



Fake Dating an Orc Cowboy (Sweet Monster Treats)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: What happens when a fake wedding date with an orc cowboy starts to feel real?

Rosey: After my boyfriend ditches me for my sister and they invite me to their destination wedding, I'm in a bind. I could go solo, but my pride would take a hit. Then an orc in cowboy "armor" swoops in to save me from a creep at a bar. Ostor's both charming and bumbling, and despite him licking my palm in an almost ritualistic way, I like him, so I spontaneously invite him to be my fake plus one for the wedding. Sharing a room with Ostor takes a surprising turn when our fake relationship slides in a new direction, and I start falling in love. When the weekend's over, will my romance with this orc cowboy be a fleeting fling or can I lasso real love?

Ostor: I'm only in town to solidify contracts for the new Wild West tourist town my orc brothers and I have built when I meet Rosey. One touch, and I know she's my fated mate, so I mark her in the ancient orc way. When she invites me to attend her sister's wedding as her fake date, I jump at the chance to show her what we've found together should be anything but pretend. She's cute and funny, and she makes my blood roar. Before the weekend's over, I'm determined to claim her as my orc bride. Can I convince her to make this real?

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Chapter 1

Rosey

“Are you sitting on a mirror?” the greasy-haired guy who would not leave me alone asked. Dressed in tight black pants and a sleeveless t-shirt with *Wanna Ride my Rod?* emblazoned on the front, he was anything but date material. He’d sidled over to me the moment I took a stool at the bar. “Because I can see myself in your pants.”

Yuck. “Go away.” I sipped my wine and contemplated leaving, but I’d just gotten here, and it was lonely in my apartment by myself. Mom and Dad would see—again—that I was dateless on a Saturday night, and Mom would dole out sympathy hugs first thing tomorrow morning.

Thus was the life of the recently rejected.

“Come on, sugar,” the guy whined. “You know you want to give me a chance.”

“Leave me alone.” I didn’t look at him, didn’t like that I had to respond. He was worse than a cluster fly, zipping in to land on my arm. I kept verbally swatting him away, but he was getting close to feeling a physical taste of my anger. I’d taken self-defense classes. I wasn’t afraid to use what I’d learned.

“Now, sugar, don’t be like that.” He snickered. “Your clothes look too tight. Why don’t you take them all off?”

“Go!”

The bartender frowned at me. Not at the asshole who wouldn't leave me alone. But wasn't that the way things always went in life?

"Just look at me." The guy lowered his voice. "Give me a pretty smile."

"She said she doesn't wish to speak with you," someone growled from nearby. "If you don't back away from her, I'll show you why you should."

"Whoa." The guy lifted his hands, his eyes widened as he looked up, up, up at the enormous orc cowboy who'd left his spot farther down the bar and approached us. "Sure thing. She yours?"

I'd seen a few orcs since they emerged from caverns below the ground. I'd yet to see an orc wearing a cowboy hat, chaps outlining his thick thighs, plus an open leather vest over his blue and green patterned flannel shirt, however.

"She belongs to herself," the orc snarled, stomping over to nudge himself between me and the jerk. "You have three seconds to leave, or you'll feel this." He lifted his meaty fist. "One . . ."

"But she—"

"Two." The orc's face darkened with fury.

"No problem, dude." The guy spun and bolted across the bar, slamming through the front door that banged closed behind him.

"Thank you," I said, hoping I wasn't scooting out of the lion's den only to find myself in the dragon's lair.

"If it's alright with you, I'll sit beside you until we're sure he doesn't come back," the

orc said in a gruff, almost hesitant voice.

I shrugged, waiting to see how this guy would act.

He settled on the oversized bar stool provided for guys like him and stared forward, ignoring me, which was both a good and a bad thing because he was cute. Funny how a woman's perspective about conversation with a guy in a bar changed depending on how he behaved.

The bartender sidled down to me and laid the fries I'd ordered on the smooth counter. "Here you go." Turning, he strode over to the tap to pour someone a beer.

"Have a fry if you want," I offered the orc, dousing them with salt and squirting a large pool of ketchup into the basket beside them.

"Fly?" The orc stared at them. "You eat insects?"

"Fry, as in French fries, though they're not French."

He blinked at me.

"They're made from a vegetable called a potato. They cut them into strips and deep fry them in oil. They're good." I shot him a shy smile. "I promise."

"If you promise," his words rumbled in his muscular chest, "then I'll believe you." He tentatively lifted one and bit into it, sans ketchup, but maybe ketchup wasn't a thing in the orc kingdom.

Not long ago, orcs emerged from deep below the Earth's surface. Unknown to us, they'd lived forever in a city built inside an enormous, cavernous valley they called the orc kingdom. An orc explorer had gone on an adventure and found his way to the

surface, where he met a few humans. Perhaps that's where the yeti rumors came from. Orcs were tall, most over seven feet, very muscular, and they had medium green skin. They came in peace, and they wanted to live among us, and what could be better than that?

The orc king's emissaries formed a treaty with our governments, and orcs joined humans all over the world. They bought property, set up businesses, and they interacted with humans on all levels.

I hadn't met many orcs, but those I had were exceedingly polite and kind.

Like this one.

After swallowing, he spun toward me and gave me an adorable, tusk-filled grin. "This fly is amazing."

My face hurt from my smile. "Fry. Flies . . . well, some people probably eat them, but not me."

"Fry." He garbled the word, and that only endeared him to me more.

He really was handsome. I slid my gaze down his bulky frame, taking in his lightly haired forearms where he'd rolled up his sleeves, his thick thighs outlined by the leather chaps. His waistline narrowed in nicely, and from what I could tell so far, he was a decent, good guy. What more could a woman ask for?

"Have another fry," I said. "And dip it in the ketchup."

Leaning forward, he scowled at the red puddle. "Is that blood?"

It was all I could do not to snort with laughter. "Nope. It's crushed tomatoes, another

vegetable. Ketchup is one of the seven wonders of the world. You'll like it. I promise."

His scowl didn't fade as he tapped a fry into the shiny red surface. Popping it into his mouth, he chewed, his thumb-sized tusks working across his upper lip. Like our wisdom teeth, they must be an evolutionary hold-out. What had orcs eaten in the past to need teeth like that?

"By the fates," he breathed, gaping at the rest of the fries. "This vegetable blood is amazing."

Incredibly cute.

My phone buzzed with an incoming text, and my smile faded, because I could guess who wanted to chat.

Normally, I was happy to speak with my sister. We'd grown up close and nothing other than a guy named Jacob could drive us apart. Jacob being my ex-boyfriend—and her fiancé.

Might as well get it over with. I scrolled into my phone while the orc cowboy shifted in his chair and moaned while eating fries as if he was about to . . .

Hold on there, Rosey. He was handsome and my knight in green armor, but I didn't pick up guys in bars.

Yet, my girly parts shouted, yet!

Just coordinating the final details for my CANCUN! WEDDING! to Jacob, my sister, Macy, who adored exclamation points, texted. Do you want a single room or are you going to share with Janie?

Did I have to go?

Actually, yes, I did. I was the maid of honor.

Oh, um, let me see, I replied. By the way, I CAN'T wait for your wedding!! I needed to lay off the exclamation points, but they were the only thing carrying me through this mortifying time in my life.

Sure, her fiancé, Jacob, and I had only gone out a few times before his gaze landed on Macy and it was over for me. But that didn't mean my heart hadn't felt the burn. I hadn't loved him. Who could love a guy who took one look at your younger sister and ditched you within ten minutes?

But the thought of attending their wedding made me cringe.

I can't do this without you beside me! Macy messaged. I was happy for her, because she and Jacob were totally in love, but still. The resort needs to know how many rooms we'll need and the guest makeup of each one. Janie or a room by yourself? Please don't worry about coming alone. One of Jacob's friends is single, and I'll ask him to dance with you at the reception.

Please, no.

Janie was one of her bridesmaids. As my sister's maid of honor, I was feeling anything but honored to attend her wedding to the guy I'd started to care about.

