, was already in my hand. I took a step toward the orc.

In hindsight, I should've seen it coming. I prided myself on my reflexes and instincts. But I was too focused on Tanner, who was walking back to the counter. He wasn't

looking at the window but instead frowning down at something on his communication device—his smartphone. But he could look up any time and see what was happening.

Ice-cold slush smashed into my face.

I blinked, focusing back on my target. Koth was running, as always. The neon-green concoction dripped down my face, into my eyes, and onto my clothes. The asshole better hope this did not stain. I had no faith in the human washing machines to get it out, and I did not have the kind of magic that would help with fabrics. And this was my favorite shirt.

I took one last glance at the window. Tanner was still not looking. I regretfully dropped the bag of tacos to the ground, grabbed my blade, and aimed.

It sank cleanly into Koth's thigh as the slimy orc attempted to turn the corner. I wished I could have aimed for his neck and ended this right now. But I couldn't risk Tanner witnessing me kill a man, not until I could explain everything. I had no doubt my mate would understand and accept me. He was mine. But seeing that without any context could be frightening, and I never wanted my Tanner to be frightened of me.

My hand curled around my other blade as I stalked toward Koth. He had collapsed because he was weak. He was trying to stand, but the poison on my blade would make it difficult. I needed to get him somewhere less open, and then I could end this miserable bastard's life once and for all.

He let out a pained scream, one loud enough I was sure even Tanner's human ears could hear. I took another step forward, getting ready to change my plan and silence the orc for good, when the chime to the front door rang.

"Mark?" As it always did, hearing the wrong name out of Tanner's pretty lips startled

me. I didn't mind being his Mark. He could call me whatever he wanted. It was just that I had a hard time getting used to it.

I turned to him, immediately sheathing my blade and stepping to block his view of Koth.

"Oh fuck, what happened?" He ran toward me, concerned. I frowned, unsure what he was talking about, until Tanner was inches away from me, his fingers reaching toward my face.

Everything disappeared. I no longer cared about Koth or if he was getting away. I no longer cared about my mission or the secrets I was keeping. All that mattered was Tanner's thick, callused fingers reaching for me.

My skin tingled as he touched my cheek. My eyes fluttered closed and I let out a soft sigh. My Tanner was touching me. All was right in the world.

"Is this a slushie?" My eyes snapped open.

Tanner was staring at his hand that was now covered in sticky, melted green liquid. I wanted to clean them for him. Lick his fingers until he was no longer covered in the stuff.

"Huh?"

Words weren't wording. Neither were thoughts. Tanner was so close. All I could smell was his sweet yet spicy scent. Those fingers flexed, and I wondered how they felt flexing around my throat.

"Mark." Tanner's voice was deep and commanding and in control. It brought me back to reality.

“Yes?”

“Did that guy throw a slushie at you?” He sounded angry. Was he angry at me or for me?

Koth! Fuck. If my brothers saw me now, I’d never hear the end of it. I spun to where he had been lying, not surprised he was no longer there. I was too focused on my mate to do my job properly.

Shame filled me. I’d had him in my grasp and easily let him go. He wouldn’t be far though. The poison on my blade would work through his system, and even if it wouldn’t be enough to kill him, it would leave him in unbearable pain and nearly paralyzed. I could still sense his magic nearby. Once I settled my Tanner, I would find Koth and end this once and for all.

Tanner was still standing there, one hand on his hip, his eyes narrowed in frustration. He looked so beautiful like this, even if I didn’t like him being angry at me.

“Um, yes? I am fine.”

“What the fuck? Why would he do that? Where did he go?” Tanner started to stalk through the parking lot, heading in the direction that Koth had crawled off in. He must’ve used some kind of invisibility illusion since he’d vanished so quickly.

Fear pounded in my chest. Koth may be little danger to me now that he was injured, but he was still orc, and he could harm my mate. That wasn’t fucking happening.

I grabbed Tanner’s arm, stopping him. “No! It is okay. It was a misunderstanding.”

Tanner was spitting mad. I was still confused as to why he was so angry. I was pretty sure it wasn’t at me, but the way he was glaring, I couldn’t be positive. He didn’t look

convinced.

“I brought tacos!” I twisted around, glad to find the bag still upright and mostly intact. “I think they should still be edible.”

Tanner’s lips twisted, like he was ready to argue. “Please?” I batted my eyelashes. Tanner seemed to like when I did that.

He sighed heavily, but there was a small tilt to his lips, like he was trying not to smile.

“Fine.” See, I told you he liked when I did that. “Let’s go inside and get you cleaned up. I might even have an extra shirt for you. But this isn’t over, Mark. There’s something you aren’t telling me, and I don’t like it.”

My stomach twisted in an ugly knot. If he only knew. But I forced a bright smile and picked up the bag, hoping we could salvage our lunch and that Tanner would eventually forgive me for everything I was hiding from him.

CHAPTER 3

TANNER

Things weren't adding up. Some random guy I'd never seen before—one that talked in the strange speech pattern that only Mark used—had come in, bought half the snacks in the store . . . gotten into some kind of altercation in the parking lot, leaving Mark covered in slushie and the man's snacks all over the ground, and then disappeared?

This was one of the few times I wished the owner of the store had actually sprung for real security cameras and not dummies that were meant to scare off anyone looking to hold up the place. Mark was standing there, shirtless by the way, cleaning himself off with a towel I'd found in the back, grinning innocently at me and batting those thick eyelashes in my direction, which I was like 87% sure he knew drove me wild. It was a distraction and it was fucking working because as slight as Mark was, he was fucking ripped. That perfect tan skin stretched over his flat stomach. His tiny nipples hardened as he cleaned green slush off his chest. Tribal tattoos covered both his arms, over his shoulders, and onto his gorgeous fucking collarbone that I wanted to lick every inch of.

The little shit knew what he was doing. I couldn't even form a coherent thought, let alone get answers about what had happened in the lot. He'd claimed he didn't know the guy. He'd just thrown the drink and ran. But, Mark was lying. I didn't know why I was so sure of it, but I was. Add it to the list of mysteries surrounding this man.

I rummaged through the old backpack I always brought with me and found a worn T-

shirt that said Wolverines Football. Looking at it brought a pang of longing from my one semester I'd gotten to play college football. I didn't regret coming home. That was my family. I'd do anything for them. But it didn't stop me from missing what could've been.

I shoved that bullshit all the way down and turned around to face Mark, who was watching me with a serious expression, like he could somehow tell my mood had changed. I forced a smile and handed him the shirt.

"Here. This might be big on you, but you can't walk around the store looking like that." I waved my hand and very clearly checked him out so he would understand I wasn't insulting him.

He took the shirt, his nostrils flaring a bit and his pupils dilating. I swallowed. What the fuck was that?

"Is this yours?" he asked, his voice low and deep and sultry.

"Uh, um. Yeah. I always keep extra clothes with me because I never know when I'll end up getting something on me in this place."

He smiled so brightly, I nearly melted to the fucking floor before he put it on. I swore he paused as it covered his face, and his rib cage expanded like he was breathing it in. It probably smelled stale from being in my bag for so long, but it didn't stop my reaction. He was sniffing my shirt. Trying to get my scent.

Yes, it was weird. I already knew I was purposely ignoring the one million red flags surrounding Mark. It was my toxic trait. I always went for the morally gray ones in anime and movies. Hell, sometimes even the morally black ones. Sukuna from Jujutsu Kaisen ? Fuck, the things I'd let that asshole do to me.

I was getting off track, and Mark was completely clothed.

“Are you okay, Tanner?” I loved the way he said my name. Like it was the most important thing he would ever say.

I hoped he couldn’t see how that made me blush. “I’m fine.” I cleared my throat. Fuck, why did this man affect me so much? “C’mon. Let’s see if the food is still warm. I’m starving and gotta take my mom to an appointment in the city today, so I won’t have time to eat dinner till late.”

That was why I’d been distracted and hadn’t seen whatever had happened in the parking lot. My mom’s sister, my Aunt Judy, was supposed to take her so I could actually make Jake’s baseball game and then get my sisters to bed at a decent hour. But like usual, she’d bailed. I shouldn’t be surprised. She always made grand plans, like how she’d move in to help Mom when I’d gone to college, but they always fell through. So now I had to leave work early, which my boss fucking hated, drive the hour and half to the appointment with Mom, and miss Jake’s first home game of the season. He’d once again have no one there to watch, and I hated how badly I was disappointing him. Maybe I could get the girls’ babysitter to bring them there? It wouldn’t be the same, but still. I knew what it was like to have no one in the stands rooting for you, and it fucking gutted me I was doing the same to Jake. Fucking Aunt Judy.

Mark was frowning at me. “Tanner?” he asked, his voice laced with concern.

I shrugged. It wasn’t his problem. “I’m good. C’mon, let’s eat.”

I could tell Mark didn’t want to drop it, but luckily for him, he did. Because I would have no problem throwing every single half-truth he’d given me—starting with the slushie incident—in his face.

It didn't come to that. We settled behind the counter and ate while I texted with my boss and then with the part-time cashier, begging him to cover for me today. Thankfully, the guy was always looking for money and agreed. And my boss, while grumbling the whole time about responsibilities, relented too. I'd known he would. He needed me. No one else was willing to work as many hours as I would for the crap pay. I'd have to do a lot more than leave early one day to get him to fire me.

Even though the tacos were soggy and a little cold, they were still fucking fire. And the guac and queso? Amazing as fucking always. I loved that little hole-in-the-wall restaurant. For a little while, I forgot about everything else. The long drive, Jake's disappointed look when I didn't show, how flaky Aunt Judy was. All I thought about was Mark's orgasm expression as he ate and how he tried to discreetly fill my plate with more food when I wasn't looking, but I always noticed. He seemed to have a thing about feeding me vegetables, and I grinned when I had an extra serving of Mexican corn cake on my greasy paper plate.

My heart fluttered as I smiled at him. How could a man be a walking red flag but so sweet at the same time? And why the fuck was I falling for him?

Mark left shortly after we finished our lunch, said he had a work thing. I wondered if it had anything to do with the guy who'd thrown a slushie at him. I didn't ask. Just like I never asked for details about his job. My little fantasy where all this was normal worked better not knowing stuff, as much as I wanted them. He asked me if I was okay 3,254 times, but eventually Mark walked away, and I deflated, all but collapsing onto the counter. Mike, the part-timer, would be here any minute. I had to make sure everything was ready for him. I needed to suck it up and text Jake and tell him I was missing his game . . . again.

Suddenly, it all felt like too much. All I wanted to do was call Mark back and sit in our little bubble in the store and act like the world wasn't falling apart around me, that I wasn't fucking suffocating in this place. Unfortunately, that wasn't possible. I

had responsibilities. A family. Bills to pay. It was time to focus on that.

CHAPTER 4

MAHK

“Hello, Koth. Fancy meeting you here,” I told the man currently tied to the chair in the bungalow I was “borrowing.” Koth had been easy to track down. He had barely gotten into the cover of the trees in Forest Glen when the pain from the poison had become too much, and he’d been barely conscious when I’d found him. I’d brought him to my borrowed home and secured him, but then left him to check on Tanner. He was weighed down by something, and I’d wanted to ensure he was okay.

I’d followed him as he’d left the store and gone back to his home. I’d watched in the shadows as he’d wheeled his mom out to the modified van they had for her. I’d been fascinated by that when I’d first seen it and had done much research on it. It was amazing the things humans came up with to compensate for their weak bodies and lack of magic. I’d wanted to follow him, but I knew from experience that when someone drove his mother in that van, they went into the closest city, and I hadn’t wanted to leave Koth alone for all that time. That slimy waste of space had a way of getting out of situations, and I would not risk it. So, I left and came back here.

Koth tried to sneer, but the pain had to be brutal by this point, and it came out more of a grimace. “Oh look, it’s the bastard love child, coming to clean up his big brother’s messes.”

I rolled my eyes, sighing and leaning against the cream-colored wall in the second bedroom. The people who owned this place were away for a few months visiting their children, so I’d lucked out on having a place to stay while I worked. I did not mind

sleeping in the forest, but this was much cozier, and I'd discovered fascinating movies and TV. Humans had so many forms of entertainment. It was never-ending.

I spun my favorite dagger between my fingers casually, like I didn't have a care in the world. Despite Koth's best efforts, his eyes didn't leave the blade.

"So original, coward. No one has ever called me that before, and it hurts me to my core." Just to emphasize, I pressed my hand against my chest. "Truly." Koth wasn't the smartest orc out there, so hopefully he understood the sarcasm.

Yes, I was the illegitimate son of the late emperor and hadn't been raised with my brothers. I hadn't even known they existed for the first years of my life. Yes, there were still some, especially among the nobility, who did not agree with my family's easy acceptance of me, but I didn't care. I especially did not care about the opinion of this poor excuse of an orc currently cowering by my feet.

"You've been quite the nuisance," I replied conversationally, ignoring the barbs. "More than that, honestly. But you crossed the line when you threw my brother's mate off a cliff. That was the reason they sent me to make sure you die."

Koth's eyes widened slightly. He was still in his human form, but it kept flickering, like his body was too weak to manage the magic that allowed the change.

"Then what are you waiting for? End this charade and kill me already."

I laughed coldly. "You would like that, wouldn't you? You don't deserve a quick and painless end."

Koth scoffed. "Painless? That fucking blade of yours was certainly not painless."

I shrugged. "No, maybe not. But it is still less than you deserve."

I weighed my options. Torturing him would be fun, and it couldn't happen to a better person. But, I couldn't get the heaviness of Tanner's expression out of my mind. The invisible weight on his shoulders as he left the store earlier. I wanted to be there in case he needed me and would not waste more time than necessary on Koth. As much as I wanted to have fun, my Tanner was more important.

I stalked toward Koth, enjoying how he flinched. He could scoff and look down on me due to my parentage, but he could not hide the fear lingering in his eyes.

"Unfortunately, I have more important matters to attend to than you. So we'll have to make it quick."

I walked behind Koth to where the silver ring sat on his finger. It had been pushed partially down the knuckle, like he'd tried to remove it while tied so he could turn back to his orc form. It was cute that he thought he'd have been able to escape if he'd succeeded. I would never be so careless.

I crouched down to take off the ring. His fingers had swollen some from him being restrained and his struggling, so the thing was not coming off easily. I sighed, annoyed he was making it so difficult.

"Your ring is stuck," I told him, a little giddy. I would be able to do some light torture after all. "Don't worry, I'll get it off for you." I pressed sharp steel against the swollen flesh right below it. My blade easily cut through, and Koth's finger, ring and all, fell to the floor. I was glad I'd thought to put down a plastic tarp I had found in the shed. I'd hate to leave a mess for the owners to clean up.

Koth's screams were loud and irritating, but they didn't last long as he turned back into his true orc form. He struggled harder, trying to break through the binds that were holding him, but it would be impossible.

I stood up and walked around to face him. Koth spit at me. “Fucking bastard.”

I grinned. “You don’t deserve the honor of dying in your true form, but I will give it to you anyway.”

“Yet you leave me tied? No way to defend myself? And you call me a coward.”

I rolled my eyes. This was exhausting. Usually, I didn’t talk to my targets. They were dead before they even realized I was there. But these were different circumstances since he’d personally hurt my family, not to mention crossing to an entirely new world in his attempt to run.

“This is why I never have discussions with my targets. It’s too tiresome.” He glared and cursed and thrashed. “Ugh, fine.” I waved my hand and the magical ties that kept him bound to the chair disappeared.

Koth lunged for me, but that was his final mistake. He might have had over a foot on me in this form, but I was faster. My blade found its home in the soft flesh of Koth’s neck before he even had a chance to fight me.

Koth made a disgusting gurgling sound before crashing to his knees. “You will pay for this,” he managed, weak and garbled, as he clutched at the bleeding wound. Then he collapsed face down and, of course, halfway off the tarp.

“Fucking hell.” Another curse I’d learned from the humans. “Now I have to figure out how to get orc blood off the floor. You had to be a pain in the ass, even in death.”

Groaning, I dragged the big body back onto the tarp before it could cause more damage. Once he was tightly wrapped, both in the plastic and duct tape, and the floor was as clean as I could get it, I began to consider my next steps.

The original plan had been to kill Koth near the barrier so I could drag him over and he could be dealt with in Belzod. That way there would be no questions about the big green orc, and we wouldn't have a barrage of humans trying to discover our existence. That had disintegrated when the barrier had closed behind me. I should still probably bring him to the cave, less chance of being discovered until I could cross back over, but I'd stopped worrying about the plan when he'd thrown the slushie at me. My favorite shirt had been ruined! I had run it through the washing machine in the bungalow twice, and that unnatural green color would not go away.

An idea came to me then. There was a sink pit in the woods between the convenience store and Tanner's house. Quicksand, mud, and overgrown vegetation made it the perfect place to dump the body of a mythical being that humans didn't believe existed. I knew from my time in Destiny that the townspeople avoided it. Children were warned from playing in the area because it was too dangerous. I could bring Koth there and let nature do its job. I'd wait till it was dark so I didn't risk running into anyone. Then, I could go see Tanner and make sure he was okay after his mother's appointment.

Grinning, I got to work. I couldn't wait to get to see my Tanner again.

CHAPTER 5

TANNER

“That’s amazing, honey,” my mom replied tiredly as she watched the video of Jake’s home run that his coach had sent us. “I’m so proud of you.”

Jake beamed, and another wave of guilt hit me square in the chest. I’d missed his homerun. Not only that, but it had been the game-winning run that had secured his team a spot in the playoffs, and not one family member had been there to see it.

My mom’s eyes started to drift close. She wouldn’t last long. Usually, she was out before we even made it home from her treatments, but she’d forced herself to stay awake so she could hear about Jake’s game. It ate at her that she could never be there for any of our events. But it wasn’t her fault. Even if she was having a good day, with how compromised her immune system was, it would be a major risk for her to attend a sporting event at a high school. Maybe if his team made the championship, we could work something out . . . but even that would be dangerous.

This was my fault. I was the one who was supposed to be picking up the slack but seemed to always be failing. Mom’s eyes closed again.

“Let me get Mom settled in her room and we’ll order a celebration pizza.”

“Pizza!” my little sisters shouted and danced around. “Pizza! Pizza! Pizza!” Well, fuck. Not that they meant it that way, but that was only another thing to feel guilty about. They shouldn’t be that excited about a damn pizza, but money was always so

tight and focused on bills and medical expenses that extras like pizza didn't happen often.

"You take care of Mom, and I'll order the pizza and get the girls calmed down." I met Jake's eyes, filled with gratitude. I'd gotten so fucking lucky with him. When I was 17, I was always so bitter. Pissed at the hand life had given me. It hadn't been until my failed semester at college that I'd let all that bullshit go. Maybe it wasn't the life I wanted, but I loved my family, and I would do anything for them.

"Thank you," I said, hoping he could feel everything behind the words. He'd even understood when I'd told him I'd be missing his game. I could tell he was disappointed, but he'd put on a brave face like always. It hurt and made me happy at the same time.

The girls were still dancing and singing as I lifted Mom gently off the couch and carried her to the bedroom. She would need a bath tomorrow, but tonight she just needed rest.

I helped her into her pajamas and then into bed. Once the pillows were right and I made sure she had some water and her evening meds, I leaned over, kissing her head. "Night, Ma. Get some sleep."