I only wanted the best in life for my little sis. Him? Not so much, though it wasn't his fault either. I'd wanted to find chemistry between us, but that didn't mean I had.

He'd found it with her instead.

Imagine the torture of attending my sister's wedding to my now-ex boyfriend without a date. I'd wince my way through the wedding and mope on the beach after with a tropical drink or two or three while she and her new husband celebrated their nuptials in every imaginable way possible.

I've got a date, so I'll need my own room, I texted on the spur of the moment.

Now why had I said that? I wasn't dating anyone and none of my guy friends were single.

What, what, what?! You're seeing someone? my sister texted. Share! I could almost see her pout. I can't believe you didn't tell me you were dating a new guy.

Damn, why had I told her that? Now I was in a bind.

The orc cowboy extended his hand. "I'm Ostor Bronish." His lightly accented voice tickled across my bones. "I owe you a debt of gratitude for introducing me to fries and vegetable blood, which I know is not blood, though it looks as if it is."

"I'm Rosey Trent." I placed my hand in his, admiring how small I was compared to this big, brawny cowboy. At five-seven, I'd never felt petite.

Sparks traveled up my arm, and I blinked at my skin, expecting it to be glowing or something.

Ostor gave me a stunned look before he slid off the stool and slammed onto his knees beside me. He flipped my hand over and proceeded to lick up the center of my palm and onto my wrist that burned as if I'd gotten stung by a bee.

He took my phone from my other hand and laid it on the counter, and then repeated the gesture, licking from my second palm to my wrist, sending tingles through my

body that dove down to light up parts between my legs that hadn't seen action in so long, I couldn't remember when.

Looking up at me, his crooked smile grew even bigger.

My heart tumbled off a cliff, soaring down the other side.

Talk about a weird and unsettling encounter. I should nudge him away. Like, who licks a stranger's hands? Sure, it had felt good, but it was a very odd way of introducing yourself to a woman.

Besides, um, bee sting? Although, his lick had made the pain fade to nothing.

Despite how odd this situation was and the fact that I'd never been a one-night stand kind of girl, I was seriously reconsidering changing that policy with this orc.

"Are you single, Ostor?" I croaked, unsure what was happening between us, but determined to find out. They said when you met "the one," you knew. Was that what this feeling was all about?

His brow scrunched together. "I am the only one of me."

"I meant are you married or with someone?"

"Oh, no. I am not." His low husky voice could've lit my panties aflame.

"You wouldn't happen to be free next Thursday through Sunday, would you?" I asked.

"I am. The sorhox cattle can wait."

Sorhox cattle?

A frown scrunched his thick brow ridge, and his eyes darkened, a challenging thing since they were nearly as black as his thick hair dusting his broad shoulders. He lumbered to his feet, looming over me while shooting glares at everyone around us. Finally, his eyes locked on me again. “Tell me what you need, tiny one, and it’s yours.”

Oh, how my imagination went wild at that statement.

I held up my phone. “Let me send a quick text, and then you and I need to talk.”

He nodded, his face solemn. “I await your command, tiny one.”

Oh-la-la.

I texted my sister. My date’s name is Ostor.

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Chapter 2

Ostor

Who would've thought I'd meet my fated mate on my second day on the Earth's surface? One touch, and symbols had appeared on our wrists, proving she was mine.

She might be tiny, and that initially disturbed me, but I could tell already that she was amazing.

I was incredibly large in all ways. We would find a way to make this work. Others had done so. Look at the half-human, half-orc younglings running around.

Though small and fragile appearing compared to an orc, Rosey had shown considerable strength already. Look at how she'd held herself against the male who'd harassed her.

Since they'd yet to meet their fated mates, my brothers would be jealous. They'd grin and rub their knuckles into my shoulder, telling me how fortunate I was. I couldn't wait to tell them I'd found her and marked her as mine.

Her dark hair tumbled across her shoulders like the waterfall I'd discovered while hiking through the caverns deep below the orc kingdom. The rich brown water had sparkled in the light of the beam insects speckling the roof of the cave. Rosey's hair glinted as if the sun, a brilliant, blinding ball of light that stunned me whenever I peered its way, had reached down and glided its fingers through the strands. Her dark blue eyes, unusual and intriguing when compared to the universal orc black, glowed

with sweetness. Just looking at her made my heart thunder like a wild beast roaring across a cavern plain.

My life would not be complete without this woman by my side.

Rosey. Such an amazing, gorgeous, appealing name. It fit my tiny mate, and I couldn't wait to begin our new life together.

She'd asked me to do something for her, and how could I refuse? I would slay vicious drundegs for her. Sever the heads of her enemies and mount them on poles on the outskirts of her city. Battle her in combat as was her due as my mate if she asked.

I was here in this town to finalize contracts with suppliers for a new business venture, but anything could be put on hold if my mate needed me.

Finished with her conversation, she placed her phone on the smooth bar surface and turned my way, uncertainty suddenly creasing her face. "Here's the thing, Ostor. I had a boyfriend until he met my sister." Pain shadowed her pretty eyes. "Now they're engaged, and they're getting married next weekend."

I couldn't feel bad that Rosey wasn't with another male when she belonged to me, but rage roared through my veins at the thought that he may have hurt her. "Do you want me to slay him?" I bolted from my chair. "I'll fetch my sword and gladly do so this instant."

"No, no!" She lowered her voice. "No. You can't kill Jacob."

"He caused you pain. Tell me where he is, and I'll lob his head from his body and mount it on a pole to display outside your home."

"My parents would kill me if you did something like that."

“Then I’ll slay them too.”

“No! Please, no killing anyone.” She huffed out a sigh. “I rent the apartment above my parent’s garage, and they’d be horrified if you mounted Jacob’s head anywhere. My sister loves him, and if nothing else, I want her to be happy. That means Jacob must hold on to his head.”

“Very well,” I said gravely, settling back on my stool. “Then what can I do?”

She pointed to the fries and not-blood. “Eat while I explain where you come into the equation.”

I collected another fry and swiped it through the tomato juices. I must share this dish with my brothers.

“Macy and Jacob are getting married next weekend, and the wedding’s taking place at a resort in Cancun. That’s where you come in if you’re still open to helping. I can’t go to their wedding alone. Talk about mortification. Everyone knows that I found him first, and while I’m glad for my sister, they’ll be watching to see if I freak out or sob. And it’s going to hurt to see them together,”

“I truly am sorry.”

“Thank you. So, the thing is . . . I need a fake date for the wedding.”

“Fake?”

“We just met.” Her laugh rang out, tickling across my skin and gliding down to slide through my cock, making the coorails spiraling around the shaft quiver. “You’re cute and all, but we barely know each other. I need a fake date for the wedding. Come with me to Mexico for four days and pretend we’re together. We’ll share a room,

though I'm sure we can ask for one with two beds when we check in. You'll need to act like you care for me—"

"This is not a problem."

"You really are sweet." Her smile grew. "We'll hang out together during the day, though I'm more than willing to give you time alone whenever you want. There will be activities, and they'll expect us to play whatever pool or beach games they dream up, plus participate in all the pre-wedding gushy stuff that's going to crush me."

"You love him?" How could this be true when her body had just responded to our first touch?

"No. It's just . . ." Her swallow took a long time to go down. "I liked him. I wanted to know him better. But then he saw her and it was over for us. If she was anyone but my little sis, I would've ripped her eyeballs out."

"Lob off their heads, mate. That's permanent."

She frowned. "Yeah, okay. Back to my problem. I need to go to this wedding and find a way to hold onto my pride. I'm happy for them. Somewhat. Whenever I think of him in generic terms and not as the guy I'd started to mentally make plans with, I can almost smile." She held up her phone. "The trip's all expenses paid. Jacob has oodles of money, and he's footing the bill."

I frowned at her feet, admiring how her legs looked in the shoes with long spikes at the heels, though I questioned how anyone could walk in such things.

"You have a passport, don't you?" she asked.

"We were required to obtain them for identification when we came to the surface."