She flashed me a weak smile, but it was full of love. "Good night, baby. I love you."

"Love you too." I closed the door, tightness in my chest. Every time I did that, I wondered if this would be the last time, if I'd walk in in the morning and realize Mom wasn't waking up and she never would. It was why Jake and I had an unspoken agreement that the girls weren't allowed in Mom's room until we went in first. I didn't want him to see that either, but I couldn't be here all the time and still pay the bills, so unfortunately it fell to him.

I shook off the thoughts. Today was a day of celebration. Pizza and spending time with the kids. Maybe I'd even play a few rounds of the newest Mortal Kombat with Jake before bed.

Pushing back all the depressing thoughts and guilt, I made my way to the kitchen, where Jake was currently arguing with six-year-old Kenzie that she couldn't have ice cream as an appetizer.

"Oh look, Tanner will agree with me!" Kenzie yelled. She jumped off her chair so she could stand in front of me, her little arms crossed over her chest. Kenzie was the odd one out. All the rest of us had dark brown hair, brown eyes, and tan skin. Then there was Kenzie, pale, blue eyes, and blonde. It must've come from her dad because the rest of us all looked like Mom. Not that we would ever know. I still remembered the day Mom had sat us down with sad eyes but a happy smile to tell us that there would be another baby coming.

She'd already been sick, and I'd freaked out. I'd almost been 17, a junior in high school and on my way to securing a full scholarship to college for football. I'd pushed her on who the father was, but she wouldn't budge. She'd insisted that this baby was our sibling and that was all that mattered.

I guessed at the end of the day, that was true. I loved Kenzie just as much as Jake, Lucy, and Mia.

"What will I agree with?" I asked her, trying to keep the humor out of my voice. I met Jake's eyes to let him know I wasn't going to undermine his authority on this. He might've been a kid too, but they needed to listen to him.

"That it's a celebration so that means ice cream before dinner is fine!"

I ran my fingers through her blonde locks, smiling. "It is a celebration. But we still

need to fill our bellies with real food.” She started to pout. “How about we eat ice cream after the pizza? Even at birthday parties, you eat the cake afterward, right?”

She tilted her head up, thinking before finally sighing. “Yeah, I guess.” I kissed her head. “Good. Now why don’t you get washed up before the food gets here.” I looked at Mia and Lucy, who were 10 and 11 respectively. “You too.”

There was some mumbling, but the girls all left, and I turned to Jake. “Thanks,” he muttered. “The pizza should be here in 15.”

“Ok, great.” I sat down at the table and waited him out. I sensed he wanted to talk about something and didn’t want to rush him. Jake had always been a thinker, even when he’d been little. He was careful with his words and wouldn’t say anything until he was sure. That was a quality that had skipped me in the gene pool.

He grabbed a can of soda out of the fridge and came and sat down. I raised my eyebrows at the choice. Soda was usually a weekend drink.

He smirked at me. “It’s a celebration.”

Snorting, I sighed. “You’re right. You could have gotten me one at least.”

Jake grinned and bounced up to get me a can and then he sat back down. Once again, we both sat quietly while I waited for him to spill. “Coach told me scouts are gonna be at the playoff games. He thinks I have a good chance of catching their eye.”

I grinned, pride swelling in me. “That’s fucking awesome, man. ‘Course they’re interested in you. You’re amazing.”

Jake smiled but then got serious. “I kinda want to tell them not to bother.”

“The fuck?” It came out before I could stop it. “Why would you do that?”

My brother sighed heavily before sinking back in the old wooden kitchen chairs. I had found the whole set on the side of the road, and the two of us had spent a weekend sanding them down and repainting them in bright colors that matched nothing but made us happy. He gave me the side-eye. “C’mon, Tan. You know why. There are no good baseball programs around here. Coach said the scouts are coming from Florida, Georgia, maybe even one from Colorado. I can’t go to fucking Colorado.”

My first thought was to shut that bullshit down immediately, but I stopped the words before they blurted out, thankfully. Jake had thought about it, clearly, and I wasn’t going to dismiss him like that.

“Because of Mom?” I asked quietly.

He shrugged, finally looking like the sulky teen I’d been at his age. “She’s part of the reason. I don’t wanna be so far away if—” He cut off, but he didn’t need to finish. I got it. I’d only been an hour away and it had felt like torture. Every time I’d gone to sleep that one semester away, I’d wondered if I’d get a call in the middle of the night, and that had been before she’d taken a turn for the worse. Then that call had happened and everything had shattered. I could understand why Jake was reluctant to deal with that. He’d only been 11, but I knew he remembered.

“I understand,” I said quietly.

“It’s not only that. How can I leave? The girls are still so young and they need a lot, especially Kenzie. And Aunt Judy is fucking useless.”

I couldn’t help it; I barked out a laugh. “So fucking useless,” I agreed. Maybe it was wrong, but I was still pissed at her, and it was easier to have a viable target for our

anger than throwing it around.

But then what Jake was implying finally hit and it hurt. “Jake . . . I don’t want you to feel obligated to stay here. You deserve a chance to go for your dreams. You’ve been talking about playing for the Nats since you were 2 years old.”

Jake smiled sadly at me. “What about you?”

I frowned. “What about me?”

“All those Aaron Rogers and Drew Bree posters that you covered our room with were just for fun?”

I snorted. “Maybe I thought they were hot.”

He wrinkled his nose. “I hope you have better taste than that. Besides, I clearly remember you whispering Channing Tatum’s name in your sleep.”

I laughed. Fuck, he was such a good kid. “Shut up. I did not.” I totally had. And not only in my sleep either. His name had been thrown around a lot in the shower too.

But then I sobered up and got back to the point. “What does my questionable taste in men and room décor have to do with anything though?”

“‘Cause it wasn’t only room décor and crushes. You wanted to be a football player, Tan. And you could’ve been. You were fucking good. You even started on a D1 team your freshman year. That doesn’t just happen.”

I looked down at the table and traced a groove in the wood. I could hear the girls giggling in the living room. My guess was that Mia figured out we were having a serious conversation and was distracting them. But that meant I had to answer Jake.

It hurt thinking about it, even if I didn't regret my decision. Still, I would never hold him back. I wanted him to follow his dreams and get to do everything I couldn't. "Jake," I said seriously, unable to keep the anguish out of my voice. "I'd never ask you to do that. You deserve more than that. I want to see you accomplish everything you want to. I want everything for you. For all of you."

Tears filled Jake's eyes that he wiped away angrily. "Well unfortunately, life is a piece of shit and it doesn't work that way."

"Jake—" The doorbell rang. Fuck.

"I'll get it. Get the girls." Then Jake walked out of the room, leaving me fucking reeling.

I couldn't sleep that night. So after the girls were all down, I checked on Mom and Jake, who was on his headset playing a video game with his friends, then I snuck out the back door to take a walk. I'd tried to bring up the scouts to Jake again, but he'd kept brushing me off. I had to find a way to talk to him about it without him getting defensive. I wouldn't run roughshod over his decisions, but I also didn't want him to regret it or resent us because he felt forced to stay home to help. Maybe I had to stop relying on him so much when I was working. I could talk to Chelsey, the girls' babysitter. Maybe she'd be willing to work something out with me that wouldn't cost a fortune. Or I could talk to my boss about letting the girls hang out at the store sometimes. It would suck for all of us, and definitely cut into my time with my little stalker, Mark, but if I took some of the pressure off Jake, maybe he wouldn't feel obligated to stay here?

With my thoughts racing a million miles an hour, I hadn't even realized I had walked toward the sink pit.

The thing had been the subject of many stories and dares growing up. And the cause

of so many groundings. Not mine. I was always too busy to spend time doing stupid shit like that. But I'd still heard all the tales at school. All the rumors about kids getting stuck in it and never coming out. All the talk of serial killers burying their bodies there.

I shook my head, smiling slightly. The thing had been practically in my backyard my whole life and I had never seen anything shady happen there, and believe me, I'd looked. I'd been a little fascinated with the macabre as a kid, especially after Dad had died and Mom had gotten sick.

I heard a noise coming from the other side of the pit. I froze, listening. At first, there was nothing and I thought I'd imagined it, but then, there it was again. A scraping sound, like something heavy being dragged. The crunch of a boot. More dragging.

I fished out my phone out of my pocket and held it tight. I didn't turn on the flashlight because I didn't want to draw attention to myself, but I wanted to be ready if I needed to call the sheriff.

I should turn the fuck around. I didn't have time to deal with whatever creepy ass thing was happening. I did not want to be the stereotypical dumb jock from a horror movie.

But I guessed I was because I kept walking in the direction of noises against my own free will. I swore my legs had a mind of their own and no self-preservation because I knew damn well this was a bad idea. I crept closer, and I could barely make out the shadow of a man. He was hunched over and focused on something.

“Axum and Nash owe me oshenge buns. A whole case of them! And a lifetime supply of the Cheetos. Maybe they can figure out how to make something similar at home.”

I froze. I knew that voice better than my own. It now replaced Channing Tatum's in my dreams. It made me smile every time I heard it at work. I anxiously waited for when he wasn't around.

Mark.

He was clearly dragging something heavy through the overgrown brambles and heading right to the sink pit. Not suspicious at all.

I needed to run. But apparently, I had zero survival skills because I kept right on walking toward Mark instead, like he had a fucking magnet attracting me to him. It was beyond my control at this point. My little stalker had had me in a chokehold since day one, and his red flags becoming a whole fucking red beacon complete with flashing lights and sirens apparently wasn't enough for me to turn away.

The dragging stopped, and I could get my first clear view of the man. He stood up straight and wiped his head before muttering a curse in a language I didn't understand.

I rubbed my eyes with the heel of my hand because there was no fucking way I was seeing what I thought I was. Maybe I should start laying off the soda too. Or maybe I needed something harder than that because clearly the stress was getting to me. I had to be imagining this whole thing.

I opened my eyes, blinking away the colorful spots, and focused on Mark again. Nope, nothing had changed.

Mark was dragging something that I was pretty fucking sure was a body, wrapped in a clear tarp.

Honestly, that wasn't the shock it should've been. Serial killer and/or assassin had

been on my list of possible careers for Mark since the beginning. See also: hitman. What was surprising was the body he was dragging. It was huge, like probably seven feet tall, and maybe the light was fucking with me, but I was pretty sure it was green.

What. The. Fuck?

“Tanner?”

I blinked out of my stupor to see Mark standing upright, his body angled in a way that made it look like he was trying to hide the giant, green, tarp-wrapped elephant in the room. Like it was possible for his tiny build to block all . . . that. He was watching me with big, terrified eyes as if he were scared of me, and for some reason, that calmed me down. He was the one dragging some monster I’d only seen in anime or read about in a monster fucking smut book to the sink pit and yet he was scared of me?

“Tanner, I can explain. Please.” He sounded so panicked that I wanted to give him a hug and tell him that everything was okay, and seriously, what the hell, survival instincts?

“Okay,” I said, and like the dumbass I was proving myself to be, I sat down in the wet dirt and waited. “Explain.”

CHAPTER 6

MAHK

Sweat dripped down my temple, and not only from the excursion. My pulse beat rapidly, heart racing in my chest so fast it hurt. My hands shook and it was hard to breathe. Panic. This was what panic felt like.

It wasn't an emotion I was used to. Why would it be? I was comfortable with who I was. I didn't hide normally. My brothers were the only people left alive whom I cared about what they thought of me, and they knew exactly who and what I was. I never feared losing them.

Now, as Tanner sat down on the muddy ground, watching me with apprehension, I understood why some people experienced panic attacks and anxiety. I could lose everything before I ever truly had it, and I wasn't sure I'd survive that.

I stared hopelessly at Tanner, hoping he'd give me a hint on where to start. He seemed surprisingly calm, and despite looking a little wary, I didn't think he was scared of me necessarily. But would that change once he understood everything?

I fell to my knees in front of him, ignoring the rock that was jabbing into me.

Tanner raised an eyebrow, waiting. "I don't know where to begin," I told him helplessly.

My mate sighed and ran his fingers through his hair in a nervous gesture I knew well.

I hated that I was adding to his stress. It had already been a rough day for him. All I'd wanted to do was get rid of Koth so I could watch Tanner and make sure he was okay. Not this. Never this.

"I guess start with whatever that is." He gestured toward the tarp.

"It's a body," I responded helpfully.

Tanner snorted. "Yeah, I got that. Why is he green?"

Oh, right. Um . . . how should I approach this? Did I lie? I had done some research on the humans' knowledge of orcs since I'd been here. The Google held a world of information. They thought we were mythical creatures, but there was plenty of lore there. Most recently, orcs had seemed to gain popularity from Lord of the Rings , which was a book but more popularly several movies. I watched them at the Cunningham's house. They were very engrossing even if the portrayal of orcs was inaccurate.

There was also a thing called cosplay. That looked so interesting! Some of the costumes I'd seen on the Google were so good. Could I pretend that Koth was in costume?

I immediately dismissed the thought. Tanner was my mate. He deserved the truth. Not only because I hated lying to him, but also because there was no chance of me going home until he accepted me. That would not happen if I lied.

"He's an orc."

Tanner blinked. I blinked back. It seemed like he was trying to process, so I stayed quiet and waited for questions.

“An orc?” he finally asked, disbelief in his voice.

“Yes. He was using a spelled ring to appear as a human, but I removed it before killing him so he could die in this true form.” Not that the knave deserved the honor.

“Okay . . . sure. This all makes sense.” Something about his tone made me think he meant the exact opposite.

“I could show you?” I tried to keep my tone hopeful. Please don’t hate me.

“The dead body? Hard pass. I—fuck. I can’t believe any of this is happening. How about you start from the beginning instead?”

That was fine. He wasn’t running. So I had to take that as a good sign. He was my mate. He’d understand, right?

I shifted so I was sitting on my bottom and told my Tanner everything. I explained about my home world, about the barrier between the realms deep in Sumner Cave. I told him about Koth, how he’d tried to kill my brother’s mate and then escaped to this world. I told him how I’d been sent here to find him. The only thing I left out was how I was stuck here and why. I didn’t want to overwhelm Tanner, and this had to be a shock to him. It had to be hard believing this was all a fantasy and learning it was true.

When I was done, I felt exhausted and exposed, but Tanner was still here.

He was quiet for a long time, his eyes focused over my shoulder on Koth’s body. I squirmed. I really wanted to get rid of it already, but I wasn’t sure if it would be the best move when Tanner was still adjusting.

After a while, I couldn’t take it any longer. He was so quiet, and I didn’t know what

to do to make it better. “Are you mad at me?” I blurted, hating the thought.

Tanner’s eyes widened like he was surprised by the question, but then his lips tilted up just a little, and I had to return the look because maybe things would be okay.

“I don’t think mad is the right word, Mark. Surprised, overwhelmed, maybe.”

“Mahk.”

He tilted his head. “Huh?”

“My name. It’s Mahk. No r.”

Suddenly, all the anger I’d expected from Tanner earlier rose to the surface. He smacked my shoulder, pretty hard for a human too. “What the fuck, man? Are you saying I’ve been saying your name wrong all this time and you didn’t correct me?”

Butterflies filled my stomach as I lifted a shoulder in response. “I don’t mind you calling me Mark. You can call me anything you want.”

Tanner scowled and climbed to his feet. “Don’t give people that kind of power. It doesn’t matter if it sounds weird to everyone else. You deserve to be called your own name.” Then Tanner laughed, the sound a little crazed. “What the fuck? Why is that what I’m most worried about?” It sounded like he was talking to himself, so I didn’t respond. I stayed where I was, my clothes being ruined by the damp ground, and waited as Tanner got his thoughts together.

There was a lot of mumbling, something about medication and therapy and a lack of sleep, but it wasn’t making much sense to me. I racked my brain, trying to think of how to make it better, but I couldn’t come up with anything.

Finally, Tanner turned to me. “I changed my mind.” Oh no. No. What did he change his mind about? Was he going to make me leave after all. “I want to see it. The body. The orc.”

I stood carefully, making sure I kept my distance from Tanner. “Are you sure? I can show you my true form if you want.” I didn’t want him to get too close to Koth, like even in death he’d taint my Tanner.

Tanner nodded but then shook his head. “No. I mean yes. Yes, I want to see your true form. I think I need to. But I want to see him first. When you show me your true self, I want it to be somewhere better than this. He’s just a stranger.”

I didn’t understand the logic, but I didn’t have it in me to deny my mate anything, so I walked closer to him and held out my hand, relieved when he took it with only a little hesitation.

Together, we stared down at the body through the tarp. He seemed to be watching it intensely, and I tried to look at it from Tanner’s perspective, wondering what he saw.

“Is this what you look like?”

I shrugged. “More or less. My eyes are purple. I have the same white streak in my hair that I do as a human. He’s taller and wider than I was.”

“That’s, that’s cool. And the fangs?”

I frowned, trying to make out what he was saying. “Our tusks? Yes, I have them.”

“Cool. Cool. That’s fine.”

I felt like Tanner was panicking, but he still didn’t let go of my hand.

“And you said he tried to kill your brother’s mate? A human?”

“Yes. Both my brothers have mates who are human. They came through the same barrier I did actually.”

That seemed to give Tanner pause. “Wait. You said something about Sumner Cave?”

I nodded. “Yes. That is where the barrier is.” Was.

“Shit. Oh fuck. Those stories are true? About people going missing in Sumner Cave?”

“I suppose. Though, the barrier only opens if your mate is on the other side.”

Tanner turned to me, a strange look on his face I could not decipher. “And that’s the only thing happening? Nothing else is making people go missing?”

I pursed my lips, not quite understanding. “No? I am sure some humans go missing because of wild animals or injuries, but the only way into Belzod is through the barrier’s magic.”

That didn’t seem to be the answer Tanner wanted. “Okay, um, how do I say this without sounding like an asshole?”

“You can say anything, Tanner. I will not be upset.”

“Fuck. Yeah, okay. You aren’t responsible for any of the missing humans, are you? Like, you didn’t kill any of them?”

Oh! That was what he was worried about? That made sense since I’d told him my profession only minutes ago. “Of course not. I have never killed a human, and I will

not unless they threaten you or my family. Or, I suppose, your siblings or mother, since that would still hurt you, but since that hasn't happened yet, I have not killed any humans."

Tanner looked a little pale. Maybe he should sit down again? Did he need to eat? I hadn't been there to make sure he'd eaten his evening meal and I read that humans could sometimes go faint when they didn't eat regularly.

"Have you eaten? Humans' blood sugar can drop and cause the faintness you're feeling now if you do not consume nutrients regularly," I told him matter-of-factly and squeezed his hand. Mainly because I liked the way it felt in mine.

For some reason, this made Tanner laugh. A lot. "Fuck, Mahk. The things you do to me. I should be terrified, but all I want to do is give you a big hug." That sounded good to me.

"I don't want you to be scared of me. I would never hurt you."

Tanner's expression softened. He lifted his free hand and very hesitantly brought it up to my face. The lightest of touches followed as his fingertips brushed against my cheek. I shivered and leaned in.

"For some reason, I believe you. I'm not scared, Mahk. A little overwhelmed, but not scared."

I grinned at him, relieved. "Okay. I have so many more questions, but maybe you should take care of this first?" He gestured to the body.

"Sure. It doesn't bother you that I killed him?"

"Not really. Which I don't know what the fuck that says about me, but I believe you

and everything you said he did. I understand why you killed him. I just— Let's be done with this part and get out of the fucking woods. We can figure out the rest later."

That was okay. More than okay, truthfully. I still needed to explain the mates situation, but that could wait. Tanner wasn't running away. He wasn't scared, and he seemed to at least want to believe me, even if there was still doubt. My Tanner was so understanding.

Reluctantly, I let go of his hand so I could finally bring Koth to his final resting place. I took one last glance at Tanner as I dragged the body to the edge of the pit. He had his back to me, but he hadn't run away. He was waiting for me to finish my job. Whistling, I rolled Koth over and over until he finally landed in the pit. I scrambled back so I didn't become a victim as well and watched as he slowly began sinking under the surface.

"Good riddance, Koth," I whispered in my native language. I waited till I could no longer see him above the surface before walking back to Tanner. He was facing me now, his back against a tree. He looked a little shaky, but he flashed me a tentative smile as I approached. I gave him my own back. The hard parts were over. Now it was time to convince Tanner he belonged with me. Should be easy, right?

CHAPTER 7

TANNER

I was fine. This was fine. Everything was fine.

I was only holding hands with a disguised, giant green being I'd been certain was fiction only an hour ago, after watching him dispose of another of his race.

Just another Thursday.

What the fuck was life?

Mahk—I couldn't believe I'd been saying his name wrong for weeks—seemed very at ease for someone who'd just admitted to being a career murderer, not to mention a fucking orc, something I didn't think I could rectify until I saw it with my own eyes. Only problem was, I wasn't sure I was ready for that. Or any of this. I should've known ignoring my little stalker's red flags would've ended this way. Of course the first person who showed any interest in me in years was a fucking mythical being hitman.

I probably should've been more bothered by the hitman portion of that sentence, but I . . . wasn't. Yes, murder was wrong, but I'd always believed in the grayscale, and sometimes you had to do what you had to do. Besides, from the little I understood about Mahk's home world, it was kind of old school, medieval sounding, so it made sense that assassins existed in the mainstream. He'd sworn he hadn't killed a human and only ended those who deserved it, and I believed him. Not once during that

whole encounter had I been scared for my life. Somewhere deep down, I knew I was safe with Mahk.

We walked away from the sink pit and onto the main road with Mahk swinging my arm and humming a tune I didn't recognize. It was so fucking adorable and tracked with the man I'd gotten to know over the last few weeks. We froze, a little awkward, unsure where to go now. I briefly thought of bringing him back to my house, but no. I was not prepared to answer questions if any of my siblings saw him, and they'd have questions—nosy little shits. Besides, sharing a bedroom with my teenage brother was a bit of a boner killer. But, on the other hand, this also wasn't a conversation we should be having outside in the middle of the night.

Mahk waited patiently, like he had been doing all night. He seemed to understand my brain was being a little slow on the uptake and was willing to allow me the time to process.

“Do you have some place we can go? Where have you been staying anyway?” I really hoped it wasn't in the middle of the woods somewhere. Even though I'd grown up with Forest Glen as my backyard practically, I wasn't the biggest fan of nature. The thought of having to hike through the woods this late at night, having no idea what wild creature was around the corner waiting to make me their next meal? Yeah, no thanks.

“Oh yes. I am staying at a house! We can go there.”

He was? Where? There were some rentals for tourists who chose to stay for the whole summer, but most people who did had RVs and stayed in Forest Glen. We didn't have a lot of open properties here that he could have rented or bought. And if he did, I was sure I'd have heard about it by now. Destiny was small as shit. Everyone knew everyone, and everyone was in each other's business.

I allowed him to lead me down the street and away from my home. After about three blocks, my first question popped in my head. Had he dragged that body all this way? Finally, he turned down a dirt path and toward a bungalow that was nestled back in the trees. I stopped moving.

“This is the Cunninghams’ home.”

“Oh, yes, I know,” Mahk responded brightly. “Mrs. Menendez told me all about them. They seem very nice.” He paused, frowning at the expression on my face. “Don’t worry. I haven’t messed up their home, and I plan to make sure everything is cleaned and exactly where they left it. I’m only borrowing it.”

He was saying words, and they were in English, thanks to the magical bracelet that he’d also told me about, but they weren’t making any sense. He’d borrowed the Cunninghams’ house? And what the fuck did Mrs. Menendez have to do with any of it?

“Do they know you’re living here?” I finally landed on.

“The Cunninghams? I don’t think so. I don’t know how they would. Mrs. Menendez informed me they are visiting their children out of state. She is dog-sitting Wonton. It seems like an odd name for a dog that big. Actually, I had never seen a dog in this realm that big before. I asked Mrs. Menendez about it, but all she said was that Wonton was a Great Dane.” Mahk shrugged like everything he’d said was perfectly normal.

I had so many questions. You know what? No, I didn’t. The less I knew, the better. I jerked my head toward the door. “Alright, let’s go. I was already an accomplice to covering up a murder, so why not add breaking and entering to the list?”

I sent a silent apology to the Cunninghams and then followed Mahk inside. He looked

worried, but I didn't think it had anything to do with the fact that he was squatting in my neighbor's home while they spent time with their first grandchild.

"What?" I snapped, when he kept staring at me, a little rudier than I'd meant to be. But I was internally freaking out a bit. Somewhere in my warped moral compass, being in the Cunninghams' bungalow without them knowing felt worse than watching Mahk dispose of a body. Maybe because Koth had seemed like an asshole who'd deserved it? Or maybe it was because even if he was ever discovered, the police would never be able to make sense of the massive green orc and would probably cover it up. Or possibly it was because the Cunninghams were sweet as fuck. They'd sometimes look after the girls for me when Chelsey couldn't, and Mrs. Cunningham made the best baked ziti and always made sure to save an extra tray for us to take home. It kind of felt like I was betraying her trust.

But when we walked in, some of my concerns were alleviated. It looked exactly like it always had. The house was clean, and all of the family photos were untouched. Mrs. Cunningham's music box collection still sat proudly in the glass display cabinet. I sucked in a deep breath. Mahk seemed to be respecting their place at least.

This was when, once again, my insane attraction to Mahk overrode any sense I thought I had. I started to reason it out. The Cunninghams were awesome. If they knew Mahk needed a place to stay, they'd probably be happy to have him here while they were gone. I could pretend, at least for a little while, that Mahk had gotten permission and I wasn't committing a crime.

I sucked in a deep breath and closed my eyes. I'd had a lot of shit thrown at me in my life, but this was simultaneously the hardest and not that bad. I could walk away at any time. It wasn't like when Mom had gotten sick or when the second stroke had left her wheelchair bound and I'd had to leave school. That was my family. It was heavy and too much and all I wanted to do was bury my head under the blanket and pretend none of it was happening, but I couldn't. I had a sick mom I had to take care of and

four siblings that were too young to take care of themselves. I'd had to face it head-on, as much as I hadn't wanted to.

I had no obligation here. I could walk away right now, go back home, and get that sleep I clearly needed. I could ignore Mahk when he came into the store or even ask him to leave. I didn't have to see his orc form or whatever the fuck else. Could go back to my boring ass life and responsibilities.

Yet, I couldn't. Just the thought of walking away from Mahk hurt, even if I couldn't explain why. My little stalker had his hooks in me, and as much as the sensible thing would be to end this, I wasn't going anywhere.

Slowly, like I was in a fog, I sat down on the Cunninghams' powder-blue couch. I looked at Mahk, who still stood in the middle of the room, looking a little shell-shocked. As much as this was hard for me, I had to imagine it wasn't easy for Mahk either. This was an entirely different culture and lifestyle that he'd been thrown into. Then on top of that, for whatever reason, he seemed attached to me and cared about my opinions. It was very odd having that kind of attention on me, even now as he stared with his blue/purple puppy eyes and those fucking lashes that were the death of me.

"Okay. Let's do this."

He didn't move. "Do what, Tanner?"

I waved at him. "The whole magic thing. Let me see what you really look like."

His eyes widened and his fingers ticked, something I'd noticed he did when he was nervous. "Are you sure? I do not want to frighten you."

"I'm sure. I want to see the real you." I flashed him a small smile. "Besides, I already

witnessed you dumping a body. If I haven't run yet, then I won't because of this.”

Mahk still seemed unsure, but he reached for the gaudy bangle he always wore and took it off.

Where the cute man I'd been crushing on had been now stood an orc. A full-ass, straight out of my favorite monster fucker Yaoi orc. Mahk was now taller than I was by a few inches, thick muscles filling his features. His skin was light green, and I noticed a few scars along his arms that had not been there in the human body. A thick, dark beard covered his face, his tusks sticking out through the coarse strands. His dark hair on his head hung down to his shoulders, and there was that white-blond streak I always found fascinating. He blinked up at me, and his eyes were fully purple now. A deep, intoxicating amethyst color that held me in a chokehold.

Mahk stood very still, his fingers flexing nervously as he watched me. I knew he was waiting for a reaction, but it was taking some time for my brain to reload and get on board with forming a coherent sentence. I wasn't scared, far from it. I was having a hard time coming to terms with how my body was reacting to the orc in front of me.

His clothes seemed to adjust and grow to fit his body, which made his odd ensemble stand out even more. They stretched over his broader form, and yeah, okay, I looked down at the bulge in between his legs. But trust me, anyone would. Even covered in clothing, it was . . . obvious. I didn't even think he was hard—he was that massive. Usually when I hooked up, I topped, but my mind was already wandering and delving into fantasies it had no business having.

I forced myself to look up. Mahk was waiting for me to say anything, to ease his nerves, and instead I was ogling the man. The orc? Whatever, it was still inappropriate. So instead, I got lost inside those amethyst eyes. Fuck, they were beautiful. I stood up and slowly approached him. Mahk didn't move a muscle.

My heart was racing, but I knew Mahk would never hurt me. It was strictly adrenaline. Too much had happened in such a short time and it had my body reacting. I stopped about a foot away. It was a little strange that he was suddenly bigger than I was, though not that much. I looked up with a soft smile and gently reached out until I was cupping his cheek, my palm pushing into his coarse beard.

“Thank you for showing me,” I whispered almost reverently. I didn’t know why I was reacting like this, but it felt appropriate. I couldn’t imagine the amount of trust it took for Mahk to share everything he had. Mahk leaned into my touch, eyes half closed, like he craved nothing more. Slowly, cautiously, he brought a hand up to mine, covering it. I grinned.

“You have the same pretty eyelashes in this form. It’s my fucking kryptonite.”

Mahk smiled, his eyes lighting up, even as he looked confused. “Kryptonite?”

Suddenly, all his odd phrasing and naivety about basic things made sense. He was from a completely different world, so of course he didn’t know those things. “It comes from an old superhero, Superman. Basically, nothing could hurt or kill him, except one thing; kryptonite. It was his only weakness.”

The implication sunk in and Mahk rewarded me with a lopsided smile that had one of his tusks tilting up, and it was so fucking adorable and so reminiscent of the ones I was used to with his human illusion. It warmed me. This was still my little stalker, just slightly larger. And green.

“I’m sorry I kept this from you,” Mahk said eventually. His voice was a little huskier now, gravel in the tone that went right to my core.

“You have nothing to apologize for. I get it.”

The air around us was heavy with anticipation. We were on the cusp of something monumental, something life-changing. I wrenched away, creating some much-needed space between us. I had to be able to breathe without his heady scent filling my nose.

We stared at each other, neither one of us finding the words for whatever was happening. I understood the significance of him telling me this. It meant something. He'd finished his job that he was here for. Mahk could've easily lied to me and disappeared, leaving me with questions I'd never have the answer to and an ache in my soul. But he hadn't. He'd told me the truth. I didn't know why, and I was scared to find out.

Something needed to be given, though. I cleared my throat. "So what now?"

Mahk's lashes fluttered. "What do you mean?"

"Well, you did your job, right? So what happens now? Do you go back to your world?" And leave me here alone? I managed to keep that part to myself.

Mahk froze at my question, one of his tusks digging into his upper lip, and I swore to fuck this massive orc was blushing.

"Well, you see, about that . . ."

Hell, what now?

"What is it, Mahk?"

He rubbed the back of his neck, embarrassed. "I cannot return home."

What? "Huh? How? I thought you said there was a barrier that you could cross. In the cave? That's how you got here, right?"

“There is.” He looked down at the floral area rug we were standing on, his toes digging into the fabric. “But it kind of closed and won’t open back up.”

“What do you mean it won’t open back up? Is that even possible? Do you know what happened? Have you been trying to find a way home?”

It wasn’t like I was in a rush for Mahk to leave me, but . . . I was realistic enough to know he could not stay here forever. He wasn’t human. He had a life and a family. He was the royal assassin, whatever the fuck that meant. Whatever this was between us wasn’t destined to be permanent, and no matter how much I wished I could have something that was only for myself, something with Mahk, I understood that wasn’t in the cards. I knew what it felt like to be trapped somewhere you didn’t want to be. I didn’t want that for Mahk.

He still looked awkward. There was something he wasn’t telling me. “I know what happened and how to reopen the barrier. I am unable to do so right now.”

“Okay . . . so how do you do it?”

Mahk finally looked up, and I was struck by how vulnerable he appeared. All I wanted to do was kiss him and hold him and make everything better, which, wasn’t that an odd feeling?

“There is a story from my homeland,” he said instead of outright answering. “It talks of how every orc has a person that is destined for them. Fated. The story goes on to say that if yours is from a different realm, one of the barriers will open, but only for the person. They would be allowed into Belzod to meet their mate. But the twist was the border would not reopen until both parties accepted the match.” He laughed a little, reminiscing, “My brother Nash always firmly believed in the stories, and my other brother, Axum, and I would tease him. It wasn’t that I thought they were fantasies exactly, but it seemed so farfetched and unlikely to happen that I dismissed

it, as did Axum.”

Made sense. I would never believe something like that either. “That was until both my older brothers met their mates, who crossed the barrier. Still, I never expected it to happen to me, and I had no idea it could occur in reverse, where I would be closed off to my home, but it did, and it can.”

I understood the words and even what they meant. Mahk believed he’d been locked out of his homeland because he had a fated mate here and needed to accept the bond before the barrier would reopen—but that was impossible.

The last few weeks flashed through my mind like a movie, from the first time I’d caught Mahk watching me to all the times he’d brought me food and spent time with me, to all the events today. The way Mahk seemed to fixate on me, seemed to act like I was the most important person in the universe. It implied one thing, but there was no fucking way whatever deities Mahk believed in would somehow decide that I, of all fucking people, was this sweet, slightly deadly orc’s perfect match. It was fucking laughable.

But the way Mahk was staring at me with such earnest want, begging me to understand, to accept him, it was hard to come up with any other conclusion. It was so fucked up, so unbelievably impossible I had to fight the urge to break down in hysterics. But Mahk was being deadly serious, and I couldn’t bring myself to hurt him like that.

“Tell me I’m misunderstanding what you’re implying,” I finally implored.

But Mahk looked at me sadly. “You’re my fated mate, Tanner. You were meant to be mine, and I was meant to be yours.”

Oh, fuck me. What did I do now?

CHAPTER 8

MAHK

Tanner's eyes were wide with panic, and I could hear his heart beating from here, even with the space between us. Too much space. It might have only been about two arms distance, but it felt like miles, a never-ending chasm separating us.

Tanner was rejecting me, or at least the idea of being my mate. He still hadn't said a word, but he didn't need to. He didn't want me. Couldn't accept me. My heart ached, shattering into a million pieces in the silence.

I waited, hoping he'd say anything. If I understood what he was struggling with and why he was so against the idea, maybe I'd be able to convince him otherwise.

It wasn't even about never returning home. That would hurt, yes, but not nearly as much as Tanner turning me away. That might break me beyond repair.

"You have to be wrong." Tanner stumbled back, his knees eventually touching the furniture. He fell back into it, like it was impossible to stay standing anymore. "Maybe it closed for another reason? Or maybe someone else is meant to be your mate and you only thought it was me, since you saw me first?" There was an edge of panic to his voice as he tried to find some kind of explanation that wouldn't tie him to me.

It was like my body cracked in two. My mate, my other half didn't want me. He was so desperate to find a reason to make it not true that he was coming up with other

plausibilities. I thought back on all the moments we'd had together. At Tanner's beautiful smile when I'd brought him tacos. What would I do if he said no?

I was suddenly feeling very vulnerable, and somehow looking like my true self in front of my Tanner while he rebuffed me was too much to bear. I pushed the bangle back on and whispered a couple words to reform the human illusion. It felt like a shield of some sort as I braced myself for the worst.

Tanner frowned at me. "You don't have to do that, not in front of me."

I shrugged a shoulder. I didn't have anything to say to that.

Tanner ran his fingers through his hair, pieces sticking up in every direction. I wanted to run mine through and smooth it down. I wanted to feel the soft strands as they brushed my skin.

"Listen, I'm not . . . Fuck, this sounds so cliché, but it's not you. It's me. There's no fucking way fate or whoever you believe in shackled you with a fuckup like me. It wouldn't be fair to you. The amount of baggage I have . . ." He started to pace the sitting room.

I didn't understand everything Tanner was saying, but I got the sentiment. He didn't think he was worthy of me, which was so far from the truth I wasn't sure I had the proper words to correct him.

How did I tell this man how much he'd grown to mean to me over the last few weeks. Yes, I'd known he was mine from the moment I'd laid eyes on him, but my feelings had only grown the more we spoke and the more I watched him. How did I explain that the way he cared for his family only made me want him as my mate more? It had been the joy of my life spending time with Tanner and caring for him, even if it was from the shadows. All I wanted was a chance to do that in full view. Whatever

struggles we had, we could figure it out together.

My knees felt weak as I closed the distance between us. Fear gripped me. What if he pushed me away? Tanner's chest heaved as he struggled to control his breath. His eyes were wide and wild, and it looked like he was about to run. I had seen that look before in some of my targets, but I never wanted to see it in Tanner.

"Can I hold you?" The words came out shakier than I'd intended. Tanner flinched, and I thought he was going to deny me, but after a moment, I was granted a shaky nod. It was hesitant and he looked terrified, but it was the best thing I had ever seen.

I moved my arms but froze. If I was going to do this, I wanted to be in my true form. A quick word and the spell deactivated and I was orc again. Tanner's breath hitched, but he didn't step away or tell me no. I closed the final distance, and soon my mate was in my arms.

Tanner was stiff at first, his body rigid in my hold. I did not move. I did not let go. I waited Tanner out. Then my mate let out a sob and melted into me.

"Shh, that's it, lulekai . You're okay. I have you now. You can let go."

Tanner sobbed again and my heart broke. I wracked my brain, trying to figure out how to fix this, to understand exactly what was going on in his mind. No matter how hard I tried, I could come up with no solution, so I just held him tightly and buried my nose in his hair, finally feeling the soft strands.

Eventually, I guided Tanner toward the sofa and we sat. I still kept him close as his body shook. Desperate to comfort him, I started to hum the lullabies my mother had sung to me as a small child.

Eventually, the shaking stopped and Tanner pulled away enough to look at me. His

eyes were red and puffy, tears staining his cheeks. Without thinking, I lifted a thumb, wiping up the streaks. Tanner smiled timidly.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to freak out like that. I don’t know what happened.”

I wanted to know what his skin tasted like. Was it salty now? I resisted the urge. “You do not need to apologize for that, my Tanner. This has been a very emotional day, and humans sometimes cry with big emotions, but there is nothing wrong with that. It is a release.”