“Good. If you say yes, we’ll leave next Thursday and return on Sunday. The wedding’s on Saturday. I hope that’s enough time for you to arrange to be away.” A shiver tracked through her. “We can get to know each other better on the plane. They’re not going to quiz us as if you’re trying to get a green card, but they’ll find it odd if we don’t know anything about each other. We’ll have to come up with matching answers to questions, such as how long we’ve known each other and where we met. Simple stuff like that.”

“Yes,” I said. “Whatever you need, tiny one, I will do it for you.”

“This is really kind of you.” She leaned close, and her light floral scent combined with a hint of her very essence befuddled my senses. “You’re not a serial killer or a misogynist, are you?”

“What’s a misogynist?”

“I enjoy a bit of alpha as much as the next woman, but don’t start telling me what I can do, who I can talk to, or hiding me away inside a basement.”

“I would never do such a thing.” In the orc kingdom, females were equal to males in all ways. How could they not be when they could defeat males in combat? Even during mating rituals, it was anyone’s guess who’d win a match over the other. But we respected them above all others, just like I did Rosey.

“Good. Just a few more things. Weapons are not allowed on the plane or inside your checked bag, so you’ll have to leave your sword behind.”

Now I couldn’t lob off Jacob’s head. Although, she said her sister loved him, and I wouldn’t want to cause my new family pain.

Her sly smile grew. “You can bring soft ropes.”

“Ropes?” I pictured the games my brothers and I planned to offer at our cowboy tourist destination that might include such things. Did she want to practice lassoing a fence post? I didn’t know anything about Mexico, but our destination must offer their version of cattle.

She shrugged. “I was just teasing.”

“I see.” Though I didn’t. There appeared to be a hidden meaning in her rope comment that I would need to examine further.

Sitting back in her chair, she studied my face. “Yes or no, Ostor? If you want to back out now that you know what I’m offering, you’re certainly welcome to do so. I’d never expect you to come with me and pretend to be my boyfriend if you find the idea unappealing.”

“Yes.”

A frown bloomed on her pretty face. “Yes, you find the idea unappealing or yes to . . .?”

“Yes, I’ll go with you as your date and yes, I’ll ensure your family believes we are happy together.”

And I’d happily do all I could to take this from fake to the real thing, but I wouldn’t mention that now. From the little I’d learned already, humans didn’t know right away that someone was their perfect match. Me mentioning it might drive her away.

“Perfect.” She held out her hand.

I stared at it. Did she want me to lick her again? Oh, no. Humans clasped hands and wiggled both when meeting and to solidify an agreement.

I held hers gently and after wiggling it, I lifted it to my mouth, kissing her palm.

A pink tinge rose into her face. “You really are special, Ostor.”

Special enough to agree to our mating?

Humans knew nothing about such things—they’d made this clear in the booklet we were all required to study when we arrived on the surface. She didn’t know what my licking meant, what the symbol she’d yet to discover on her wrist meant, let alone that we were essentially married already.

I’d explain soon, and she’d understand.

She might believe this was fake, but she was mine, and I was hers forever.

I was going to do all I could to show her this should be real.

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Chapter 3

Rosey

“Could Ostor Bronish please come up to the desk? Ostor Bronish. Please come up to the desk.”

We sat in the airport lounge, waiting to board our flight to Cancun, and my heart kept ping-ponging around in my chest. I was nervous. How could I not be? I'd avoided Jacob as much as I could after he quickly ended things with me, gushing about all my sister's amazing attributes. I'd seen him twice in the six months since, and only at a distance. With my heart still feeling crushed, I'd done all I could to stay away. I was sure my sister knew what I was doing, but she'd kindly avoided mentioning it to my face. Mom giving me endless hugs and patting my back while clicking her tongue in sympathy had been bad enough.

I kept rubbing the cute little circular floral tattoo on the underside of my right wrist I'd somehow obtained since meeting Ostor. It wasn't there before, and when I spied it the next morning, I couldn't imagine where it had come from. Had I somehow pressed my arm against metal with an embossed symbol? It wasn't etched in black or dark blue or any other normal tattoo color but in what looked like pure gold. I'd heard of permanent jewelry before, but I doubted it looked like this.

I'd had only one glass of wine at the bar that night so this wasn't the result of me blacking out and going wild.

It wouldn't wash off, no matter how hard I scrubbed. It hadn't faded, and I wasn't

sure what to do or think about it, but I'd made an appointment to see my doctor when I got home in case it was still there. Did skin cancer look anything like this?

"Ostor Bronish?" the voice said, louder. "Please come to the desk."

That brought my brain to attention. I dropped my arm, deciding to ignore the mark for now, and turned to Ostor, nudging his elbow.

"Is someone speaking to me?" Ostor asked, crooking his head back to stare at the ceiling. "Where is the melodic voice coming from?"

"Her," I pointed to the airline counter. "She needs to speak with you." Hopefully there wasn't an issue with his passport or something like that.

We grabbed our carry-ons and walked up to the desk.

"Ostor Bronish?" the woman in the airline uniform with a tag identifying her as Beverly asked with a smile that engulfed him in joy and flatlined when it turned my way.

"That's me." He shot me a concerned look. "I'm Ostor Bronish."

"Congratulations," Beverly gushed, her gaze sliding down his chest encased in a snug t-shirt emblazoned with Lonesome Creek Cowboys in swirly letters on the front, made to look like a rope lassoing a fence post. "You've been upgraded to first class. We saw you were an orc, and we know how tight the economy seats can be and thought this might make your flight more enjoyable."

"Oh, um, thanks?" Ostor whispered in my ear. "What does this mean?"

"You've been given a primo seat on the plane," I said. Great for him. Not so great for

me because we'd be separated. We'd planned to get to know each other better during the flight, though we'd texted a few times over the past few days and had some of the background stuff settled.

It was okay. We could run through the rest before we boarded and en route to the resort in the transport van.

"You're living the high life now, buddy," I said.

"You'll board with Group 1." Beverly leaned over the counter to pat his chest.

Getting touchy feely, wasn't she? My face blazed, and my chest tightened as if someone had just slammed a heavy suitcase on top of it. I mean, he didn't belong to me. Not really.

But sorta.

"I'm sure a big, brawny orc like you will enjoy the amenities offered in this class of service." Beverly batted her long eyelashes at him. "Your new seat is 2A."

"2A," he said, his thick brow still scrunched together.

"If you'll . . . give me your cell number, I'll send the information to you," she purred.

As well as her own number, no doubt. Jeez. Who tried to pick up a guy at the airport? It was clear he wasn't standing here with his sister. I mean, I could be his wife. His fiancée. His not-pretend girlfriend.

"He won't need anything like that." I nudged his hand holding out his phone back down to his side. "He's downloaded the app, and his new boarding pass will show there."

“Oh, yes.” So much for Beverly’s smile. “Of course,” she minced out, her lips thinning. “Do you control all his actions or do you only police his phone?”

Fuck her.

My belly churned, and my pulse thundered in my ears. I bellied up to the counter with fury climbing up my throat.

Ostor took my hand, holding me back before I climbed over the counter and started ripping out her hair. “I assume Rosey has been gifted with primo as well?”

“Rosey?” Her sharp gaze fell on me. “Is she your girlfriend? I thought she was your mom.”

I was going to rearrange her nose. Sputtering, I opened my mouth to slam her but—

“I’d appreciate it if you could ensure my wife is seated beside me,” he said.

Wife?

He turned me to face him and cupped my cheeks sweetly in his big hands. “Rosey and I are going to Cancun for our moon of the honey, and I can’t wait to taste all this lovely woman has to offer.”

Moon of the honey?

Wife?!

My eyes widened as he curled toward me, and when he gently claimed my mouth with his own, I stood in place, stunned at first.

Then the warmth radiating from his body engulfed me, drawing me into his spell. My hands, as if possessed, found their way to his shoulders, and I tugged him nearer. A bolt of lightning shot through me, and I instinctively leaped to wrap my legs around his waist, my feet dangling above the ground. Sturdy, he didn't even shift from the gesture.