Tanner snorted. “Where did you learn that?”

“The Google,” I responded proudly.

Tanner burst out laughing then, and I smiled in return. I thought he might be laughing at me, but it didn’t matter since I’d made my mate smile, a real one, not the one he gave customers at the shop. More than smiling, I’d made him laugh.

“Fuck, Mahk. Please don’t change.” That made me smile even harder. Maybe we would be okay. It might take some time, but maybe Tanner would grow to accept me.

It took a while for him to stop, even wiping his eyes as more tears fell, but they were the happy kind I’d also read about. At least, I was pretty sure that was the case. Once he did, his expression got serious, and my heart skipped a beat.

But Tanner took my hands in his and squeezed, little tingles shooting through my fingers, all the way to my heart.

“I think I need a little time, Mahk. Just to process. This was a lot.”

I nodded solemnly. “Take all the time you need, lulekai . I will wait for you.”

Tanner frowned. “But aren’t you stuck here, unable to get home?”

I lifted a shoulder in response. “It would be worth it. I’d miss my brothers, but I would wait a lifetime if it meant I could eventually call you mine.”

Tanner’s face fell. “Fuck, you can’t say stuff like that, Mahk. You know what that does to me?”

I shook my head. “I was only speaking the truth.”

Tanner slumped down on the couch. “You need to stop being so . . .” He waved his hand vaguely. “. . . perfect.”

I frowned. “I am not perfect.”

“For me you are. It’s hard to think around you.”

I forced myself not to reach out and touch him. “Do you want me to leave?” I wouldn’t go far. I’d still be watching, but I learned that some humans needed space when faced with a big decision or problem, and I would respect that if it was what Tanner wanted.”

But he shook his head. “No. Just—and I feel like the biggest asshole asking this of you—can I have a little time? Not a lot. If this is too much, I’ll help you find a way back home, I swear, but I just . . . Fuck. I need some time.”

Nothing Tanner said made sense. I’d already told him he could have all he needed. So I picked up his hand, enjoying how it was slightly smaller than mine in this form, and brought it to my lips. I barely brushed them along the knuckles, but Tanner still gasped, his eyes fluttering closed for a second like I imagined he would with a more intimate gesture.

“Take all the time you need, my Tanner. I am not going anywhere.”

CHAPTER 9

TANNER

I was torn between needing space and staying in the safety of Mahk's arms forever. I was a bigger guy, so it was rare for me to be the one comforted. Normally, I didn't mind. I liked being in charge, and I was a caretaker by nature, but every once in a while, it was nice to be on this side of things.

Plus, Mahk's arms felt amazing. The way he held me so securely, there was no hesitation, none of the awkwardness that often came when cuddling wasn't leading to sex. There was no impatience, no fidgeting. Mahk held on, making it clear he wasn't going anywhere, even if he hadn't said the words.

As amazing as it was, the rational part of my brain knew I needed to create some distance because I'd never be able to think clearly like this. I also needed to get home. I didn't like leaving Jake home with everyone by himself at night, in case something happened. He hadn't tried to call me, but in light of the conversation we'd had today, I was afraid he wouldn't unless it was a bad emergency, in a way to prove to me that I needed him home.

That was another reason I had to take a step back from whatever was happening with Mahk. I didn't want to stay away completely—I didn't think I could. But a good night's sleep and a little clarity would do me a world of good.

I shifted a bit on Mrs. Cunningham's sofa to look Mahk in the eyes. He still had that cautious hesitance, like he was positive I would break things off and run the fuck

away at any second. I tried to smile, hoping to let him know we were okay.

“I need to get home.”

He nodded solemnly. “Of course.”

Mahk disentangled himself from me and stood up, and then suddenly he was human again. That switch was going to give me whiplash. It took my brain a second to register why he’d changed appearances.

“You don’t need to walk me back. I’ll be fine.”

Yeah, that didn’t go over well. Mahk narrowed his eyes, his lips pursed as he thought. “If you do not want to walk with me, I understand. I will follow you.”

I couldn’t help it. I laughed. “Have you been following me home a lot, Mahk?”

He nodded, completely unashamed. “Almost always, unless I had a lead on Koth and had to work. But even then, I came to check on you afterwards.”

“You know, most humans frown on that kind of behavior. We call it stalking.”

He seemed to think about this, considering why we wouldn’t be okay with being followed without our knowledge.

“And you? Are you upset that I followed you? I had to make sure you were safe.”

Warmness filled my belly. I stood up and touched his now smooth and tan cheek. It was weird seeing him like this after seeing the true Mahk. I wondered why his human form was so short. While he was maybe four or so inches taller than my 6’3” as an orc, he was at least six inches shorter than me now. He was also narrower now, and I

could easily wrap my arms around him and hold him there. I had so many questions about the magic. Did he choose what his human form looked like, or was it random? How did it actually work?

Anyway, none of that mattered right now. My brain was at max capacity, and I could wait for those little things. I had a question to answer, and the longer I took, the more concerned Mahk became. I could tell by the way he was stiffening and how his cheek twitched under my skin.

“No, I’m not. I should be, but I’m not. But from now on, you don’t hide in the shadows. I want to know you’re there.”

Mahk beamed. “Okay. I like that.”

“I like that too. Now, c’mon. I have to get back home. We can walk together.”

“I like that even better.”

I took his hand as I led him out, just to reinforce that even if I was fucking confused, I wanted him here, next to me.

The walk back to my house was quiet. We were both in our heads too much for any more conversation. The air was heavy, but it wasn’t awkward. It had never felt awkward with Mahk, even when it probably should have been. Being near him felt natural.

All too soon, I was standing in my front yard. The porch light flickered, leaving creepy shadows across the overgrown grass. I groaned. Guess I had to add replacing the light to my list. The lawn . . . Well, that could wait another week or two. Maybe.

All the lights were off in the house, including in my room, so Jake must’ve finally

gone to sleep. I took it as a good sign as I turned toward Mahk.

“Thank you.” I rocked back on my feet, feeling a little awkward. “For walking me back, I mean.”

“Of course. Can I walk you to work in the morning?”

I’d never dated in high school. I hadn’t had time. Between taking care of my siblings and football, a boyfriend had been far from my mind. Besides a couple mutual blow jobs in the locker room, I really hadn’t done much until my semester in college. Even then, dating hadn’t been on the radar, but hooking up had become a priority.

But because of my lack of experience, I’d never gotten to have that curling your toes, giddy feeling when you first started seeing someone and it was new and exciting and big and scary. I’d never gotten to know what it was like to stand on the lawn of my mom’s house with my date, wondering if we were gonna kiss. I’d never gotten to sneak in late, trying not to wake up my family while my mind reeled from an amazing date.

Now, at twenty-fucking-three years old, I knew what all those teen movies were talking about. My stomach felt alive with butterflies, the anticipation heavy as Mahk and I stood so close, our hands still intertwined, knowing we had to end this but not sure how.

Of course, whenever I’d imagined this, it hadn’t been with a nearly 7-foot orc, but life liked to throw surprises my way.

“Yes,” I finally answered, my voice a little shaky. “I would like that a lot.”

Mahk batted those damn eyelashes and flashed me the sweetest smile, and I was a fucking goner. I wanted to kiss him so badly. I needed to know what he tasted like.

Would he fight me for dominance, or would he yield so prettily? I had no business wondering that. Not after I was the one who'd asked to put the brakes on this so I could think, but my brain and body didn't give a fuck.

"Can I kiss you?" I found myself asking without meaning to.

Mahk's eyes widened, like he was as surprised by the question as I was. But I was in too deep now. I wasn't turning back. Mahk nodded, a little dazed, and before I could process anything, my free hand cupped the back of his head, fisting some of his hair and tilting his face up.

Our lips touched.

It was innocent at first. No tongue, just lips pressed against each other. But then Mahk's parted with a breathy sigh, and I took the invitation, leaning in and taking more—taking everything he was willing to give me.

Mahk yielded. Somehow, I'd known he would. Under that protective, stabby exterior was a sweet man with a possibly subby streak, and I was here for it. I licked at the seam of his lips, savoring his taste before breaking free.

"Fuck, little stalker, you are so sweet." I kissed him again, unable to help myself. Then one more quick peck. "I can't get enough."

"You can kiss me any time you'd like, Tanner. I always want to be kissed by you."

I rested my forehead on top of his head. "You can't say things like that to me, sweetheart. I'll take it seriously."

"I hope so. I am being serious."

Fuck. It took all the self-control I had to back away. Space. I needed space. I needed to think about all the things I'd seen and heard today and not get swept away by all things Mahk. He thought we were fated mates, which yeah, that was a problem for tomorrow, but Mahk believed it wholeheartedly, and I wouldn't tease him by getting his hopes up more than I already had. Space. If I kept saying it, maybe I'd actually do it.

"Goodnight, Mahk," I whispered, taking a step back.

Mahk reached out like he was going to stop me but then forced his hand down. "Good night, Tanner."

"I'll see you tomorrow."

"Yes, I will be here."

I turned away, focusing on my house because if I looked at Mahk again, I probably wouldn't go inside.

I made it to the door. It was unlocked because Jake always forgot to do it before bed, so I easily turned the handle and slipped into the dark house before glancing one last time. I could see him, standing in the flickering light, staring at me with laser-focused intensity.

I waved, like a dumbass, glad Mahk couldn't see how red my cheeks were in the darkness. Or, hell, I hoped he couldn't. I had no idea how good his eyesight was.

I closed the door, but then immediately ran to the window, desperate for one more glance, but Mahk was gone.

CHAPTER 10

MAHK

I paced the parking lot of Tanner's work, the bouquet of flowers in my hand. The woman at the flower shop had said that roses were popular for wooing a romantic interest, but when I'd looked at them, they didn't seem right. The roses were beautiful, but they were too uniform and monotone for my Tanner. He was all explosive color and wild edges. Nothing about him or his life was neat and monotone, and I wanted my first gift to him to demonstrate this.

So twenty minutes later, the nice woman at the shop had helped me design my own bouquet, and then I was on my way. Now that I was here, I was having doubts. The research I'd done said flowers were a good gift in the beginning stages of wooing, but what if I'd gotten it wrong? Tanner had never mentioned liking flowers and had none around his home. Maybe he disliked them. Or maybe he was allergic. That was another thing I'd learned during my research: humans could have sensitivities to certain things and it could make them sick. The more I learned about my mate's species, the more terrified I was. How were they so prone to vulnerability?

Anyway, maybe this was a bad idea. Tanner hadn't seen me yet, he was busy talking to the other cashier who was taking over, so I could easily hide these before he saw them. I did not want to make him upset by presenting him a gift he couldn't even enjoy.

I was looking for a place to place them when the bells on the door chimed.

“Mahk?” I turned, trying to hide the bouquet behind my back, but it was too late. Tanner found them.

He met me where I stood in the cracked lot and smiled crookedly. “Whatchu got there, little stalker?”

I felt like maybe little stalker was an insult, but I was anything but insulted. It made my heart skip a beat when he called me that with that teasing but sweet lilt to his tone.

Tanner raised an eyebrow and waited. Knowing he wouldn’t give up until I showed him, I pulled the flowers from behind my back and handed them to him.

“The internet said flowers were a good way to woo a romantic interest,” I explained. “The woman at the flower shop suggested roses, but they didn’t feel right.”

Tanner looked a little awestruck, and my nerves were starting to get the better of me. Before I could rip them out of his hands and run away, my mate leaned down and lightly brushed his lips against mine. It was nothing like the kiss from that first night Tanner had found out about me, but it was the first time he’d kiss me at all in the five days that had passed. My lips tingled with the sensation, and I found myself leaning forward, silently begging for more.

“Thank you, sweetheart. You’re right. Roses aren’t really my thing. But these, I love. It’s like a rainbow.”

I knew my mate would love them! I brimmed with pride from knowing I’d pleased Tanner and at how well I already knew my mate.

“Let’s run by the house so I can put these in water, and then we’ll head over to the school.”

I nodded and then started to hum happily to myself when his free hand entwined with mine.

From what I'd read in my research, this wasn't a traditional date, but when Tanner had asked me to come to his brother's baseball game with him, that had seemed more significant than any dinner and movie that the Google had said was standard. I wouldn't be hiding in the shadows. I would be sitting directly next to Tanner and his sisters while they watched their brother play in something called the playoffs. For Tanner, whose family was more important to him than anything, I couldn't help but feel a thrill at being invited.

He didn't live far from the convenience store, so soon we were standing in the overgrown lawn of his home. I wondered about that. The rest of the houses in the neighborhood had neatly trimmed grass with pretty, colorful flowers. I wanted to ask Tanner why his was not like that but didn't know how.

I hesitated on the gravel pathway that led up to the faded porch. Did he want me to come inside?

He seemed to understand my hesitation and tugged only my hand. "Come on in. You don't have to wait here like a creeper."

I didn't know what a creeper was but was too excited to care. It was my first time being invited inside Tanner's home, and while I'd seen most of it through the windows, it felt different entering

The front door led directly to a living area. It was clean but worn. An old carpet with clear tread marks from overwear and slightly faded stains covered the space. The sofa was large and looked more comfortable than Mrs. Cunningham's, but the fabric was as faded as the carpet, and the dents from people sitting on it were obvious. Next to the sofa was a chair in the same fabric. It was soft and comfortable looking, and the

bottom opened with a lever to allow the person sitting to rest their feet up. I liked that chair a lot. I wanted to ask Tanner what it was called, but his mother was currently sleeping in it, so it felt rude.

Tanner smiled uncomfortably and led me past her. In the hallway, I couldn't help but notice the walls lined with photographs of the family. They were a timeline of Tanner and his siblings' lives, starting from when he'd just been an infant cradled in his much younger mother's arms, a man with a build so similar to Tanner's, it must have been his father's sitting next to her, smiling down happily at the small child. Eventually, the man stopped being in the pictures, and his mother began looking weaker and more frail. More children continued to pop up, but despite the hardships that had clearly marred their lives, they were always smiling, always so filled with love.

I allowed Tanner to lead me into the kitchen, which was in a similar state as the living area. It was clean, but the appliances and countertops were old and not of great quality. I didn't have to be of the human realm to notice that. The floor was chipped, and in a few places, mats covered missing tiles. None of that mattered, though, because the focus would always be on the dining table and the brightly colored chairs that made the place feel very homey.

Tanner was rummaging through the cabinets, muttering quietly to himself. Eventually, he pulled out a tall glass mug that we would drink pints of ale out of back home.

"We don't have a vase," he told me sheepishly. "But I think this should work."

"It's perfect." He seemed self-conscious for some reason, and I never wanted him to feel like that. Like the bouquet of flowers, the mug fit Tanner much more than a vase ever would. He quickly filled it with water and placed it on the counter near the window behind the sink.

“They look great,” he said, closing the space between us and wrapping his arms around my waist. “Thank you. Seriously. No one has ever done that for me before.”

The statement both pleased me and saddened me. I hated that Tanner had never had anyone who cherished him the way he deserved. On the other hand, it satisfied some part of me I hadn’t realized existed to know that I would be the one to give that to my mate. The only one.

The way Tanner was looking at me now, I’d do anything to keep that expression on his face. I could practically feel his contentment. I’d done that. I’d made him happy by such a simple gesture.

His phone vibrated then, pulling both of us out of our moment. He still didn’t move for a long while, his gaze meaningful and heavy. Finally, he dragged those brown eyes away and dug it out.

“That was Chelsea. She just picked up the girls from school and will meet us there.”

I nodded. Chelsea was his sisters’ nanny, though he called her a babysitter. I did not understand that phrase, as neither of his sisters were babies, but humans were strange sometimes.

“C’mon. It’s time for you to meet my family.” He took my hand again, which would never not thrill me, and we walked back to the living area. He paused at his mother and separated from my grip so he could adjust the blanket that had shifted on her. He watched her with a sad smile, as the woman barely moved. He kissed her head. “Rest, Mom. I’ll take plenty of pictures.”

He walked away, once again taking my hand, and we left.

The town of Destiny was small, and while Tanner did have an automobile—a truck

he'd called it—as well as his mom's van, he rarely ever used them. Which pleased me because I was still not used to the contraptions. You were locked in a metal tube going at intense speeds. My research had shown how dangerous they were, and I had seen many videos of gruesome accidents. I would prefer that Tanner never used one at all, but when I'd suggested it, he'd laughed in my face. I guessed the idea of a day-long walk to get to his mother's appointment was not pleasing to him. I wasn't sure what was wrong with carriages, but apparently humans no longer used them.

The weather was nice, as Tanner had explained, so we walked to the high school, it was called, to see his brother Jake play baseball. I had looked up the game when I'd been invited, and we had something that was similar. It made me pleased that I should be able to follow the game at least somewhat.

In under ten minutes, we were coming across a large brick building. In front was a sign that read: Destiny Memorial High School. Home of the Mustangs . I pulled out the phone that Tanner had helped me buy. It gave me access to the Google everywhere, not only at the Cunninghams' home, which I was glad for now as I looked up what a mustang was.

“Oh, like a rhipponek but with four legs.”

Tanner tilted his head. “A rhipponek?”

“It is an animal back home, similar to your horses, I think. They have six legs though.”

“Wow. That's . . . wow.” I didn't know what wow meant, but he did not seem upset, so I put my phone back in the pocket of my polka-dot pants I'd found in something called a thrift store.

“You know I love hearing about your home, but when we're at the game, try not to

mention that, okay?"

Right. I was just an everyday human who was temporarily living in town for business. That was what we'd decided I should tell people.

"Okay," I replied easily. I understood why I had to pretend to be a human. It was why I'd been given the magical bangle to begin with. We all knew how dangerous it could be if other species found out about our existence and found a way to infiltrate our world.

We walked through the lot filled with automobiles. Young ones lingered, some sitting on the tops of the vehicles or in the beds of the ones that were trucks. Other children were on the grassy field on the side of the school, kicking a black-and-white ball. None of them paid us any mind as we kept walking back.

"That's the soccer field," Tanner whispered to me. "Do you know what soccer is?"

I shook my head but remembered the name so I could research it later. "Back there, you see those yellow posts that are sticking up?"

It was in the distance, but they were clear. "Yes."

"That's the football field," Tanner explained a little excitedly. "That was what I played."

I could tell it meant a lot to him, and I wanted to ask so many questions. "I want to learn all about it. Do you still play?"

Tanner deflated, and a flash of sadness spread across his features. "No."

He didn't say anything else, and even I realized this wasn't the time to press.

We crossed the soccer field and were then standing in front of a fenced in area. A diamond of sorts was painted in white, and a mound of sand sat in the middle of it. All around, children in two different colored uniforms were standing. Some were stretching. Some were tossing a white ball— baseball , my brain supplied—to each other, catching it in brown mitts. Along the other end of the fence, players were swinging the wooden sticks the humans called bats.

Tanner paused at the fence, where many other families were also mingling about. He scanned the field and then grinned and pointed to where two boys tossed the ball to each other on the far end. “The dark-haired one with his back to us is Jake!” Tanner told me proudly. I chose not to remind him that I knew well what Jake looked like. “His number is 6.” Then a little quieter, he added, “That was my football number.”

That also meant something to Tanner. Something I did not understand now, but I would. Unsure what to do or say, but wanting to fix Tanner’s sadness, I squeezed his hand and leaned into his shoulder.

Just then, the boy with Jake saw us and said something to Tanner’s brother. He turned around and, upon seeing us, broke out into a huge smile and even waved. He looked so much like Tanner at that moment, it warmed my heart.

Tanner laughed. “He’s so corny.” But he waved back, and I could feel how proud he was of Jake.

“C’mon, Chelsea said she was saving us a spot in the bleachers. I can introduce you to Lucy, Mia, and Kenzie.”

“That sounds wonderful.”

Everything felt perfect as we walked over to the metal benches Tanner had called bleachers and up to a young woman with three young girls hanging all over her.

CHAPTER 11

TANNER

As far as first meetings with the family went, this couldn't have gone better. Despite Mahk's idiosyncrasies, the kids all loved him. Even Jake stopped shooting him dirty looks and giving him veiled threats as the night wore on. Mahk had chosen to introduce himself as his more fake human name, Mark. I wished he didn't have to, but Mahk would be considered odd here. So it was easier not to bring attention to him.

Apparently, there was a sport similar to baseball on Mahk's home world, so he picked up on the rules of the game easily, only having to ask a few strange questions, mostly about what we called things. If the girls noticed, they didn't say anything.

Jake's team won. They had another playoff game next week, and then, if they won, it would be the semifinals. If they won that, they would then play the finals at the college field. The one I'd gone to. It would be my first time back there if he got that far, which I truly believed they would. The whole team was stacked, but Jake . . . he was fucking magical. It hurt that I hadn't been to as many games as I should have, but I vowed I'd be at every playoff game this season, and if I could casually get him to give the scouts the time of day, well then that would be a plus.

After it was over, Mahk offered to get us all tacos at our favorite spot. I tried to tell him it was unnecessary, but he brushed me off. Though that reminded me. I had no idea how he was getting money. He told me they used gold coins in his world. I couldn't imagine they were much use here, unless he somehow sold the gold for U.S.

dollars? I'd have to remember to ask him later.

Either way, the kids were psyched, and I didn't have the heart to tell any of them no. Mahk was even considerate enough to pick up some dinner to bring home for Mom. It made me want to cry. No one had ever taken care of us like that. And he did it so casually, too, like it was the easiest thing in the world for him.

After dinner, we all went back to the house. Mom was up and in good spirits and very excited to meet Mahk, the first guy I'd ever introduced her to. I knew she had so many questions, but luckily she focused on Jake and the millions of videos and pictures we had of the game.

It was late now. The girls were all asleep, as was Mom. Jake, Mahk, and I were sitting in the living room while Jake taught Mahk how to play Call of Duty . It was fucking hysterical.

“Seriously, dude?” Jake asked him incredulously. “You’ve never played a video game, like at all?” This was after I'd had to show him how to hold the controller.

“No. My family was . . . traditional. We didn't have anything like this.”

I held in a snort. Traditional? Was that code for orc royalty, and had none of our modern technology?

Jake made an offended sound in the back of his throat. “That sounds fucking awful. No offense.”

Mahk shrugged. “No offense taken. I'm quite enjoying discovering hu—modern technology.” Yeah, whoever told that man about Google should be arrested.

“Don't worry, bro. Once you get a handle on the controls, this game is pretty easy.

Let me show you how to pick a character.”

I tucked my knees under me on the couch, not playing, just enjoying the two of them bonding. Mahk was fitting in seamlessly, and it made my heart ache in the most confusing fucking way. I wanted him. There was no denying that—there never really was. It was more than that too. As much as I wanted to have sex with Mahk, I didn’t even mind that we hadn’t yet because just being with him made me the happiest I had ever been in my life.

It was effortless. We seriously fit. Even with the communication issues and cultural differences, it never seemed like a hardship to teach Mahk and exist with him, and I had no doubts that if I was ever lucky enough to see his world, he would be the same with me. Which, what the fuck? Did I honestly want to travel through some magical barrier to a fantastical land with orcs and ogres and horses with six legs? The easy answer was yes. Of fucking course. That was my fantasy-loving ass’s wet dream. But the truth was, it wasn’t that simple. While Jake explained what a zombie was and why they needed to kill them, I glanced at the closed bedroom door just off the living room. I couldn’t fuck off and leave my family. Even a quick trip would be a challenge. There was no real way to communicate between the two worlds, so what would happen if I were there and there was an emergency? What if one of the kids got hurt or sick at school and needed to be picked up? What if Mom . . . ?

I trailed off, not wanting to think about it, even if it was a very valid concern, and where I always got hung up when I thought about being mated to Mahk. Mahk hadn’t brought it up since the day he’d admitted the truth to me. He was honoring my wishes and giving me time to think. Problem was, the more I thought about it, the fewer answers I had.

I really, really liked Mahk. Like, a whole fucking lot. I could easily see this falling into love. I liked how curious he was about everything. I liked how unapologetic he was about him watching me and his stabby tendencies. When he’d pulled one of his

blades when Mrs. Robinson had been rude to me even had me swooning. Then, the subsequent conversation where I'd explained what a Karen was had me wanting to wrap Mahk in my arms and kiss him senseless with how fucking adorable he was.

I liked that he was thoughtful. That he liked to take care of me. That he always made sure I ate full meals and would spit random facts about all the ways humans could die or get sick. I liked his obsession with Cheetos, while he also constantly wanted to feed me vegetables. I liked the way he yielded so prettily to me while we kissed.

Even the things that should be major red flags, I found endearing. It was easy to imagine us spending our lives together. Except that one little thing: he had a home and life in a whole other realm. How could we possibly make it work? Mahk seemed to think we'd figure it out, but I couldn't understand how. I'd never ask him to give up his life there, but I couldn't go with him, even temporarily.

Could we do long distance? Except instead of being in different states, we'd be in two different worlds. Even the thought of it made me sick. I couldn't bear being that far away from Mahk and not even having a way to talk to him. He was an assassin for fuck's sake. He could be in danger or hurt, and how would I even fucking know? I hated it. I hated everything about all this. Why did I have to finally find someone who was perfect for me, who wasn't scared off by my family, who wanted me for me, and the circumstances had to be impossible?

Mahk turned toward me, concern etched across his features. I tried to smile and wave away his worries, but he wasn't buying it. He put down his controller and whispered something I couldn't hear to Jake. My brother turned toward me, and, fucking great, now both of them were worried about me.

Thankfully, Jake didn't say anything to me, just turned to Mahk and said, "Next time, we'll play Elden Ring ." There was an evil glint in his eyes, and I almost laughed. That was a big jump up skill level wise.

But my sweet little stalker, of course, had no idea and nodded happily, reminding me a lot more of a golden retriever than the big deadly orc he was.

“I look forward to it, Jake.”

Then he climbed to his feet and took my hand.

“Let’s go.”

I frowned. “Where?” It was late and everyone was asleep and . . .

“Damn, bro, you really are oblivious. Go with your man. We’re fine here.”

“What? I don’t want to leave?—”

“Fuck, Tan. I’m trying damn hard not to cockblock you. Go. I promise if something happens, I’ll text you. But for real, go be with your boyfriend.”

Jake stopped playing to look me directly in the eye, and his expression was so sincere, any doubts I had evaporated. Suddenly, I wanted nothing more than to go be with Mahk. Alone.

“Okay, but text or call me if you need me. Don’t try to handle shit on your own, Jake. I’m fucking serious.”

Jake rolled his eyes but nodded solemnly. “I will. I promise. Now, please go.”

I scruffed up his hair because it drove him crazy. “Thanks.”

Jake shrugged, and Mahk, apparently, was done with the whole exchange because he took my hand and all but dragged me out of the house.

He didn't stop there, either. I barely had time to close the door behind me before I was basically running after my man, down our path and onto the street. He kept going until he was almost halfway down the block and in front of one of the patches of woods that surrounded all the homes in the neighborhood. I was breathless by the time we stopped. Partially from laughter at Mahk's eagerness and partially because I was out of fucking shape and Mahk was fast when he wasn't purposely slowing his steps to look human.

He glanced around, probably checking for nosy neighbors, before finally turning his attention to me. Mahk's human hands reached up to cup my face. I suddenly wished to see his real form. I had barely had a chance this past week since most of the time we spent together was while I'd been working. He couldn't change here, though, so I twisted my head to kiss his hand, which made him smile.

It didn't last long, his expression turning serious again.

"You're sad," he stated matter-of-factly.

I frowned. "No, I'm not."

"Yes, you were. Back at the house, when I was playing the video games with Jake. Talk to me, lulekai . Let me carry some of your burdens, at least for a little while."

While I tried impossibly hard not to swoon in the middle of the fucking street, one of the words Mahk had said stuck out to me. He had said it before— lulekai —but I wasn't sure what it meant. I had always been internally freaking out too much to ask, but now I was too curious to let it go again.

"You keep calling me that, lulekai ." I stumbled awkwardly over the word, not sounding anything like Mahk did when he said it. "What does it mean?"

Mahk's lips twitched at my pronunciation. "Lu-le-kai," he said again slowly, so I could understand it.

When I repeated it, I sounded a little better. At least it was likely understandable if I was talking to an orc. Maybe.

But Mahk beamed like I'd done the best thing in the world. "Perfect!" It so wasn't, but okay. "Lulekai means protector in my native language. You are always caring for and protecting everyone else, and you forget to protect yourself."

Well, damn, I never expected to get a fucking boner from learning a new language, but that had to be one of the sweetest and most meaningful things anyone had ever said to me. And here I was, calling him little stalker. I needed to step up my game.

I was so overcome by emotion, I couldn't wait another second. My mouth was on him, aggressively devouring everything it could possibly taste. As always, Mahk submitted to me, opening up to all I wanted to give to him.

"Fuck," I muttered into his mouth, absolutely fucking breathless as my fingers curled into his hair, holding him exactly where I wanted him.

I pressed my body against his, and Mahk stumbled back a step before bracing himself. I could feel his hard chest through his ridiculously baggy clothes, which only got me harder. I slid my free hand under the fabric, caressing up his hard flat stomach and over his pecs. Mahk moaned as my fingers grazed his nipples.

I never stopped kissing him. Even as I slotted my leg between his spread ones. He was so fucking hard, and I put a little pressure against his cock with my thigh. Mahk's hips rocked forward of their own accord, and he let out a sweet little whine.

"Fuck, darling, you make such pretty noises." He let out another little sound that went

straight to my cock.

I was suddenly well aware that we were outside, and while we were away from the direct view of my neighbors, I wouldn't put it past those nosy fuckers to have their ways to still be spying. "I want you alone," I whispered to him, "but it doesn't feel right to do it at the Cunninghams'." I might have reasoned away the wrongness of Mahk "borrowing" their home, but fucking in there crossed a line I wasn't willing to.

Mahk hummed and nipped at my lip. I wasn't sure if he understood my hang ups about where he was staying, but he respected them. "We can go to the cave."

While that sounded hot, and I added that to my mental bucket list of places I wanted to have Mahk, it was too far away right now. I didn't have the patience to get there.

"Too far." I nuzzled his cheek and then licked the edge of his ear. Even though he'd literally spent the day sweating outside in the beating sun of the high school baseball field, he still tasted and smelled so sweet. Did orcs not sweat, because what the fuck?

"The store?"

My immediate reaction was to shut him down. That was my place of work. I couldn't fuck my man there. I'd get fired! But then Mahk rocked his hips again, letting me feel the thickness of his bulge. I pinched his nipple in warning, but it didn't stop him, even a little, as he started to hump my leg. The little shit knew exactly what he was doing.

I was past rational thought. It was either the store or by the sink pit, and as horny as I was, I didn't think I could do that knowing Koth's body was currently sinking to the bottom. But the store . . . The cameras didn't work there. I knew that for a fact, and even if the owner somehow found out I had come in after hours, I could easily say I had forgotten something. It wouldn't be the first time.

Mahk's hands trailed down my back and to my ass. He squeezed, holding me tightly as he continued to fuck my leg. His eyes were rolling to the back of his head, and I was worried he might come then and there.

I pinched his nipple again, harder this time. Hard enough to get him to stop and turn to me with lust-filled eyes. He batted his lashes at me.

"The store," I confirmed, my voice husky with need, "Now, little stalker. If I don't fill you soon, I'll lose it."

CHAPTER 12

MAHK

I glanced around to make sure nobody was watching, then turned my back to my Tanner. I looked at him from over my shoulder. “Hop on.”

He stared at me incredulously. “I’m sorry, what?”

I remembered then that I was still in my human form and Tanner was quite larger than I was like this. I could understand why he would be skeptical. But while I may look human, I was still orc.

“Please trust me, lulekai . I do not want to waste any more time.”

Tanner sucked in a breath between his teeth. “Neither do I. Fuck it.” He walked behind me, wrapped his arms around my neck, and then hopped up, his thick thighs circling my waist.

I could admit it was awkward in this body to hold him like that, but I could carry him with ease.

“Hang on,” I whispered, then took off, no longer hiding my speed. I did not want to waste time walking like a human to get to the shop.

Tanner’s arms tightened around me, his fingers digging into the fabric of my clothing. He laughed breathlessly. “Holy fuck. This is wild!”

Before long, we were standing by the back door of the convenience store. Tanner hopped off my back with a laugh. “That was so fucking awesome. We’re doing that again.”

I grinned. “When we can cross the barrier, I will take you through our forests in my true form just like that.”

Some emotion that looked like sadness flashed across Tanner’s features, but he quickly hid it. I wanted to ask him what was wrong, but then my mate was pushing me up against a brick wall and having his way with my mouth again, and I forgot all about it.

His fingers curled in my hair and held it as he fumbled to pull his keys out with his other hand. Finally, he grabbed them and opened the door. Tanner dragged me in, took just long enough to close and lock the door, and then he was on me again.

I melted in his hold, loving how he took control. “Fuck, sweetheart,” he muttered into my mouth and rocked his hips up against me. “Take that bracelet off. I want to see you.”

“Are you sure?” It was unlikely anyone would come anywhere near here at this time at night, but it was possible. Sometimes, potential hikers or campers who were looking for an early start on the fish would pull in thinking the shop was open and looking for gas for their vehicles or snacks.

Tanner sucked on my neck. “Yes. Fuck yes. We’re in the back. No one can see us. But I want our first time to be only us, no magic, no illusions.”

I was still me, even when I looked human, but it pleased me how comfortable Tanner was seeing me as an orc. I’d learned that humans were often more relaxed with what they were used to, and if they could pretend something wasn’t real, then they would.

But Tanner never pretended.

I touched the bracelet and whispered the words to deactivate it. As soon as the magic lifted, Tanner fell to his knees, his fingers curling into the waistband of my breeches. I barely had a chance to blink before my mate was pulling down my bottoms and exposing my erection to him.

He sunk back on his heels, his eyes wide and hungry. “Fucking A, sweetheart. I knew you were huge, but . . . damn.” He sounded both aroused and frightened at the same time. Still, he reached out and brushed a featherlight touch along my cock, driving me wild and sending a shiver down my spine.

His hand circled my knot. “Holy fuck, baby. This...please tell me this is what I think it is?”

I frowned. “My knot? I have seen human media. You know what this is, yes?”

I knew Tanner would not have one, but my research had shown many, many stories that featured males with knots.

“Your . . . knot. I should’ve realized you’d have a monster cock.” That was a good thing that I did, right? Tanner was certainly aroused.

“And this expands when you come?”

“You mean orgasm? Yes. It would lock me inside my partner if I was penetrating.”

“Fuck me. I usually top, but I will need to feel that one day.” I nodded, unsure what to say and pretty incapable of forming complete sentences as Tanner massaged my knot with his calloused fingers. I arched my back and rested my hands on his shoulders.

“Whatever you want.” I gasped. That was my last coherent thought because Tanner leaned forward and licked along the underside of my thick cock.

“Next time. Today, I really want to be inside you. Are you okay with that, sweetheart? We can do something else.” His thumb brushed over my tip.

“N-no.” My teeth sunk into my lower lip. “I want that. I want you inside me, to mark me as yours.”

Tanner cursed quietly under breath, and then his teeth sunk into the meaty flesh of my thigh, right by my groin. I screamed out in pleasure and pain, my nails digging into his shoulders.

“Don’t say shit like that to me, little stalker. I’ll leave marks all over your body so everyone, both orcs and humans, will know you’re mine.”

Yes. That, please. I wanted that so badly. I would proudly wear Tanner’s marks. I wanted to do the same to him, and I couldn’t wait for the day that he was ready for that. We hadn’t discussed it, but I could tell Tanner was still apprehensive. He was frightened about something, but whatever it was, he wouldn’t discuss it with me. I had to be patient. I was confident he would come to me when he was ready.

Tanner licked across the mark he’d left, soothing the ache. Then he was standing, his fingers fumbling with the button on his pants. I stilled his hand. “Let me? Please.”

Tanner’s pupils were huge. He licked his lips and moved his hands to my body. I took that as a yes and immediately tugged at the button. I didn’t mean to rip it off completely, but I must have used too much strength because the tiny button went flying across the room, the only sound the ting ting as it bounced across the floor.

I opened my mouth to apologize but never got the chance. Tanner growled, his hand

curled around my neck in a possessive grip. “Clothes off now. Can’t wait another fucking minute!”

All I could do was nod my head like one of those bobblehead dolls that were sold at the novelty shop in town, and then it was just limbs and awkward fumbling as we undressed each other. His mouth and hands were everywhere, nipping and sucking at my jaw while his hands possessively cupped my hips. Then his mouth drifted lower, as did his hands.

I wasn’t better. As soon as Tanner was naked, I could not stop touching him. My hands mapped out every inch of his skin, memorizing every curve, every scar, all of it.

Tanner’s tongue flicked across my nipple, and I screamed out, surprised. He flashed me a wicked grin. “I knew these were sensitive, sweetheart.” One hand teased my right nipple mercilessly, while his mouth did wicked things to the other. I was glad I was pressed against the wall because I did not think I had the strength to stand.

Tanner switched his mouth to the other side, his hand drifted down and he wrapped those thick fingers around the base of my cock, tugging it roughly.

“T-tanner,” I whined, completely undignified, but I didn’t care. I arched into his touch, desperate for more.

“Lube,” he whispered huskily. “Fuck, we need lube.”

I wracked my brain, trying to place the word. Finally, it came to me. “Oh, pleasure oil.” That distracted Tanner from his ministrations enough for him to pull away with a goofy smile on his face. “Pleasure oil? That’s what you call lube?” He jerked my cock again, and it took me a moment to remember what words were and answer.

“Yes. It’s different. Magical. Allows a human body to adapt to our penises more easily.”

“Fuuuck. Okay, yeah, we will absolutely have to try that.” I nodded, agreeing. I didn’t want to hurt my Tanner. “Luckily, I have a normal human dick, and I’ll make sure I fit in your pretty, tight hole perfectly, little stalker. What about condoms?” he asked. I’d learned about them, but it was not something we needed.

“No. We cannot get or transmit diseases. You are safe.”

“Thank fuck.” Tanner stopped what he was doing and I almost cried. But then he kissed me roughly, all teeth and dominance, before pulling away. “Don’t move.”

He ran out into the store, naked as the day he was born. I closed my eyes and squeezed my cock, slowing the flow of pleasure. I did not want to have my release until Tanner was inside me. It was not the same as him accepting the mating, but it was close, and it was all I wanted.