His mouth still locked on mine, he turned and settled me on the edge of the airline counter. The cool surface beneath me contrasted nicely with the heat of his body pressing into mine. As he deepened our kiss, his tongue grazed my lips, coaxing them apart. I opened to him, welcoming the thrill that came with this male alone. Each caress ignited something deep within me, a part of me that had just come alive and was kicking, hungry for more.

His kiss grew more insistent. My senses exploded with the taste of him—his breath warm and sweet, mixed with traces of the tea he'd had earlier. I was utterly lost in this moment, drowning in the way he held me, the world around us fading to nothing. It was just us, and the tension of the last six months evaporated like morning mist in bright sunshine.

His every touch sent ripples through my body. His fingers ran along the sides of my thighs, curling in toward the center where I craved him in a way I'd never wanted anyone else before.

Everything was perfect until a sharp hoot rang out, and I realized someone was insistently tapping my shoulder and grunting.

Ostor lifted his head. His gaze sunk into mine, his swirling with heat.

“Well, hello there,” I croaked. “Nice to meet you, Ostor.”

“You will be mine,” he growled.

I could get into his possessive tone of voice, the way his hands still held my ass, and the way my lips throbbed.

“Excuse me,” Beverly cried. “Excuse me! You can’t do that here. Go . . . I don’t know where, but please . There are children present.”

Oh, yeah, we were at the airport and everyone in the vicinity must be watching.

“You go, girl,” a woman called out from nearby.

“Hot,” someone else shouted.

“Please, Sir,” Beverly snarled. “You’ve proven your point.”

That I belonged to him? I wasn’t sure what I felt about his comment, but if the full package came with his kisses, I wasn’t opposed to seeing where this went next.

With a smile holding a hint of alpha satisfaction that made me want to cuddle against him, he spanned my waist with his big hands and lifted me off the counter. Turning me, he wrapped his arm around my shoulders and tugged me against his rock-hard body.

“Rosey is not my mother,” he told Beverly gravely.

“Yes, I can see that.”

“Apologize to my wife,” he added.

My breath caught. “Oh, I—”

“I mean it.” His steely voice was sharp enough to slice through metal. “You insulted

her. Scorned her and I'm tempted to lob off your head and mount it on a post."

Beverly gaped at him, saying nothing.

"Ensure Rosey Trent is sitting beside me," he said. "Or I'll post a complaint online."

Air jerked in and out of Beverly's chest, making her boobs wiggle. "I'm terribly sorry, sir. Ma'am." That, I doubted. "I'll see what I can do." All business now, she ducked behind her computer screen, and frankly, I would've too. Although, I wouldn't have played mean girl with another woman when it was clear she was with the guy I'd set my sights on.

Women needed to stick up for each other.

A few clicks and she looked up, avoiding both of our gazes. "The seat next to yours was open, sir, and I've moved your wife to that spot."

"Thank you." Taking my hand, Ostor led me back to our chairs, where we sat.

"Well." I placed my carry-on bag on the floor beside me and spent a long time fussing with it. I couldn't bear to look at him and not because he'd declared to the world that I was his wife, that I was his .

That kiss . . . It was going to haunt me throughout the weekend.

"Yes, well." His voice rang with the same heated satisfaction I'd found in his eyes.

"Honeymoon," I whispered. At least everyone had returned to whatever they were doing and the guys sitting at a nearby bar had stopped hooting. "The word is honeymoon. Not moon of the honey." Thought that sounded cute.

“Ah, honeymoon . I’ll remember.”

“We’re not married.”

“Not in the human way. That is correct.”

“Not in any way.” I looked up at him, dragging my eyes from his when I found raw hunger there. This guy craved me. Why?

“We shall see.” His gaze scanned the room before returning to me. “What are your questions, mate?”

Mate?

I should be telling him in no uncertain terms that his sudden alpha tendencies needed to be suppressed, but I couldn’t find the breath to shout the words out.

“Um, um . . . What’s your favorite color?” I asked.

“Green.”

No surprise there.

“Mine’s blue. Your favorite food?”

“Smoked sorhox.”

I crooked my neck to frown up at him. “What’s a sorhox?”

“An orc version of your cow. They’re much bigger however.”

“What do they look like?”

“They’re a darker green than me.” He poked his muscular forearm, making it blanch before smoothing back to medium green again. “They have long claws instead of hooves.” He stretched his arms out about twelve inches. “A spiked tail that you’d be wise to avoid.”

“Why?” I couldn’t imagine such a creature.

“One gouge could hurt or even kill.”

“I’ll stay away from its tail.” Not that I’d ever see, let alone get near a sorhox.

“I’ll be with you when the time comes.” Taking my hand, he kissed the back. Normally, a gesture like that might make me cringe, but with him, it made me want to climb into his lap and beg for another kiss. “They’re quite gentle. You’ll adore them.”

Why was he acting as if I’d meet even one sorhox? I doubted I’d find them at the resort in Cancun, and when we got back home, we’d part ways. I’d never see him again—something I was beginning to suspect would make me sad.

“You said something about a new business you’re starting with your brothers?” I asked to get away from all this possessive talk.

“Yes.” His tusky smile flashed. Funny how I hadn’t felt his tusks when he kissed me. “My brothers and I are opening a new tourist business. You’ve heard of ranch destinations? We’re combining orc heritage with a version of your Wild West. We’ve created a town complete with a saloon, a jail, plus an authentic sorhox ranch where our guests can stay. They’ll participate in trail rides, bull riding in a tamer rodeo experience, plus everything a fake western town might offer.” He listed them off. “Stagecoach hold-ups, pretend shoot-outs, and story time around a blazing fire each

night.”

“This sounds like a lot of fun.” My heart crunched because there was almost no chance I’d ever see such a thing. It must be pricey. I got by with the income from my radiology assistant job, but there wasn’t much left after paying my bills and putting a little away in my savings. I could swing take-out pizza or a day at Quirky Kingdom—a kiddie amusement park a woman and her orc husband ran a few towns away from mine—but nothing like a ranch tourist destination.

“When do you hope to open your business?” I asked.

“Within a few months if things go well. I was in your city to negotiate contracts for supplies. Our initial phase includes getting the town open to tourists and making sure that part runs smoothly. The next phases include putting in vast gardens where we’ll grow all our produce, plus expanding the small town we’ve constructed. I . . .” He looked down at his hands resting on his thighs. “My original intent was to help with the contract negotiations then return to the orc kingdom.”

He meant leave the surface. “Forever?”

“That’s changed.”

Why did those few words make sunlight burst inside me? “What’s changed in particular?”

His gaze locked on mine, and he started to speak, but he was cut off when they announced it was time for Group 1 to board. His head swiveled to the airline counter.

“This is us, correct?”

“Yup. We can continue the conversation on the plane.”

“I’ve never ridden in an aero-plane before,” he gulped out. “I admit, I’m nervous. Will you heat me up so I don’t leap?”

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Chapter 4

Rosey

H eat him up . . .

My gaze shot to his groin. When he'd settled me on the edge of the airline counter and spread my legs to step between them, he'd rubbed against me. There had been no missing the fact that this guy was big all over. Something had hummed down there, but he hadn't pressed hard enough for me to figure out what it might be.

I had to be mistaken. No guy packed vibrating devices in his briefs.

I stood and grabbed my bag. "I'm not sure what you mean."

He rose as well, towering over everyone. A few people watched him with curiosity, but most ignored him. He wasn't the only orc in the place.

A frown bloomed on his cheeks. "Heat me . . . Leap. I'm saying this phrase wrong. Could you help me heat up so I'm not . . . No, not heat. I worry I'll be afraid, and I need something to distract me."

"If it will help, I'll talk your ear off."

His frown deepening, he rubbed his pointed right ear and cupped it a moment before lowering his arm to his side.

“That’s a saying,” I said. “Like a joke. I won’t really remove your ear. It just means I’ll chatter a lot.”

“Good, good.” He sent me a nervous smile. “I appreciate it.”

The poor guy. He really was worried. I would do all I could to help him relax.