Within thirty seconds, Tanner was back, holding a plastic bottle. “Remind me to pay for this before we leave.”

I grunted and watched my beautiful mate as he scanned the small break room/office that we were in. His eyes landed on the two-person sofa that was shoved against the wall.

“I guess that will have to do. Over the side of the couch, little stalker,” Tanner ordered me. “Let me see that sweet ass of yours.”

I could not move fast enough. Soon, I was bent over the end of the sofa, but it was awkward. The arm was too short, and I could not seem to get in the right position.

Tanner pulled me up, clearly losing his patience, then he was moving the love seat away from the wall. “Kneel, sweetheart. On the couch facing away from me. Lean your upper body over the back.”

This would’ve been easier in the more compact human body, but Tanner wanted me as an orc. We somehow managed it, and then his body was pressed up against mine, his thick cock slotting between my ass cheeks.

His nails raked across my back in a brilliant burn of painful pleasure that had me arching into his touch. “You’re so fucking beautiful, Mahk. Inside and out. You are the best thing that ever happened to me.”

I was overcome with emotion and at a loss for words. By the time the lump in my throat cleared enough to speak so I could return the sentiment and let Tanner know I was the luckiest orc alive to have him as a mate, he had spread my cheeks with his hands, exposing my hole.

“Tanner—” It was the only thing I managed before something wet licked across my entrance. Tanner had his tongue pressed up against my hole as he licked and sucked.

I cursed in my native language, completely undone by the sensation. My toes curled and my fingers dug into the fabric beneath me. I could not stay still if I tried.

“Tanner! Lulekai . . . What—” Nothing else came out as he pressed past the rim. “Fuck!”

I humped against the couch, but I couldn’t get enough friction. I needed to touch myself. I reached for my cock. Tanner pulled back and bit my ass cheek, hard. “I don’t think so, little stalker. That’s mine. Hold the back of the couch and don’t move your hands.”

I melted a little even as I immediately let go of my cock and obeyed. I couldn't help it. Tanner's words held power over me. "Tanner!" It came out more as a cry than a whine. "

What is that? What are you doing?"

He kissed the bite mark with gentle lips. "Have you never been rimmed before, sweetheart?"

I shook my head. "N-no." I wasn't familiar with the term. I'd read and watched many educational videos on human sex, Tanner called it porn, but I don't remember seeing that. I'd have to look?—

I lost my train of thought when something cold and gel-like replaced Tanner's tongue. "Lube," he told me gently when I stiffened. Why was it so cold? Pleasure oil was never this cold. He pressed the tip of one of his fingers against my hole. "One day, I will make you come just from eating your ass, but I'm sorry, baby. I'm too desperate now. I need to be inside you. I can't help it."

"Yes. Please. Now."

He pinched my thigh. "No. You need to be stretched. I may not be as big as an orc, but I'm not small by human standards, and I won't hurt you."

He pressed a finger with the cold lube inside me.

I regretted not bringing pleasure oil with me across the barrier. I could not wait till I could use some on my Tanner. I wanted to claim him with my knot in the orc way and take care of his every need.

"Fuck, sweetheart. You're so tight. Look at you squeezing the fuck outta my finger. I

can't wait till it's my cock instead."

I couldn't wait either. I needed it so badly. Tanner thrust his finger in and out a few times before twisting it, touching a gland that made my poor cock leak with pleasure. Soon, he was adding a second finger.

By the time he added the third, I was done. My head rested limply between my hands and my neglected cock was ready to explode.

"Tanner. Please. I am ready. Take me."

Tanner tsked. "I don't know, baby. I don't want to hurt you. Maybe I should add a fourth finger?"

There was something about his tone that made me believe he was teasing me. I was still learning all the nuances of the human language that the magic in the bangle did not help me understand. But I knew my Tanner well enough to read his tones.

Still . . . "Please. Lulekai . I'm good. I promise."

Tanner growled, sounding more orc than I was. His teeth scraped along my shoulder. "Yeah you are. You're so fucking good."

His fingers left me, and I suddenly regretted everything as the emptiness made me feel hollow. I twisted my head, ready to beg Tanner for . . . well, anything.

I didn't need to. It was only seconds before I felt the tip of his cock press up against my entrance. "Ready?" he asked breathlessly.

In response, I pushed back, like it would be possible to impale myself on his dick. Tanner laughed, squeezed my hip in a bruising grip, and then pushed inside me.

He didn't hesitate, and I relished the burn as I adjusted to his thickness and length. Tanner was right. He was not as large as an orc, but based on the research I had done on human sex organs, he was both larger and thicker than average, and I felt every inch of that as he pushed inside me.

I could feel Tanner's breath on my back, his fingers flexing on my hips, his thighs pressed against me, his balls resting on my ass. For a moment, everything was still. Tanner, me, the air. We were on a precipice of everything changing, and I savored that moment and all it meant.

Then the tension broke, and Tanner fucked me like a wild beast. All I could do was hold on and take everything he gave me as he pulled out and thrust back in, his pace brutal, hard and fast and fucking everything. He bent over me and sunk his teeth into my shoulder. My Tanner loved to bite me. Apparently he loved to leave his marks. I wanted every one.

"Fuck. Mahk. You take my cock so good. You're such a good fucking boy. So pretty, so tight. You like being stuffed with my cock, baby?"

Tanner was breathless with exertion, but he kept up a steady stream of dirty talk, and the words all washed together in a wave of pleasure. My dick was painfully hard. I didn't dare touch it, but I tried to get some kind of friction. I needed something, anything. But even as it rubbed up and down along the fabric of the sofa, it wasn't enough. I needed Tanner.

"Tanner, please touch me, lulekai . I need you. I need to orgasm."

"Shit. You need some help, baby?"

"Y-yes. Please."

Tanner thrust in, changing his angle, and I was so, so close to the edge. I needed a little something more.

Tanner's hand wrapped around my cock and I almost cried. He didn't move it, though. In fact, he stopped moving altogether.

"Fuck my hand, sweetheart. Make us both come."

I was muttering nonsense now as Tanner's grip tightened, and I did exactly as he'd asked. Every movement impaled me farther on his cock and gave me the friction I so desperately needed to finally gain my release.

"Close." I screamed out.

"Me too. Come for me, Mahk. Come on my cock."

His words were more powerful than any orc magic I'd seen. As soon as he said them, the invisible wall that had been holding me back crumbled and my release was spurting all over the cushion. My hole clenched. Tanner's hips stuttered and he cursed loudly as he orgasmed, his release filling me.

I felt claimed as my mate painted my insides. I'd known Tanner was mine from the moment I'd laid eyes on him, but this? This brought us closer in ways I could never imagine. I wanted this every day for the rest of our lives. I wanted to claim Tanner as well. I wanted him locked on my knot and my marks on his skin the way his littered mine. I was confident we would get there. Tanner belonged with me. He needed to let go of his fear and . . .

"Um, Mahk? What the fuck? Is that your knot?"

Tanner's hands were wrapped around my cock, holding my expanded knot tightly

within their grasp. I closed my eyes in pleasure. It felt so good. Not as good as it would be inside him, but it was close.

“Yes.”

“Oh. My. God. Okay, yeah, I need this ASAP. We gotta get that pleasure oil.”

I felt a small pang of longing, knowing the barrier was still locked. Most days I didn’t think about it. It was not like I’d seen my family every day, and it had only been a month, but at times like this, I remembered I didn’t have that option. More than missing my family, it was knowing why I couldn’t get through, because Tanner had not fully accepted the bond.

He seemed to understand, though, because Tanner adjusted us, his one hand still around my knot. We were half-lying on the tiny couch, Tanner practically on top of my back, with his softening cock still inside my hole. It was awkward, but I loved feeling the weight of my mate on me. He kissed my shoulder tenderly.

“I’m sorry, Mahk. I shouldn’t have said that.”

I shrugged. I was not angry. He meant no harm by it. “I swear I’m working on it. Maybe it opened now that we had sex?”

“Maybe,” I agreed, even if I knew it did not. Not until Tanner fully accepted the bond. Not until he allowed me to bite and claim him.

Tanner heard it in my tone. “Fuck. I’m sorry, Mahk. I’m—I just need a little more time.”

I twisted my head to kiss him. My tusk pressed into his lip, but Tanner licked it, unbothered. “You do not need to apologize, my sweet mate. Take all the time you

need.”

Tanner looked conflicted, and all I wanted to do was go back to basking in the post-orgasm pleasure. So I nipped at his lip.

“That is a worry for tomorrow, Tanner. All I want is to feel pleasure and be in your arms.”

He smiled softly. “That I can do for you.” He tightened his grip on me and kissed the side of my face. My eyes fluttered close.

CHAPTER 13

TANNER

I buried my face into Mahk's neck, engulfing myself in his scent. It was one of my rare days off, Mom was napping in her bedroom, and the kids were at school. So that meant I'd snuck Mahk into my home like I was a teenager sneaking in their boyfriend, and now we were snuggled up on my twin bed.

Though, snuggled up was putting mildly. The bed wasn't even big enough for me, let alone both of us, and since Mahk currently didn't have his magic activated, he was even bigger. I was lowkey impressed the bed frame was holding on. The thing was a fucking trooper.

Mahk was draped over me, eyes half closed as he lazily played with my nipples. It felt so fucking good, even if he wasn't actively trying to turn me on.

It had been almost a week since we'd first had sex in the backroom of the convenience store, and things were kind of . . . awkward.

Not because of the sex. No, that had been fucking amazing, and we'd happily kept it up all week. I'd fucked him a few more times. I also was so damn close to being able to take his entire dick in my mouth, and I was determined. I didn't think I'd ever have the courage to let him knot my mouth entirely, but I wanted it to be so fucking close that it was possible. I'd also learned that Mahk had miracle-working fingers, as he had been stretching me open for days now. Since we didn't have any of the magic lube from his world, Mahk had insisted on being extra thorough before I could take

his cock. I wasn't complaining. I had never come hands free before, but I had done it twice while Mahk had milked my prostate, and let's just say . . . 10/10, highly recommended.

So yeah, sex was fucking awesome, but the awkwardness remained and it was entirely my fault. Mahk was stuck here, and I couldn't even gather up the courage to explain to him why it was so hard for me to accept the mate bond. He'd explained it a little more as we'd lain wrapped up in each other on the old ass couch in the convenience store—that thing needed to be burned now, but luckily no one else used it. He needed to bite me, but it would only work if I wanted it too. I was glad orcs knew and cared about consent, but fuck, I almost wished he hadn't given me a choice. Because I couldn't get out of my damn head.

Mahk looked up at me, eyes filled with concern. For a moment, I was lost in the rich purple color. I wished he didn't have to hide it, but also a selfish part of me was glad that only I saw this side of him, the real him.

“What's the matter, lulekai ? You're thinking very loudly.”

I snorted and pinched his bare, very firm ass. “I am not. I've got a lot on my mind.”

Mahk's expression turned serious. He propped himself up on my chest. “Do you want to talk about it?”

No, but also . . . yes. Or well, not yes, but I had to. I was being a selfish fuck, and it wasn't fair to Mahk.

“It's about the mate bond.”

Mahk's expression fell. “Oh.”

I smiled softly and ran my fingers through his hair. “Yeah, oh. I’m scared, Mahk.”

He frowned, his tusks curving inward. “Scared of what? I’d never hurt you.”

“I know, sweetheart. I have no doubts about that. I can’t grasp how it’s going to work. I can’t leave this world. Fuck, I don’t even know if I can visit. What if something happens to my mom or the kids and they have no way to reach me?”

To Mahk’s credit, he didn’t dismiss my concerns or tell me it would work out. He stayed very quiet for a moment and thought about it. “As much as I want you to visit my homeland and meet my brothers, I understand your worries and they’re valid. Human technology won’t work there. It is possible that someone can create something that will allow easier communication. Once I can get through the barrier, I’ll talk to some people I know who are more versed in that skill.”

That would be amazing actually. I still wouldn’t be comfortable with long visits, but having a way for my family to reach me would make short ones possible. Because I wanted to see Mahk’s home world. I wanted to know everything about him and his life.

“In the meantime,” Mahk continued, “we’d just stay here. My brothers will come get me if they need me, and I’d keep trips as short as I can.”

I sat up and dragged Mahk with me, so I was leaning with my back against the wall and he was resting his head on my chest. I tightened my arms around his middle, holding him there. Not that he was trying to escape. I could hear his contented sigh.

“That’s not fair to you, sweetheart. You shouldn’t be the only one compromising on everything.”

He shrugged. “This is one I am happy to make. I’m growing to like this world a lot,

and I love your family. They need you. I understand that. And I need you. Whether our main home is here or my world matters very little to me as long as I can be with you.”

My heart was pounding in my chest. This man did so many fucking things to me. Sometimes the way he cared for me seemed less believable than the fact that he was a fucking orc. That was the thing I was having the hardest time wrapping my mind around. The connection was undeniable, but that he actually found me worth making those sacrifices for? It was almost more than I could bear.

The words were on the tip of my tongue. I love you . They’d been running around my thoughts since the night we’d first had sex. Just, every time I tried to say them out loud, I got all tongue-tied. Instead, I squeezed Mahk close and kissed the top of his head.

“What about your job?” I finally asked. I still didn’t understand everything about his realm, but being the royal assassin must come with responsibilities, right? I didn’t want Mahk to neglect them to make me happy.

Again, he shrugged. “If I’m needed, one of my brothers will send a messenger or come here themselves. They also both have human mates who may want to come home sometime. So, I am sure they will be happy to visit when they can. Especially Nash. It’s harder for Axum to be able to leave like that.”

Yeah, I was sure the emperor traveling realms was frowned upon. I tilted Mahk’s head up so I could stare into his eyes. “You mean all this? You really think it could work?”

“Yes to both your questions. I love you, Tanner. You are my mate, and I am willing to do anything to be with you. Besides, I feel like this is less of a sacrifice than you believe it to be. I love my brothers, but it was not like I spent every day with them. I

sometimes went months between visits. This won't be much different. Only now, I will have a whole family to spend time with and I will not be alone. I'll have you."

This fucker was gonna make me cry. He made everything seem so simple. Could it truly be that easy? Had I built it up in my head so much when what I'd felt were insurmountable mountains were tiny hills? Fuck. Maybe I was scared to commit. I believed Mahk. Believed everything he'd said about how he felt about me, but maybe there was still a tiny piece of me that worried he would one day wake up and realize the mistake he'd made by tying himself to a hot mess like me. Then he would resent me, and there would be nothing we could do about it. Once Mahk bit me, there was no turning back. It would be the two of us for the rest of our lifetimes.

Mahk ran his thumb across my thigh. "Whatever you're thinking, it's not true. I can feel the doubts and fears running through you. But you're it for me, Tanner. I want this. I want you."

I cleared my throat, choked up. Fuck, I wished I could turn off that doubt and just accept this. For both our sakes.

I opened my mouth to say . . . something. I didn't know what, but I had to answer in some way, but before I could, my phone started to ring.

Every time it did, I had a split second of paranoid fear. It wasn't logical. It was way more likely to be a spam call than anything else. Especially since I was home with Mom. Still, some of the worst moments of my life had begun with a phone call, and that wasn't a fear I'd let go of easily. When I looked at the screen, I saw it was work. Which was unusual. I was employed by a fucking convenience store. It wasn't exactly a call after-hours type of profession.

"Hello?"

“Tanner?”

It took me a moment to recognize the frazzled voice on the other end of the line as the part-timer, Mike.

“Mike, what’s up?”

“I’m sorry to call you on your day off, but, um, I need help.”

I was already disentangling myself from Mahk and searching for my clothes even as I was frowning. I had no idea what he could possibly need help with, but he sounded frantic, and I knew Mike pretty well. He was a decent guy and reliable. He’d never called before, so I had no doubt if he was, there was a reason.

“There’s a group of people here. Campers from the city. They’re fucking pissed, and I’m pretty sure they’re high too. They’re claiming I’m ripping them off or some shit and demanding to speak to the manager.”

What the fuck? “They realize it’s a fucking gas station in a town with less than a 1000 people, right?”

Mike didn’t laugh. “They won’t leave. They already knocked down the chip display and are now opening all the sodas and dumping them on the floor. I called the owner before they escalated and he said to call you. After the call went to voicemail. The sheriff, well you know how he is, I don’t think he took me too seriously and I don’t know if he’s gonna bother showing up. and. I—fuck, I’m kinda freaking out here.”

“Fucking hell. Listen. Go lock yourself in the back room. Your safety is more important than whatever damage those assholes do. I’ll be right there.”

“Thanks.” Behind him, I heard a woman screaming at the top of her lungs while a

man's voice cursed loudly.

I hung up and looked toward Mahk. He was also already dressed and had activated the bangle to look human.

"I'm sorry," I told him, upset that our conversation had been interrupted.

Mahk grinned and flashed his fancy blade. "That's okay. This sounds fun."

Why was that so hot? I gave him a quick kiss. "No killing anyone please."

Mahk batted his eyes. The little fucker. "How about some light maiming?"

I almost laughed out of pure shock. "Mahk . . ." I fixed him with a look my mom would be proud of.

Mahk pouted, a full-on puppy-dog pout. "Fiiiine. But if they come for you, I make no promises."

I could live with that compromise. I pecked his lips quickly. Mom's door to her room was still closed, so I quickly left her a note that I had to run to work and then we were heading toward the door.

Mahk seemed satisfied and hummed to himself as followed me. He didn't even complain when I went for the truck. It was broad daylight, so we couldn't do the piggyback thing, and I didn't want to take the time to walk.

Once he was in the passenger seat, I reached over and took his hand, kissing it gently. "C'mon, let's go take care of some asshole Karens."

CHAPTER 14

TANNER

I tore out of the neighborhood while I stabbed the number for the police station into my phone.

“Destiny Sheriff's Department,” a young woman’s voice said cheerfully.

“Hi, Marcy, it’s Tanner. Is Sheriff Johnson in?”

“Hi Tanner!” She responded brightly. How did a person raised by Sherrif Johnson, arguably the grumpiest person in Destiny, possibly all Maryland, turn out so cheery all the time, I had no fucking clue. But she had always been like that, even when we were kids. “Yes, he’s right here at his desk. Would you like to speak to him?”

Mahk eyed me curiously, but I just shook my head slightly. I’d explain later.

“Hello?” The man grunted once he was on the line.

“Sheriff Johnson, this is Tanner from the convenience store.” Technically, the place had a name, but no one ever used it, and somewhere along the lines, even the sign disappeared.

“Pagely,” he deadpanned my last name, “Why can I do it for you?” Annoyance dripped from his tone.

“Well your job for starters would be nice. Mike, the part-timer called you and you ignored him.”

Sheriff Johnson sighed heavily. “Tanner, c’mon now. I can’t be showin’ up to the store every time a customer gives y’all a hard time.”

I squeezed the steering wheel, tempted to swing over to the station and have this conversation in person. But, I had a family to feed and I couldn’t do that if I caught charges for assaulting a police officer.

“No...but when they start destroying the store, refuse to leave, and are threatening the employees? Oh, and probably under the influence? I think that might warrant a visit, don’t you?”

“You don’t think you’re exaggerating a little?”

By then, we pulled up. “I just got here. I’d be happy to send you a video if you’d like.”

The sheriff grumbled a few more things under his breath, but finally relented. “Fine, I’ll send a car out.” Which meant either him or Marcy. The police presence in this place wasn’t exactly booming. The forest had its own set of rangers, but they didn’t deal with anything outside of it.

“Thank you,” I replied with as much sarcasm as I could muster. I hung up to go inside. I had no intention of waiting for that asshole and leaving Mike alone inside.

I hadn’t bothered parking in a spot and had pulled directly up to the front door. I hopped out, Mahk immediately at my back. I didn’t need to be inside to already know this was a fucking mess. I could hear the screaming and the thunderous bangs of shelves hitting the floor.

What the fuck had happened? I'd had to deal with asshole tourists before, but this was extreme. Mahk's eyes flashed and his fingers opened and closed at his sides. He was fighting the urge to grab his blades, and I almost told him to go ahead and do it. What were these fuckers doing?

Straightening my shoulders, I pushed the door open, ready for fucking war. "What the fuck is happening in here?" I barked as soon as the glass door closed behind Mahk.

The woman, who was literally standing in the middle of the store and screeching in an octave so high, she rivaled Mariah Carey, stopped suddenly after the words left my mouth. Her chest was heaving like she was exhausted, which I guessed made sense. Screaming like that sounded like hard work.

A man who had been pounding on the door to the back room paused and his head snapped to me. He stalked forward, and I immediately confirmed Mike's suspicions. They were high as shit. Two other guys were tearing up the store and another woman who seemed the calmest. She was sitting on the counter, sucking on a lollipop, and watching her jackass friends.

"You. Are you the manager here?" He got right in my face and jammed a finger into my chest. Mahk rumbled behind me, and I blindly reached for his hand before he orced out and killed every one of these fuckers.

I pushed his hand away and stared him down. "Do not touch me."

He scoffed. "I should do way more than that. What kind of establishment are you running?"

Was this asshole for real? It was a gas station for fuck's sake. I didn't get to respond before Mahk was in front of me, growling at the asshole, one of his—thankfully less ornate—blades in his hand. It always fascinated me how they were hidden until he

needed them. I called it his Mary Poppins magic.

At first, the guy smirked as he gave Mahk a scathing once-over. I got it. In this form, he was smaller than the asshole customer in this form, and in his highlighter colored, mismatched clothes, it wasn't incredibly intimidating. .

"You need your little boyfriend to protect you?" The fucker sneered at me.

"No, he doesn't," Mahk snapped, his voice deeper than usual. It went right to my cock. "But you touched and threatened what's mine, and I cannot allow that to stand."

Fuck, what was it about his formal, medieval ass phrasing that got to me so much? And yeah, the protector thing was kind of hot. I wasn't afraid of these assholes, and I definitely could handle my own, but everyone wanted to be defended sometimes, right?

I squeezed Mahk's shoulder in warning. As sexy as it would be to get a firsthand demonstration of his knife skills, I was well aware of the audience we had. All the fucker's friends had stopped trying to destroy the place and now formed a semicircle behind him—except the girl with the lollipop. She was still chilling on the counter. Not to mention Mike, who I guessed was still locked in the back room.

Mahk's shoulders shook, but the knife stayed at his side, his grip loose and relaxed. Was that a good thing? I had a vision of him throwing it across the room and lodging in one of these sorry asshole's throats. What did it say about me that the thought didn't bother me much?

The guy was high and apparently had no sense of self-preservation. It didn't matter what Mahk looked like on the outside—he was radiating danger . If I weren't in love with the man, I'd be running the other way.

“Fucking freak,” the guy muttered, and then he made what could very well be a fatal mistake. He took a swing at Mahk.

Not fatal because of Mahk’s fancy knives, but because every fiber in my body burned with uninhibited rage when I saw his arm swing back to aim directly at Mahk’s beautiful face.

It was like everything slowed down. I could make out every detail, every motion, and my body was moving before my mind could catch up. I was in front of Mahk and catching the asshole’s fist in my hand before it could land. There was so little strength behind it that I wanted to laugh. Mahk probably wouldn’t have even blinked at the weak-ass punch. But that didn’t matter. Mahk was pissed that he’d poked me? Well, that didn’t compare to the rage I’d felt seeing that fist flying toward my man . . . my mate. Mahk was mine . Nobody touched him.

The guy’s eyes widened as soon as he realized I’d blocked him. He tried to stagger back, but I held on, squeezed his fist.

“Fuck,” he gritted out. “Let go.”

“Yeah, I don’t think so.” I squeezed and twisted. The asshole screamed at the crunch in his arm and then he fell to his knees.

“Ahhh. Jesus fuck. You fucking freak!” His friends were all yelling and cursing me out, but none of them made a move. At least they still had some sense.

“Get the fuck outta here and I won’t press charges for damage of property and threatening my employee.” Not that I was really Mike’s boss, but it worked for the threat.

“You broke my arm!” the asshole shrieked, almost as loud as his friend had been

earlier.

Mahk squatted down so he was directly in front of the guy. I stiffened, prepared to drag him back if he tried to kill or “lightly maim” the fucker. Not that he didn’t deserve it, but while I was sure the sheriff would look the other way for a broken arm while defending myself, especially after I’d be happy to remind him that he ignored an emergency call, he couldn’t ignore a dude being skinned alive or whatever Mahk had in mind.

But he didn’t touch him. Mahk casually flipped his blade from hand to hand with clear skill. Even from here, I could see the sharp glint. He grinned at the guy. “Did you know that my blades are so sharp that they can easily cut the skin off an animal with one stroke?” Mahk demonstrated, whipping the blade in a clean and hot as fuck swipe. “And animal pelts are much thicker than human skin. I wonder what damage this could do to you?”

Mahk’s tone was conversational, like he was discussing the weather. It made him even more menacing, and I could tell he was terrifying the dude. His eyes were wide and his whole body shook as he clutched his broken arm.

“Y-ya’ll are fucking crazy.”

I crossed my arms over my chest and stood behind Mahk, using my bulk to be more threatening, as Mahk just grinned at him, his eyes shining.

The guy scrambled back on his ass until his friend helped him up. “C’mon, man. Let’s go,” the guy who had been destroying the coolers whispered. “It’s not worth it.”

The rest of them seemed to agree, and then they were running out, glaring at Mahk and me. I waved my fingers at them. “Bye! Thanks for stopping by.”

The girl on the counter laughed. “Well, that was entertaining. I’ll see y’all later.” She followed her friends out, completely unbothered.

They were all loaded up in the Jeep and about to tear outta here, when the lights from the patrol car finally showed up. They tried to leave before anyone could grab them, but I had to give Sheriff Johnson some credit; he blocked the exit with the car, leaving them stuck. Once I was satisfied that he was actually arresting the guys, I turned to Mahk.

I turned to my man. His gaze was heated, and the bulge in his pants proved he was as turned on as I was. I was on him in a fucking second, one hand squeezing the nape of his neck, the other cupping his cheek. I couldn’t get my mouth on him fast enough, and soon we were locked in a bruising kiss. I forgot about everything else. The only thing I could focus on was Mahk, how his more slender body pushed against mine, his hand curled lightly in my hair while the other one found my ass. I backed him up, our mouths still locked together, until he was leaning against the counter. My hand slid into the waistband of his pants?—

“Uh, hey, guys, I’m still here.” I snapped my head up, ready to murder whoever was interrupting me, until I saw Mike hovering uncomfortably by the back room. The kid had just turned 18 and was working to help out his momma and save for college. I could fucking relate. He didn’t deserve any of this. I reluctantly pulled away from Mahk.

“Shit, I’m so sorry, Mike. Are you okay?” He shifted again and nodded jerkily. I couldn’t tell if he was still freaked out over the altercation or if it was what he’d witnessed. Then I noticed him trying to discreetly adjust himself. Oh, ok. That made sense.

“I-I’m fine. Thanks for coming. I didn’t know what to do.”

“Course. You shouldn’t have to deal with that shit. Believe me, I’m gonna have words with both the owner and the sheriff. They should’ve had your back.” Mike shrugged. Downfalls of a small town. Everyone knew everyone, and if you weren’t cozy with the town royalty, they acted like you didn’t exist. Mike was not town royalty. Neither was I.

“At least he showed up now.” True.

I finally had myself under control enough to look at the damage. Fucking hell, they’d destroyed the place. “You got your phone with you?” I asked Mike.

“Yeah.”

“Good. I want you to take pictures of everything, then send them in a group message to me and the owner. I wish I thought to take video of those assholes.”

“I did,” Mike said quietly. “I had to stop eventually because that one guy caught me and I had to lock the door to the back room, but it should be something.”

I squeezed his shoulder. “It definitely is. Don’t clean any of this shit. Leave it for the owner. It’s his fucking problem now.”

Mike’s eyes widened. He probably thought I’d lost it, but I didn’t give a fuck. Those assholes had left him here in a dangerous situation. It could’ve been way worse than property damage. The owner was gonna bitch, but that wasn’t my concern.

“Take the pictures, Mike. Then we’re all getting the hell outta here. The store’s closed today.” It didn’t matter to me if I didn’t have the right to make that decision. The owner had lost the little bit of respect I’d had for him when he’d left us to deal with this.

It didn't take long to get all the pictures, then Mahk and I were leading Mike out and locking the door. Marcy had stopped in at some point, took pictures of her own, and told us that she'd get our statements later once everything settled down. I always like Marcy and was pleased she wasn't making us linger around.

I drove Mike home, he was way too shaken up to walk, and then it was finally Mahk and me alone.

Immediately, my dick remembered where we'd left off earlier as I turned to Mahk in the passenger seat.

I cupped his cheek, bringing our foreheads together. My stomach was pressed against the clutch, but I didn't care. It was all Mahk in my brain, all the time.

"I'm ready."

His eyes widened. "Ready for what?" I didn't miss the hitch in his voice.

"I—" Fuck, why were words so hard? "I love you, Mahk. I think I have for a while now. Everything seems less heavy when you're by my side. I want nothing more than to be yours for the foreseeable future and, shit, even longer than that. I won't lie and say I'm still not scared. So many things could go wrong, and doubts might win out some days, but seeing you with that asshole at the store, it solidified things for me. You're my mate, and I was a fool to keep ignoring that."

Mahk shivered. He found my hand and brought it to his lips. "Please speak plainly, lulekai . I need to hear it."

I sucked in a shuddery breath, getting the courage to speak the words Mahk deserved to hear. "I'm your mate, little stalker. Bite me, claim me, make it official."

CHAPTER 15

MAHK

I snuck another glance at Tanner from the corner of my eye. It had to be the hundredth time, but I could not stop myself. His words ran on repeat in my mind, and until I made what he asked for a reality, I wouldn't be able to stop staring at him.

We were in Forest Glen on the way to Sumner Cave. It had been Tanner's suggestion. Privacy was not easy to come by, so why not make our mating official in the very place that separated our worlds.

"Bite me, claim me, make it official." My jaw ached with the desire to do just that. I would have taken him then and there in the truck if it were possible. But Tanner deserved more. He deserved something special, and while this would never be what I'd imagined, there was a certain significance to it that made it feel right.

I looked at Tanner again, but this time he caught me and flashed me a cute smile. "You keep staring at me. I promise I won't change my mind, Mahk. This is what I want."

I hadn't even been thinking that. I'd heard the sincerity in his tone when he'd uttered my favorite words I'd ever heard. Of course, now he put that fear in my head.

My expression must have shifted because Tanner stopped walking, wrapped his arms around me, and kissed my head. "I swear I would never toy with you that way. I already put you through hell these last few weeks, but I meant what I said,

sweetheart. I love you. I want you in every way possible, and that includes as a magical mate.”

I snorted, but secretly I was relieved. Tanner had so many responsibilities, I was afraid they would get the better of him.

But after another kiss to my hair, he entangled his fingers with mine, and we walked the rest of the way to the cave in comfortable silence.

We stopped at the entrance, staring inside. “The barrier is in there?” Tanner asked with a hint of hesitation in his tone, but I could not tell if it was because of what we were about to do or entering the cave.

“Yes,” I replied gently, trying to feel him out.

“It’s so funny. I’ve heard the rumors about this place my whole life. We’ve all heard about hikers disappearing. I always figured it was partially parents scaring us out of exploring and the usual disappearances of hikers from wildlife or dehydration. It’s so wild that the stories were kinda true.”

I kissed his shoulder. “But remember, the people who disappeared through here had a happy ending. It meant they met their fated mate.”

“Right,” Tanner muttered to himself. “And your brothers, their mates also disappeared through here?”

“Yes, Rainn and Kai.”

“Oh yeah, I know them a little. They’d stop by the shop before hiking. That’s . . . They were cool. I’m glad they found their forevers.”

I was still confused where he was going with this, so I answered his question honestly, “I am too. I cannot wait to get to know them.”

He nodded but didn’t continue right away. “And there’s enough room in there, right?” He gestured toward the cave, “I never considered myself claustrophobic, but suddenly I’m questioning that.”

“Yes, lulekai . It is quite spacious. I promise. But if you’d rather, we can find a secluded area out here?—”

“No,” Tanner cut me off. “No. Let’s do it there. Everything began for us in that cave, and I want this moment there too.”

I kissed him. “If at any time you change your mind, we can leave.”

“Okay, thanks. But I’m ready.”

He straightened his shoulders much like he’d done before confronting those people at the store, then marched in. I followed after him, smiling.

Once we were inside, Tanner let me lead.

“You’ve never come in here?” I asked him.

“Nah. I know I grew up here, but hiking or anything outdoorsy besides football was always low on my list. Kenzie keeps asking to come though, so I gotta find time one weekend to get her here. I think all the girls would enjoy it.”

“That sounds fun. I want to fish.”

Tanner wrinkled his nose. “Eww, why?”

I shrugged. “It sounds entertaining.”

“You have a weird definition of entertaining, baby.” But I didn’t think so because many humans liked fishing. I looked it up.

After a few turns and splits, we were at the barrier. Well, a solid cave wall, but I knew my homeland lay right beyond that. I felt it.

“This is it?” Tanner whispered, like the moment was too momentous to use his full voice.

“Yes. This leads to my home.”

Tanner turned to me, his expression soft. “Are you ready for this?”

“I have been ready for this moment since I first saw you, my beautiful mate.”

Tanner’s cheeks flushed bright red. He rocked back on his heels and seemed a little uncomfortable. Then he took off the backpack he had been wearing and knelt by it.

“Let me see you, baby.” The bangle. I took it off and once again was fully in my orc form.

Tanner’s eyes scanned my body, lingering on the bulge that was growing in my pants. “Fuck.” He swallowed, then focused all his attention on the bag.

First, he pulled out the thick blanket that was normally on his bed and laid it out over the cold ground. I was glad that he’d thought of that detail. I did not want him to be uncomfortable. Next came the large bottle of lube.

I frowned at it, nerves wracking me. “I wish we had pleasure oil.”

Tanner smiled up at me reassuringly. “It’s okay, baby. You’ve been stretching me for a while now, getting me ready for that cock. I’ll be good. I promise.”

I swallowed, my fingers shaking with eagerness to touch him, when he added, “Just make sure to get some when you cross over.”

Of course. It was the first thing on my list.

Once Tanner had the blanket set up in the way he liked, he stood, a hungry gaze in his eyes as he once again focused on my bulge.

“Is that all for me?” he asked, voice rough.

Hands reaching for my waistband, I groaned. “Yes. Only for you.”

Tanner’s eyes darkened with possessive need. He loved that. He closed the distance between us and knocked my hands out of the way before pushing my pants down and exposing my cock. I couldn’t get used to human underwear, so I wore none. Every time Tanner remembered that fact, he went wild, which pleased me to no end.

“Clothes off,” he ordered even as he started to toss his shirt off and to the side. For a moment, I was frozen, focused solely on my mate’s naked body. He was so beautiful. He had admitted to me that he was a little self-conscious, since he no longer had his football body, but to me he was perfect. I loved that I could grip his hips and ass, and I could worship those thighs for days.

I must’ve taken too long because then Tanner was on me, removing my clothes in between kisses and love bites. I helped as much as I could, but it was hard to concentrate on anything but Tanner’s hands, and mouth, and scent, and, well . . . him.

He licked his lips and reached for my cock. “Baby . . .” He moaned, deep and gritty.

“I love that you don’t wear underwear. So fucking naughty keeping this monster cock all out and ready for me.” I’d already been hard, and Tanner’s rough touch wasn’t helping matters.

I couldn’t help it. I bucked into his touch. “Tanner.” It was breathless and more whiny than I liked, but I couldn’t care too much because then Tanner was leading me to the blanket, using my cock as a handle.

He maneuvered us so that I was flat on my back on the blanket and then he crawled on top of me. He sucked on my nipple, one of his favorite places to toy with me, while I squeezed his hips, my fingers digging into his back mainly to give me something to focus on so I didn’t get completely lost.

“I swear one of these days, I’m gonna get you to come just from nipple play.” It wasn’t the first time he’d said it, but it had not happened yet.

After one last, searing kiss, Tanner reached over and grabbed the lube. He handed it to me and then positioned himself on all fours with his ass to me. “Get me ready, baby.”

I barely heard the words because I was completely focused on the black plug nestled in between his cheeks. I had seen it before, the day Tanner had sheepishly admitted to buying it to help prepare himself for me. He’d explained it to me, and while most of ours were glass, I was familiar with the concept. He hadn’t used it, or at least I hadn’t realized he had, but seeing it now conjured all kinds of dirty fantasies.

I reached out, lightly grazing my fingers along the black rubber. “Lulekai,” I whispered almost reverently. After he’d declared he was ready, we had stopped by his house to bathe ourselves and check on his mother. He had also texted both Jake and his sisters’ babysitter to let them know he was going to be a little late. He must’ve put this in after his shower, but I had no idea.

Tanner turned his head so he could look at me. “Like your surprise?”

“Yes.” I knelt behind him and licked across one ass cheek. “It’s amazing.” I gripped the base and pulled.

The sound Tanner made was obscene, and I was internally preening that I finally had the opportunity to make my mate come undone as he had for me so many times.

I wanted to play, but we had a goal, and I would do nothing that would delay that. I went slow so I didn’t hurt Tanner, but still did not delay when taking out the sex toy. Once it was out, I tossed it to the side, completely focused on Tanner’s pulsing hole.

I suddenly had the urge to taste it, like Tanner had done for me. I don’t want to waste time, but any extra moisture had to be beneficial, right?

I must have been staring for long because my Tanner started to twist around to look at me again, but before he could speak, I buried my face between his cheeks.

“Oh! Fucking fuck! Warn a guy, will ya?” Tanner collapsed onto his elbows, back arched sexily, and then he keened. I scraped my tusks along the sensitive skin while licking around the rim.

“Mahk! Oh shit. Oh shit, baby. So good. Oh fuck, don’t stop, don’t stop.”

Tanner’s hand snaked between his legs to play with his cock, which had been leaking freely. Whenever I’d tried to do that, I’d been chastised that my cock was Tanner’s to play with. I considered saying the same thing, but I liked watching Tanner pleasure himself, so I kept to my task.

Soon, Tanner was begging for more, and I couldn’t bear the thought of teasing him. So I reluctantly pulled back, picked up the lube, and squeezed out a generous amount.

Tanner was stretched and loose enough, so I started with two fingers. My digits were thick, but it didn't take too long to be buried to my second knuckle.