I took his hand, and we went up to the desk, scanning our boarding passes before walking down the passage and getting on the plane. I showed him how to tuck his comically small-for-his-size backpack under the seat ahead of ours.

“Window seat or aisle?” I asked.

He glanced at the two places and shrugged.

“Why don’t you take the window? You might enjoy looking at the ground as the plane soars over it.”

I wasn’t sure a green-skinned guy could get any greener, but my fake orc boyfriend did.

“Take the aisle instead,” I said. “Then you can run to the bathroom if you need to.” I’d make sure he knew where to find the paper bag as well. Hopefully he’d see this wasn’t a scary experience and enjoy the flight. At least we didn’t have any stops along the way.

I scooted into the window seat and sat while he dropped into the aisle seat. It was good that they’d moved him to first class. His knees bumped against the seat ahead even here.

“Buckle up,” I said.

He frowned at his legs.

I leaned over and helped him secure the fastening. “All set.”

“I appreciate you so much, Rosey,” he groaned, as if I’d performed CPR and brought him back from the cusp of death. “I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“Without me, you wouldn’t be here.” Maybe it was wrong to take an orc who knew almost nothing about air travel on a plane, let alone to Mexico. Would he enjoy the experience, or would it make him decide he did want to return to the orc kingdom as soon as his contract negotiations were finished?

“This is true, and I can’t imagine such a thing.” Turning slightly, his gaze fell on my mouth. “I enjoyed kissing you, Rosey. I want to do it again.”

I didn’t have to force a smile because I felt the same. “I imagine you’ll have other opportunities.”

“Because we’re pretending to be a couple.”

“Congratulations, you two.” A steward stopped beside us and handed us each a glass of champagne. “I was told you’re on your honeymoon! Here’s a little drink to celebrate.”

“Have you had alcohol before?” I asked Ostor as he held the fluted glass in his big hand, his eyes narrowing in on the bubbles rising to the top. “Oh, that’s right. You had a beer at the bar, didn’t you?”

“Nest beer.”

Nest . . . “Oh, you mean near -beer? That doesn’t have alcohol. This does.”

“Is this alcohol good?” he asked the steward who still stood nearby, tucked out of the aisle enough that passengers could keep boarding.

“It’s a matter of perspective,” I said. “It can have an impact on your brain, though this isn’t a lot.”

“It’s delicious. Congratulations again!” the steward said, turning and continuing through the cabin.

“Do you like this pain?” I wasn’t sure he could scowl any harder.

“Champagne . No pain unless you drink the entire bottle. And yeah, I like it.” I took a sip.

He watched me before lifting it to his nose and sniffing. After grunting, he placed the glass to his lips and drained it in a few swallows, erupting in coughing after. “It . . . it . . .” he choked out, banging his chest. “Why is it clawing my throat?”

“This is a sparkling wine. The bubbles can have that effect.” I sipped more of my drink.

They closed the cabin and taxied the plane along the runway. And as the jets heated up and roared, I expected Ostor to clutch his armrests. Cling to my hand. Stare at me while he had a full-blown panic attack.

Instead, Ostor started singing in a deep, robust voice. “Out on the prairie, all alone in my socks, with only a beast called a sorhox. We’re both green and maybe a touch ugly, but we share one bliss—When I’m feeling lonely, I give the sorhox a kiss.”

Someone behind us snickered.

Ostor kept repeating the same verse until people around us started singing along. Alcohol affected everyone differently, so there was no telling if this was his norm or if he was getting silly after one glass of champagne. If this was any indication of how orcs responded to alcohol in general, we'd have to take care at the all-inclusive resort, where drinks flowed like water at the Hoover Dam.

I found this part of him adorable.

It was going to pinch when we said goodbye.

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Chapter 5

Ostor

The boob-ly pain was amazing, but I could tell it was having an impact on my mind. Thankfully, its buoyant effects didn't last long, because those around me had stopped joining in on my song.

"More champagne?" the steward asked, stopping beside us with a smile.

"Only if you'd like me to keep singing," I said gruffly.

"Any distraction is good, right?" He tilted his head to his left, where a toddler sat beside her mother. "She was fussy when she boarded, but your song worked a miracle." He tutted. "Flying can be hard on little ones. The pressure hurts their ears. Some are scared. But you made take-off a breeze for her. Thank you." He held up the bottle. "Are you sure I can't talk you two into more?"

"Not for me," Rosey said, and I murmured the same. While singing was enjoyable, I suspected those around me would not enjoy me doing so for the entire flight.

Singing had worked a miracle on me as well.

The plane continued onward, and I leaned over Rosey to peer out the window, my belly dropping away to nothing when I saw how far above the ground we were. But I was equally fascinated by the view.

“Orcs live beneath the ground, and it has its own beauty,” I told Rosey. “Iridescent insects cover the roofs of our caverns, and they generate light when they rub their back legs together. This helps us see our way. Like with your sun, they give us day and night. They rub their legs to attract a mate but only do so the equivalent of your twelve hours before resting and granting us darkness.”

“It sounds amazing.”

“A few random insects have not received the notification that they mustn’t rub all the time, and they’re our stars in the night.”

“Do they create white light?”

“Some. Others create every shade imaginable. I’ve seen images of your northern lights, and I suppose you could say they create ours.”

“Tell me about your family? You said you have brothers.”

“Ten brothers and six sisters.”

“Wow. That’s a big family.”

“It’s common with orcs. Our males have . . .” How could I delicately say this? While the youngling girl had fallen asleep in the seat opposite mine, others might take offense if they overheard. I leaned close to her ear and whispered, “We generate lots of cum.”

Huffing out a laugh, she looked up at me. “All guys say that.”

“It’s been studied. We generate at least three times that of a human male.”

“Because you’re bigger.”

“Not three times bigger,” I pointed out.

“Why so much?”

“To ensure fertility, I suppose.”

“Your spermies swim slowly?” she asked with a grin I found incredibly sweet.

“Perhaps. Twins are common with orcs as well. There are two sets in my family. Two of my sisters and two of my brothers are identical.”

“Your spermies split the egg, then.”

I didn’t know what that meant. I could only surmise what spermies meant. “You probably understand the science of this better than me. I’ve lived a simple life on my family’s sorhox ranch, and while I was educated as well as the next orc, our biology wasn’t something that interested me.”

“A ranch? Then you have experience.”

“My family has owned the same ranch since my parents mated. This is why some of my brothers chose to come to the surface and start a new business venture. I’m one of the youngest in our family and while we younglings could continue to work on our family ranch all of our lives, my older siblings have mated and they’re producing many younglings themselves. The ranch is enormous, a common thing when you consider how vast and lush our caverns are, but our family compound is getting crowded.”

“If you return to the orc kingdom, what will you do if there’s no room for you to

work at the ranch?”

I shrugged, because I was not returning to the orc kingdom. My place was by my mate’s side.

There was no way I could leave her. My heart would be shattered forever.

I watched as we soared above the ocean, marveling about that as well, and pointed. “We have lakes and seas as large as this one, though our water is darker, richer, like the soil here on the surface. Our waterways harbor small creatures that give off light as well, which makes the water sparkle.” Large creatures as well. Dangerous ones, which I was sure I’d find here on the surface.

“It sounds beautiful.”

“Perhaps one day, I’ll be able to show you.”

“I can’t imagine what it’s like. Humans are only allowed in your kingdom if they’re on diplomatic missions, correct? I haven’t heard of anyone traveling there for tourism or to visit with friends.”

Only human mates could go to the orc kingdom.

Would she be offended if I told her we were fated to be together forever and that I adored her already? I ached to share the emotions growing within my heart. It was common for fated mates to fall in love fast. Who’d resist when they found the person the very fates themselves had chosen for them to love? They were our perfect match, and while love could also grow between those who weren’t fated, it must feel like a dimmer image of the affection roaring through me now.

I kept my voice as light as I could because I had to tell her a fraction of what I was

feeling, but I didn't want to frighten her away. "Your hair flows like the deepest river in our caverns, dark but alive with veins of shimmering gold, resembling strands of a stone found commonly on our ground."