"Holy hell, your fingers are so big. So full," I would've been worried, but he continued with, "So good. Fuck me with those thick fingers, sweetheart."

He didn't have to tell me twice.

It didn't take long for me to want to add a third. Just to be extra cautious, of course.

Tanner cursed as I pulled out, leaving him empty. I knew from experience how awful that was so I hastily reapplied more lube before working three fingers inside him.

"Fuck. Fuck. Mahk, oh my god. What are you doing to me? Ahhh!" Tanner continued to blabber nonsense. He was no longer making any effort to hold himself up, his face smashed against the blanket while his hand rapidly pleased himself.

"Don't orgasm yet, lulekai . I want you to find your release locked on my knot with my teeth in your neck."

Tanner sucked in a breath. "Yeah, well, maybe don't say shit like that if you don't want me to shoot my load early."

I smiled, proud. I was pleasuring my mate so well he could barely control himself.

It wasn't long before Tanner was begging for my cock. "I'm ready, Mahk. Please. Please. I need your dick. Now! Please, Mahk, now."

Leaning over his body, I kissed the nape of his neck where my bite would go, then removed my fingers.

Tanner was immediately whining, but he wouldn't be soon. I added even more lube to my cock, you could never be too careful, and then lined it up with Tanner's hole. Even with all the stretching and prep we had done, I still hesitated. I was very large, and while Tanner was not small or fragile for a human, he was still a human. We didn't even have the pleasure oil to ease me in. I did not want to hurt him.

Tanner seemed to understand without even looking at me. He had stopped masturbating and said softly, lovingly, "I'm ready, sweetheart. You won't hurt me."

Still, I didn't move. "You'll tell me if I do, right? Promise."

"Yeah, I promise I'll tell you. But Mahk, I trust you. Fill me up, baby. Let me finally feel that fucking knot exactly where it was meant to be."

"You amaze me, Tanner. I love you." Then I entered him.

I was being cautious, terrified of hurting him as I slowly rocked my hips, fucking him more and more open until, finally, I was fully seated.

Tanner was panting, his hands fisted in the blanket, tangling up the fabric in his grip. "Tanner?" I asked hesitantly, afraid to move. "Are you okay?"

His head jerked rapidly. "Y-yes. Just really full. Stretched but it doesn't hurt. But I'm gonna need you to move. Please."

"Okay." I adjusted myself, holding his hips tightly as I started to move. I was probably being too wary, but until Tanner no longer had his eyes squeezed shut like that, I was going to go slow.

Finally, it seemed he'd stretched and his body relaxed. I felt the tension leave him, then it was time.

Normally, I liked when Tanner was in charge. I loved him being inside me, controlling my orgasms, even how and when I moved while he fucked me. I would happily submit to Tanner's ministrations every day.

However, I could not deny how good it felt to give Tanner even an inkling of the pleasure he had been giving me. I wanted to own him, if only for this brief moment in time.

Once I was confident I was not hurting my Tanner, I began to fuck him in earnest. Each thrust hit him deep, letting him feel every inch of my cock both on the way out and in.

While I had been prepping Tanner this past week, he'd taught me how to find his prostate, the pleasure gland inside biological human men, and I made sure to hit it now. It wasn't the same as finding it with my fingers, but I kept adjusting myself until Tanner cried out, his head jerking off the blanket and his cock leaking profusely. I grinned to myself. I'd done it.

I hit it again. And again. Tanner was crying and cursing me out and was jerking his cock so roughly it had to hurt. "Baby, I need to come! Now."

"I'm close." I panted. "Hang on for me, lulekai . We come together."

"Ugh, yeah, Yeah . . . okay." He was struggling and wouldn't last much longer.

My knot ached as my orgasm built. "I'm almost there, Tanner. Are you still sure you're ready for this?"

My heart pounded and it was not purely from adrenaline. The bite would only take if he truly wanted it, and I still feared that he had doubts that would prevent us from taking this step.

“Yes. Bite me, Mahk.”

Those were the magic words. I could not hold off for another second. “I love you, lulekai . Come with me.”

“Fuuuck.” Tanner’s body tensed, and then he reached his peak. Tanner milked my cock, and I was soon following behind him, my knot growing as I came. “I love you,” I told him one more time and sunk my teeth into the nape of his neck.

Tanner cried out and, to my shock, started to come again.

“Mahk, oh my god. I fucking love you.”

My chest heaved as my knot swelled and I fell to my side on the blanket, bringing Tanner’s back to my chest.

He twisted his head to look at me through hooded eyes, a tired but happy smile on his face. “Holy fuck, Mahk. That was . . . I don’t think I have words for it.”

I did not either. I kissed his neck where my bite now lay.

For a while, I basked in the feeling. I was mated. I’d found my mate. The one person who was perfect for me, that I would spend the rest of my life with. I was so focused on Tanner and the love that was thrumming through my chest that I almost forgot the whole reason we’d chosen to do this in the cave. That was, until there was a humming sound, and where there’d once been a cave wall was now an opening that I could just peek the sunlight through.

“Mahk, is that . . . ?”

“Yes,” I replied quietly. “The barrier opened.”

Tanner tried to turn to me and then winced when he remembered he was still locked on my knot. “We did it?” He sounded kind of surprised, which made me chuckle.

“It looks like it.”

We both stayed quiet after that, until my knot went down and we could separate. Even then, we did not say anything as we cleaned up. Tanner had packed some water and granola bars in the backpack, and I gathered them and handed one of each to him. Tanner smiled gratefully and downed half the water in one gulp. We both dressed, and then it was time. We could not avoid it any longer.

We stood watching the opening, holding hands. “I won’t be long.”

Tanner stayed quiet, but his fingers shook in mine. “I promise, Tanner, I will be back.”

This time, he squeezed my hand. “I know you will. Doesn’t make it any easier. I wish I could go.”

I wished he could too. I wanted to suggest that he come through just so he could see my home and then immediately come back, but that would likely be harder. It was best to wait until I could be sure Tanner could easily access his family.

“Come to my place as soon as you get back please. I will be waiting.”

I cupped Tanner’s chin and kissed him quietly. “I will. I’ll bring the pleasure oil.”

Tanner snorted. “I might need a little recovery time, but I can’t wait.”

I looked back at the barrier. I had to go now or I never would.

“Come back to me,” Tanner whispered.

“I will. I swear it.”

“I love you, Mahk.”

“I love you too.” I finally forced myself to disentangle my fingers from his. I took a step forward. I couldn’t look back. I knew we wouldn’t be apart for long, but it still ached. Especially so soon after mating. But I would quickly update Nash, write a letter for Axum, get some supplies, and come back. A couple of hours and I would be in Tanner’s arms.

CHAPTER 16

MAHK

I breathed in the fresh air of my realm, a weight I hadn't realized I was holding falling off my shoulders. I'd meant it when I'd said I would wait for Tanner as long as necessary, but I'd missed having access to my home. Missed it more than I had been allowing myself to admit. Being here now, well, to put it literally, felt like coming home. I'd been happy in the human world and would gladly live there full-time, but being cut off from my home and family had been hard. Tears sprang in the corner of my eyes as relief filled me.

Still, I quickly turned around, beyond pleased to see the opening was still there. I knew it would be, but somewhere in the back of my brain, there was a little worry that I would not be able to freely travel the realms. It was a false fear. I would be able to return to my Tanner once I saw my brother and completed my errand. We'd done it. I'd claimed my mate and made it back.

I wasn't naive enough to believe everything would be smooth sailing. Staying permanently in the human world would come with its own challenges. I still had a lot to learn. Not to mention, I would need to find my own house soon. I could not stay at the Cunninghams' bungalow forever, and Tanner's was not large enough for me to move in. We would have no privacy. But we would figure it out. I had no doubt. Together, Tanner and I were stronger than apart, and we'd face everything side by side.

Feeling confident and at peace, I walked away from the cave with one more glance

back. I swore I saw Tanner peeking out, but if I went back, I'd probably never leave him. The farther away I got, the more my chest ached with the desire to be close, but I pushed through. It wouldn't be long until one of Nash's men found me; they always kept an eye on this barrier.

Soon enough, I heard voices coming up ahead. One I recognized as my brother, Nash.

When I was finally able to see them, Nash was walking next to a tall human with a collar around his neck. Kai.

"Brother!" I called out. When Nash saw me, both relief and happiness flashed across his features.

"Mahk! I was wondering if you'd ever grace us with your presence again."

I laughed as I greeted him. "Yes, well, I was busy cleaning up your messes for you." Or, you know, meeting my mate, falling in love, and convincing him to give us a chance, but I did not want to miss the opportunity to tease my brother.

Nash's purple eyes, one of the few features we both had, lit up with mischief, like he was ready to retaliate, but his mate spoke, eyes wide, before he could.

"No, that's not what happened at all. I totally got thrown off a cliff, and I wouldn't let him go without me, and I . . . sometimes have a bad habit of getting lost, so obviously he didn't want me to go, and . . ."

Kai trailed off, his eyes bouncing from Nash to me and then back again. I was very proud of myself for keeping a straight face so Nash's poor human mate didn't think I was making fun of him.

"You're joking, aren't you?" He sounded embarrassed, which I felt bad about, but

Nash brought him close and whispered something in his ear that had him smiling and blushing at the same time.

“I apologize,” I told Kai. “I did not mean to upset you.”

But he waved it away. “It’s fine. Just ignore me.”

Before I could ask him what he meant, Nash brought the conversation back to me. “So, I take it Koth will no longer be a problem?”

I grinned. “He’s at the bottom of a sink pit. You will have no more trouble from him.”

Both Kai and Nash looked relieved. “Thank you,” Nash said sincerely. “Were there difficulties? You were gone longer than expected.”

I almost laughed. It was hard to believe so much had happened in such a short time, and I was bubbling with anticipation to tell Nash all about my perfect, beautiful mate. “Let’s head out. I have much to tell you . . .”

A few hours later, I was on my way back to the cave. It was only a little over a month since I had done exactly this, yet absolutely nothing was the same. Then I was only focused on helping my brother. And now . . . Destiny was also my home. Or I hoped it would be soon. Tanner and I hadn’t discussed details about what would happen next, but I wanted to stay in Destiny. Or anywhere Tanner ended up. Tanner was my true home; everything else was just places. Still, I wanted to feel settled and comfortable there.

Taking one last breath, I crossed the barrier back to the human realm. I stepped into the cave and . . . nearly cried when I saw it was still open. A small shiver ran through me, and I took a moment to get my bearings. Once I felt more grounded, I activated

the bracelet so I would look human.

I glanced around even though I knew Tanner was not here. I had been gone for over half the day, spending more time than I'd anticipated so I could catch up with Nash and Kai. It had been amazing, but I was more than ready to be with my own mate again. He was probably panicking, and I couldn't wait to soothe him and myself. By the end of my visit, I knew I was being short with Nash and his men, but I had just mated! I needed Tanner.

I could feel the distance between us and I was done with it. I was about to hurry out of the cave when I noticed the backpack still leaning against the wall, and attached to it was a note.

Little stalker,

I packed you some snacks for your trip back to my house. I hope your family was well and you enjoyed your visit, but I can't wait till you're home. I'll be waiting for you.

Love,

Lulekai (I really hoped I spelled that right.)

My stomach swooped happily as I carefully folded up the note and put it in the front pocket of the backpack before opening it. It seemed that Tanner had taken the blanket—and the lube—with him. Instead, there were two bags of Cheetos and a little pouch that was still cold. Inside was a bottle of Yoo-hoo, the best drink ever, and one of those mozzarella cheese sticks. Tanner's sister Mia had introduced me to those last week, and I could not stop eating them. Tanner had warned me that human food tasted so good because it was packed with sugar and preservatives, but it was hard to care when it was that delicious.

Smiling at the thoughtful gesture, I picked up the backpack and threw it over my shoulder along with the other satchel of supplies I had taken from home. Then I made a hasty retreat, ready to get back to my mate.

I had barely made it out of the forest when my eyes locked on lights up ahead. They were on vehicles so humans could see easier at night. Walking toward them, I was able to see that they were on a truck. My heart raced with anticipation. Trucks were very common around here, but somehow I just knew . . .

The door opened and Tanner stepped out.

My breath stuttered as a huge smile lit up his face. Not caring who was around, I sped up and threw myself at my mate.

“Oof,” Tanner breathed out a laugh and staggered back a few steps as I tried to climb up his body. But his hands cupped my ass and he held me tight when I wrapped my legs around his middle. “Fuck, sweetheart. I missed you too.” He buried his face in my neck.

Maybe we should feel silly because it hadn’t even been a whole day, but I could not bring myself to care. I’d missed Tanner like I would miss a limb.

He carried me back to his truck and somehow managed to open the passenger door and place me on the seat. I didn’t let him go though.

He nipped at my nose. “Did you have a good trip?”

“Yes, I saw Nash and his mate, Kai. It was lovely.” My lips quivered with a smile. “I brought back pleasure oil. A lot of it.”

Tanner’s eyes sparkled. “Jake is spending the night at a friend’s house, so we have

the room to ourselves.”

“I like the sound of that. I need you. We separated too soon after mating.”

Tanner nodded seriously. “I know. I ached for you all day, even though I was thrilled you could finally get home.”

I kissed him gently. “I am home. Right here with you.”

EPILOGUE: TANNER

TWO YEARS LATER

“Oh, fuck, baby, just like that. Feels so good.”

Mahk grinned as he hovered over me, his dick doing wicked things to me as he fucked the daylights out of me. I preferred to top, and most of the time, I still was, but every once in a while, I enjoyed being fucked down by my sexy, sexy mate.

“I am close,” he growled. So was I. Mahk’s hands were almost as magical as his dick, and they were doing things to me as he jerked me off at the same time as fucking me.

“Do we have time for you to knot me?” I already knew the answer, but I was hoping that maybe I was wrong.

Mahk frowned. “Not if we want to be there on time.” He had picked up the intricacies of sarcasm over the last two years.

I pouted for a second, but then Mahk pegged my prostate again and I forgot what I was pouting about.

“Come on my face.”

Mahk’s eyes darkened, almost blue instead of the normal purple. He didn’t say anything, pulling out. Thankfully, my mate knew me well enough to know I hated being empty immediately after his thick orc dick had been filling me, and two fingers

entered me before I could complain. He knelt up as much as he could in this position—my hand quickly replaced his on my dick—and he started to pump his.

I succumbed to my own orgasm when the first salty drop landed on my lips. I opened my mouth and stuck out my tongue, desperate to get as much of Mahk's cum as I could. Some landed on my chin and even my nose, and I licked them clean.

Then Mahk's mouth was on mine, our bodies pressed together. I knew we had to get up. I needed to take an extremely quick shower and we had to leave, but I took a moment to hold my mate and be grateful for every moment that had led to this.

But eventually, our post-sex haze had to end. We did need to get going. There was no fucking way I would be late to my little brother's first game in the MLB.

Mahk and I quickly got out of bed and hustled to clean up. Usually, it was dangerous for us to shower together, but today we were lasered-focused, and in less than ten minutes, we were out and dressed, both wearing Colorado Lightning jerseys with Jake's name and number on the back.

After many, many fights and emotional talks, Jake had finally agreed to go away for college. I thought Mahk being there had helped. Not only had he immediately stepped up to help with the kids and Mom, but his never-ending supply of money had changed things tremendously. It turned out that he had a contact who had originally been from his world and now lived here. He would buy the gold Mahk would provide and melt it down for watches, jewelry and other items. And since Mahk was pretty much royalty back home, he had a fucking lot of money.

Once Jake had been convinced that Mahk and I were the real deal and I wouldn't be left alone, he'd accepted a scholarship to a university in Miami. He hadn't even finished his freshman year before he'd been recruited to the MLB. He had ended up finishing that year, and then had done one on their minor league team due to a shoulder injury that had needed some extra recovery time. But now, here he was. The

breakout rookie on the Colorado Lightning.

By some miracle, his first game happened to be in D.C., so I didn't even need to find a way to fly the entire family out anywhere. When we made our way downstairs, Mom was already there and sitting in her wheelchair, drowning in a Lightning hoodie. She was still frail but had been doing much better. Money really did talk, and we'd been able to get her much better care since Mahk had joined the family. She would never fully recover, but she was able to have some semblance of a life now.

She smiled brightly. "Are you boys ready? The girls are already sending pictures."

My sisters had gone early with Jake's girlfriend, Tessa, and his best friend, Nicky. The stadium had some fun kid activities they hadn't wanted to miss. I had a class this morning I couldn't blow off, since it had been presentation day. We'd gotten out early, right after our presentation, which was why Mahk and I had had time for a quickie, but the girls hadn't wanted to risk missing it.

I returned Mom's smile and kissed her cheek. "Yup, we're ready. Do you have your mask? Your scarf and hat?"

Mom rolled her eyes but patted the bag she had on her lap. "Yes, dear, I have everything. Though, it's hardly hat and scarf weather."

I fixed her with a look. She was doing better, but she was still immunocompromised. Even with the box we'd managed to get with the help of one of the more senior teammates whose wife was also immunocompromised, I didn't want her to take any chances. It was only April. It still got chilly sometimes.

Mahk hummed, moving us along. "Come on, Momma, let's leave the worrywart to fret while we get you in the van."

I elbowed Mahk in the arm, but he only laughed and went to wheel Mom out of the

house. He and my mom had bonded over the last two years, and it was beautiful to see. He'd confessed to me that she reminded him of his mother, whom he had lost years ago, and I was glad he got some comfort from their interactions.

While Mahk took Mom out, I did one final check around the house, mainly out of habit. We'd moved into a much bigger home just outside of Destiny a year and a half ago. The girls had had to change schools, but they hadn't minded much because we all had so much more space. Mom had her own suite on the first floor, and the whole thing was handicapped accessible. We'd even gotten one of the stair lift things so she could get up if she wanted to, though she rarely did. The house was a fucking blessing, along with everything else. I'd also quit the store and was now going to college for athletic training and was the assistant coach of the local high school football team. It might not have been my original dream, but I wouldn't trade it for anything.

Mahk and Mom were already settled by the time I got to the van. Mahk had his feet on the dash, the embodiment of a passenger princess. While he'd adapted to many things in this world, he still wouldn't drive. That was okay. He looked hot as hell riding shotgun next to me.

So much had changed in the last two years, I couldn't totally wrap my head around it. Some things were still the same though. Mahk still acted as the official assassin for Belzod. It wasn't often, but every once in a while, a messenger would show up at our door, asking for Mahk's assistance. We would tell the family it was a business trip, which wasn't a lie technically.

I had even been to his realm a few times. Mahk had come through and they'd been able to find a way for me to still get communication in case of an emergency. I'd gotten to meet both his brothers and catch up with Rainn and Kai. It was amazing getting to learn about Mahk's home and where he grew up. I hoped that as the girls got older, we'd be able to spend even more time there.

“Ready?” I asked them, meeting Mom’s eyes in the rearview mirror. Her face was so filled with joy as she answered me, it made me giddy. I never thought this day would come. Not only was my brother a fucking professional baseball player, but my mom was well enough that she could go.

Mahk squeezed my knee, seeming to sense all the emotions that were coursing through me. Fuck, even my eyes were starting to get wet. I quickly blinked back the tears and turned on the van. “Then let’s go watch Jake kick ass.”

“Yes!” both Mom and Mahk screamed as I took off. And that was exactly what we did.

The End