"That's . . . nice."

Why were her eyes sparkling with humor? I was being serious, though perhaps, I hadn't said enough to impress her. Tark was the poetic one in our family, but surely, I could come up with something that would show her what she was starting to mean to me already. "It also resembles the fires of Pyrathon that burn endlessly in some of our deepest caves. It moves and dances like gleaming shadows on dark stone walls. If I could, I'd bury my face in your hair and remain there until my dying day."

"Ostor," she croaked, and when she looked up at me, her sky eyes had darkened as if a storm lashed through her. "That's incredible. I'm not sure what to say."

"I hope I haven't upset you by speaking like this."

"Not one bit. It's beautiful. It makes me hurt in here." She pressed her fingers against her chest. "But in a good way."

A good way. My tension eased.

"I can see why you can't wait to return home," she said.

Not if it meant leaving her. "I may choose to stay with my brothers." They'd be surprised, since that wasn't my original intention, but how could I leave Rosey?

"Some of your people have left your gorgeous orc kingdom to settle on the surface," she said.

“To start a new life much like those who left your eastern shores many generations ago to travel across the vast, open spaces to build homes for their families.”

“There’s a lot to unpack about our western movement.”

“I’ve read about some of it, and it’s tragic.”

“Humans may try to do what they think is the right thing, but not all of us are good people.”

“Good isn’t an all-or-nothing thing. Each fragment of a person can be peeled away to reveal another facet, and some may be harsher than another, but that’s what makes us all unique.”

“You’re right.”

“All we can do is keep trying to be a good person and hope that others see the facet that shines the brightest.”

“You’re a deep person, Ostor.”

“You mean like our caverns?”

“I think you could make that comparison. I imagine there are depths in your world that still haven’t been explored, minerals and creatures that are equally wondrous and frightening. And each of them contains their own facets.”

“I believe you’re right.”

“Chicken, pasta, or the fruit and cheese plate?” The man who’d brought the boob-ly pain asked, standing beside us, holding an electronic device in one hand. “For your

meal.”

“I’ll have the fruit and cheese plate,” Rosey said, and I nodded in agreement.

“Anything to drink?” he asked.

“Just water for me,” Rosey said, and I agreed with that as well.

The male moved on to the mother and youngling sitting opposite us.

Rosey and I talked as we ate, and the more I got to know her, the more I could see the fates had been right in placing me on her path. She would one day agree, or I’d wallow in my own, non-boob-ly version of pain for the rest of my days.

“What do you do to provide for your life?” I asked. “And do you have siblings? Tell me about your family.”

“I work as a radiology technician, which means in the medical field. We use equipment to take images inside a person to help diagnose them with various illnesses or to identify breaks in bones. I run that equipment,” she said proudly. “It’s a great job. Everyone I work with is awesome. And I like helping people.”

“It sounds like a wondrous career.”

Her smile grew. “As for my family, my parents are still together, and I rent the apartment above their garage, partly because they give me such a great deal but also because I like being close in case they need me. They’re still very active and they work as well, but I’m sure they appreciate it when I mow the lawn or weed the flowerbeds. I love gardening, and that’s my only chance to do it. I have one sibling.” Her laugh burst out. “Not a twin.”

“Your sister—”

“Macy.”

“Who is marrying the male you hoped to form a mating with one day.”

“Yeah.” She stared at the remaining cheese on her plate before popping a round green item called a gripe into her mouth. She spoke around the bite. “I’m twenty-eight, and I thought I’d at least be in a solid relationship by now. Sometimes I feel like life is passing me by and if I could only leap onto the train, it would take me somewhere special. Instead, I remain at my job, living in an apartment that’s cheap but I don’t own, and the train keeps on chugging along, leaving me behind.”

“I’m thirty,” I said. “And I believe you still have a wonderful life waiting for you. One day soon, your mythical train will stop, and you’ll hop on board. What an amazing ride you’ll take after that.”

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Chapter 6

Rosey

The plane landed and after going through immigration and customs, we collected our bags and walked outside to find the person from the transport company holding a sign with my last name.

“This way,” the man said, swooping in to grab our bags.

His eyes widening and a growl ripping up his throat, Ostor lifted my bag against his chest and pawed at his waist, I assumed for the sword he’d mentioned he’d use to lob off Jacob’s head—if I felt the need.

“You will not remove this from her possession,” he snarled.

The transport dude reeled backward, his face blazing like he was about to have a heart attack.

“Hey,” I said softly, placing my hand on Ostor’s forearm. “Juan is just trying to help us with our bags. He’ll take them to the van and deliver them and us to our resort. He’s not trying to steal them.”

“I apologize.” Ostor deflated, his face darkening. Those around us who’d paused to stare continued what they’d been doing.

“Not a problem. I should’ve told you,” I said.

Ostor lowered my bag to the ground, and at my encouraging smile, Juan took the handle and wheeled it and Ostor's toward a vehicle waiting by the curb.

Sweltering sunshine greeted us beyond the awning, and I grabbed my sunglasses from my backpack, putting them on.

Ostor looked down at me, his eyes watering and tears already streaming down his face.

Aw, was he crying?

"Hey, it's okay," I said, spontaneously giving him a hug. I tried to, that is. He was so much bigger than me that I couldn't reach all the way around him. "No need to be upset. Juan's probably used to people acting protective about their bags."

"It's not that. It's the blazing bulb in the sky. Your sun." He looked up and glared at the sky, shaking his fist. "Why is it so much brighter now than it was before?"

"Oh, I see." I'd brought a spare pair of sunglasses, but like the rest of Ostor, his head was much larger than mine. How could we make this work?

"Do you know if your stores carry sunglasses big enough for orcs?" I asked Juan as he urged us to climb inside the second row of the van.

"Of course." He gave Ostor a guarded smile. "You'll find some there." He waved to a bar built into the outer wall of the terminal with a few items for sale on display. "I can wait."

"Thanks." I took Ostor's hand and hurried him over to a rack with all sorts of sunglasses, thankfully finding a few that had been marked "Orc". They were universally round, and they were going to make Ostor look like an overgrown, green

Harry Potter, but they'd give his poor eyes a break. I bought a pair and curled my finger his way. "Bend forward and I'll put them on."

He scowled at them before shaking his fist at the sky again but did as I asked.

I tried not to laugh. An orc in sunglasses should be a common thing, but he still looked different while wearing them.

Actually, he looked amazing.

"You brought a bathing suit, right?" I asked, picturing him wearing floral print shorts. Were his legs as lightly haired as his arms?

"I did not."

"Okay, then, we'll hit the resort's gift shop after we've settled into our room and get you some."

"I'll buy my possessions from now on," he growled.

"Consider the sunglasses a gift." I could understand clinging to one's pride. I also tried to pay my own way whenever I could.

"Thank you."

We walked over and got inside the van. Juan slid the door shut and climbed into the driver's seat, where he verified our resort and then started the engine.

"Beer? Water? Tequila?" he asked gaily as he drove the vehicle away from the terminal.

“No thanks,” I said.

Ostor shook his head and stared out the window. “Amazing. So different from where we come from.”

“We” meaning he and I, I assumed, and not the orc kingdom.

“Palm trees are pretty, though very different from evergreens, aren’t they?” I lived in the Boston area, though not in the city itself. “Do you have trees in the orc kingdom?” Vegetation must grow there, or they couldn’t feed their orc cattle.

“Some. They’re not as tall as these, though they have more branches.”

“Palms adapted to live in hot climates like this one and to weather tropical storms. I understand they’re quite flexible and can sway rather than break in a strong wind.”

“Will we experience such a thing while we’re here?”

“Thankfully, it’s not hurricane season, so I doubt it, though I’m sure we’ll see rain here and there. It’s common in the afternoon, but it leaves as quickly as it arrives, and the area steams after.”

He nodded and continued to stare, pointing out one thing after another as we left the airport behind and traveled to the resort strip in Cancun.

Juan pulled into the palatial place that was a complete opposite from how the locals lived, and stopped at the front entrance. Someone rushed over to the vehicle and opened the sliding door.

“Hola! Welcome to Azure Sands,” the man said with a big smile, gesturing for us to get out of the van. “Orc. An orc!” His brown eyes lit up. “Welcome, orc!”

Ostor grinned. “Thank you. It’s nice to meet you.”

“You as well. Come this way.” The man guided us toward the large glass entrance doors etched in gold. “Your bags will be brought to your room once you’ve checked in.”

Towering palms framed the entrance, as well as three-story cream-colored pillars and huge stone planters overflowing with bright tropical flowers. Lush hibiscus shrubs glided away in long rows on either side of the stone sidewalk that curved around to form a complete oval behind us. An intricately etched, tan-colored stone awning arched over us. Two-story carved statues of Mayan gods marched in long lines behind the shrubs. I could’ve remained out here for hours, studying each statue.

“Hola,” a woman said. She dipped close, offering us sparkling margarita glasses full of tropical drinks adorned with pineapple skewers. “Welcome to Azure Sands. A fruit drink?” Her eyes gleamed. “Or do you want tequila?”

“What’s teek-eela?” Ostor whispered out of the corner of his mouth. “Everyone keeps offering it. Is it a ritualistic drink here?”

“It’s another form of alcohol. Yummy alcohol,” I said with a grin. This was going to be fun. When my sister’s invitation arrived, I’d cringed and immediately started thinking up excuses for why I couldn’t attend. A sudden inability to expose my skin to the sun. Food poisoning. Or pneumonia. I’d call a few days before and fake a cough.

But Ostor was making this fun. With him as my date, I was looking forward to the long weekend. Such was the difference being with a great guy could make.

We lifted drinks off the tray, and the woman smiled and hurried to our right, her heels clicking on the gleaming marble floor.

“This way, please,” the man who’d greeted us at the entrance said, urging us farther into the enormous, three-story foyer with a round, arched roof overhead. A massive crystal chandelier cascaded like falling stars overhead, the lights making the entire room glow. Floor-to-ceiling windows bathed the room in sunlight on the opposite side of the lobby, offering sweeping views of turquoise pools and arched stone paths lined with vibrant, tropical vegetation. Red stone buildings etched in gold marched in rows toward the sea, with a huge swimming pool in between.

“Right over here.” While we sipped our drinks, our greeter escorted us toward the registration desk on our right, the gleaming wooden counter backed by an eye-catching red wall etched with gold designs. Such opulence. I’d never seen anything like it outside of TV shows.

He led us to the left of the counter, where we were greeted by a woman sitting in a wheelchair. She smiled and waved to the two plush chairs opposite her desk. “Please sit and I’ll check you in right away.”

We dropped into the seats, and I was glad they’d provided large seats for orcs.

“Name?” she asked in a cheery voice, and I gave her mine, Ostor murmuring his own.

She clicked into her computer. “Ah, yes. Perfect. A lovely room on the third floor, overlooking the pool. Here’s a packet that explains all we offer here at Azure Sands.” She handed it to him. “The concierge in your building will help with dinner reservations. All your meals are included. Breakfast and lunch are at the buffet other than the pool barbeque area where you can choose lunch options at the times noted in the booklet.” Her smile rose. “I see you’re part of a wedding party. If you choose to dine all as one group, let your concierge know, and they’ll ensure you have a table large enough to accommodate all of you at once. Your bracelets are coded to unlock your door.” She secured them around our wrists and cut off the excess string. “Room 3205.” Her hand lifted and a smiling man came over to stand beside us. “Miguel will

take you to your room and ensure your bags are brought promptly. I hope you enjoy your stay at Azure Sands!”

After thanking her, we rose and followed Miguel out of the lobby and up over one of the arched bridges, where we paused to look down at the pools on either side where fish swam among rocks and colorful vegetation.

“Amazing,” I said, spontaneously taking Ostor’s hand and giving it a squeeze. “Have you ever seen anything like this before?”

“Never,” he breathed, staring around with widened eyes. “There’s nothing like this in the orc kingdom.”

“If you’ll follow me,” Miguel said with a bright smile. “Your building is the third on the right. I’m sure you’d like to unpack and change into something better suited for our tropical environment.”

“Do you have a shopping area?” I asked, remembering that Ostor hadn’t brought swimming trunks. “We need to pick up a few items of clothing.”

“We do.” His gaze flicked down Ostor’s frame. “We stock orc-wear now, and I believe you’ll find we have a good selection.”

“Awesome,” I said, realizing that I still held Ostor’s hand.

He lifted our linked fingers and lifted them to kiss my knuckles. Heat flashed through me, and I had to remind myself that this wasn’t real, that he was only practicing what we’d discussed we’d do when my sister and others were around.

Miguel took us into our building and up to the third floor where he opened our door. We stepped into the air-conditioned suite. He showed us the closets in the short hall,

as well as the mini bar, dorm fridge, and coffee maker, telling us that the bar and coffee would be replaced daily. “Don’t drink the water from the faucet, though it’s safe to use to brush your teeth.” He pointed to two glass bottles standing near the coffee maker. “We purify our water here and if you need more, please let us know.”

He urged us into the bedroom with a sitting area and balcony beyond.

One bed.

One big, orc-sized bed.

“Oh, there’s been a mistake.” My cheeks blazed. “I meant to mention this in check-in. We need two beds.”

“I do apologize,” Miguel said. “But we’re still renovating to accommodate orcs. I’m afraid the double rooms only have queen sized beds which . . .” He scanned Ostor’s frame. “Your legs will stick off the end. It won’t be comfortable.”

Ostor said nothing.

My shoulders curled forward. “Well, um . . .”

“I’m terribly sorry.” Miguel’s face darkened.

The bed stretched across the room like an orc-size monument to bad decisions, and every second I stared at it made my skin itch with dismay. This wasn’t part of the plan. Fake dating, yes. Acting like a couple for the weekend, sure. But sharing a bed with a seven-foot-tall, palm-licking orc cowboy wasn’t on my agenda.

“Could you give us a minute?” I asked Miguel in as neutral a voice as I could manage.

Ostor's eyes remained locked on me, and he was probably wondering what was going on, but I couldn't meet his gaze right now.

Taking a breath, I grabbed Ostor's arm and urged him toward the balcony. "Let's check out the view." My voice was too bright, too perky. Without waiting for a response, I steered him out onto the balcony, sliding the glass door closed behind us.

Heat immediately wrapped around us like a tropical hug. The balcony had two massive chairs that catered to orc-sized bodies. They faced out toward the resort's teal-colored pool where people played in the water. Palapas dotted the sides of the pool like straw hats, offering shade to the lounge chairs beneath. On our left, the ocean sparkled under the late-afternoon sunlight, waves gently licking at the powder-white sand where a few people walked while others bobbed in the water.

The tension coiled in my shoulders loosened. The view was near postcard-perfect, and who could be uptight while staring at something like that? Though it didn't solve the situation waiting for us inside the room.

"So..." I bit my lip, glancing sideways at Ostor. "What do you want to do about the bed thing?" My words came out careful, like I was negotiating a peace treaty. I hoped my question sounded casual, though inside, panic fluttered in my chest as the lines between fake and real wavered too close for comfort.

Ostor shrugged, his tusks catching sunlight as he looked back at the bedroom, his eyes shaded by this cowboy hat. He'd removed the glasses while we sat in the lobby. "We can make this work, right?" His voice came out calm, like he hadn't just casually suggested we'd share a bed. "You're tiny. I'm big, but I can keep to my side."

The thing was, I wasn't scared of Ostor. The idea of curling up next to him didn't fill me with unease. It filled me with something that was part of the problem. A weird

cocktail of anticipation and something warmer, softer, kept sloshing through me. It was ridiculous for me to feel this way, because whatever this was, it wasn't anywhere near real.

But I'd invited him here. I'd set the rules, such as they were. I'd laid out the boundaries clearly in my mind. Sharing a bed was way past the line. It took fake dating into . . . something else.

I realized I hadn't answered him, so I forced myself to turn back toward the pool, trying to focus on the soothing sound of water trickling below us. "Yeah, sure. It'll be fine." My words came out more confident than I felt. My awkward laugh burst out. "I mean, it's only for a few nights, right?"

Ostor's large hands came to rest on the railing beside mine, his solid presence a comforting surprise. "If you're worried, I can sleep on the floor, or maybe that chair-thing."

"No way." I groaned at the thought of him scrunching himself up on the sad excuse for a sofa. More decorative than functional, it wouldn't even fit my body well, let alone that of a seven-foot orc. "And you're not sleeping on the floor." I met his eyes, finally, and immediately regretted it because the intensity there was too much for what we were supposed to be.

His smile came out slow; a tusky kind of grin that loosened everything inside me.

"Then we'll share the bed," he said, shrugging again, like it was the simplest solution in the world. "You're safe with me."

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Chapter 7

Ostor

Was Rosey worried I'd roll onto her while we shared a bed?

Worse, did she think I'd do something she wouldn't like, such as the male at the bar had done. Maybe ask her about her clothing or suggest she's sitting on smooth reflective glass, though I wasn't sure what the point of that was.

She didn't know me well. Talking about my favorite color and my family's business wasn't enough to assure someone that I wouldn't prey on them while they were at their most vulnerable.

I could lie on the sofa-ish thing in the area past the bed, though it was the size of a chair with a footrest.

Her shoulders loosened, and she gave me a smile that didn't feel fake. But then she sighed, and I braced myself for her to say she'd changed her mind, that she was going to go to the front desk and ask them for a second room.

"You know what?" she said.

I held my breath.

"The truth is, I feel safe with you. I trust you, maybe more than I should since we just met, but despite that, I feel as if I know you. I know you won't hurt me." Turning, she

leaned her back against the railing. “We’ll make this work. Thank you for being understanding about it.”

“You’re welcome.” I was grateful she no longer seemed distressed about this but worry gnawed on my bones for a completely different reason.

How was I going to lie beside her without accidentally touching her? The bed was big, but not large enough to keep my body from seeking hers while I slept. She was my fated mate, and I ached to tell her, to claim her. To be everything she could ever want and need both in and outside a bed.

I was teetering on the edge of something much, much stronger than mere friends.

We went inside, where Miguel waited politely.

“We’ll keep this room,” Rosey said with a cheery smile. “Thank you so much.” She gave him a slice of money, something new to orcs, and he left, passing another male tugging our bags into our room by the handles.

He placed them in the entryway and started to leave. This time, I stepped forward and tugged a nugget from my pocket, holding it out to him.

When I dropped it in his palm, he stared down at it before his eyes blazed. “This . . .”

“Not enough?”

“It can’t be real,” he said.

“It is. A small thing from the orc kingdom.”

The male barreled into me, giving me a hug. “Thank you. Anything you need? Ask

for me. Jose.” With a grin, he whirled around and sped from the room, me calling out thanks as I shut the door behind him.

Rosey gave me a bemused look. “What did you give him?”

“I assume we should give everyone who assists us a token of our appreciation?”

She lifted her case and laid it on the bed, unzipping it. “A tip?”

Tip . . . I noted the word in my mind. “Yes, that. You gave Miguel a slice of money. I didn’t bring slices with me, but I did bring orc tokens of appreciation.”

“He seemed pretty happy with whatever you gave him.”

I tugged another nugget from my pocket and held it out to her.

She stared down at it lying on her palm. “Please tell me this isn’t real gold.”

“I cannot do this for you because it is gold. We mine for . . .” I started to tell her the story we’d all been told to share, but didn’t feel comfortable lying to her. “I brought some with me.” That felt neutral enough and it was true. “Prior to arriving at the airport, I placed it in the bag they took from us to place inside the guts of the plane.” I waved to the open side pocket where I’d tugged the plastic bag out and stuffed into my pocket after we’d collected it from the long spiraling strip of material spinning around and around with bumping luggage.

“To avoid the metal detectors? How much did you bring?”

“Enough for incidentals.”

She shook her head. “Incidentals, huh? Maybe let me leave the tips and hold onto

your tokens of appreciation. You might need those when we get home.” She laid a colorful dress across the bed and lifted out a small bag decorated with flowers. “The staff don’t make much here, so it’s common to give them a tip to thank them if they do something for you, but gold nuggets would be considered too much.”

Not where I came from where it was like any other rock lying on the ground.

“Don’t worry about tips,” she said. “I brought plenty of ones.”

“I’ll reimburse you.” Why hadn’t I thought to study this online? Then I would’ve known about this tip and perhaps known how many slices of money to bring with me. “Orcs barter. We don’t use slices to pay for services.”

“Cards must be a new thing for you too. And again, I’ve got us covered. You weren’t expecting a Cancun vacation, and you’re doing this as a favor to me. I don’t expect you to reimburse me for anything.”

Yet I would. I’d find a way once we returned home.

She took her small floral bag to the bathroom and returned to finish unpacking in silence.

I followed her lead.

We’d just placed our suitcases inside the closet when her phone buzzed in her back pocket. She tugged it out and stared down at it.

“Are you going to look?” I asked.

“I know who sent the message.” She gazed up with stark sadness on her face. “Macy.”

“Your sister will be excited to know you’ve arrived.”

“Yeah.” Her lips thinned as she swiped into the message, reading it to me. “Are you here yet?!” Her gaze flicked to mine. “My sister adores exclamation points and she’s a little loud, so be prepared for her to gush about almost everything. She’s a sweetie, though. I love her a lot.” She continued reading. “Bring Ostor down to the swim-up bar! Come have drinks with us! Everyone’s already here, and it’s gorgeous!!!” Rosey dragged out the last word, injecting considerable enthusiasm.

I expected her to sag on the bed. Instead, she smiled, though it also held a touch of sadness.

“Three exclamation points, Macy?” she grumbled. “It looks like we’ve been summoned.”

I raised an eyebrow. “To what?”

“Macy wants us to meet them at the swim-up bar.” She rubbed her belly as if it pained her. “I’m excited to see my sister. Jacob? Not so much. I’ve avoided him since he’d pulled me aside with a forced look of regret and explained how he’d met someone else, someone who also happened to be the person I grew up sharing everything with except guys. Macy.”

“I imagine you’ll feel awkward at first. As if you must force the same cheer that’s part of your sister’s everyday personality.”

“Good point. I should pretend to be Macy to get through this.”

“Be Rosey,” I said, my voice scraping up my tight throat. “She’s amazing.”

Her smile didn’t last long enough. “I’ve managed to avoid him except a few times

where I pretty much bailed out of Mom and Dad's house as soon as I saw he was there. It was easy to avoid him the rest of the time, really. I refused invitations, worked late shifts to avoid get-togethers, and I even skipped Sunday brunch at Mom and Dad's to keep from seeing him. Now, there's no escaping it. No running. No excuses. Just the upcoming slap of reality." She rubbed her belly harder.

I walked over and took her phone from her, carefully placing it on the bed. Then I tugged her into my arms. "It will be alright. You're not facing this by yourself."

She sagged into me, and it felt wonderful to give her comfort. "I appreciate you being here, Ostor. I'd be a wreck if I was dealing with this by myself."

If I had my say in it, she would never deal with anything by herself again.

Stepping away from me, she sucked in a shaky breath and typed out a reply on her phone, sharing it out loud. "Be there in a bit. Ostor forgot his bathing suit. We'll grab one at the gift shop and then we'll join you." One tap, and she looked up. "Hitting send feels like sealing my fate."

"You're still tense."

"You got that from me, did you?"

I remained quiet, giving her a chance to process this.

"It's going to be alright," I finally said.

"Yup, it is." Her words came out breezy, and she said it with a fake smile, but it was a start. She'd see. I was here for her. Always.

"Bathing suit," I said, to distract her from her stress.

She nodded. “Bathing suit.”

We left our room and took the stairs to the first level, striding back to the lobby and locating a store with various clothing in a brilliant assortment of colors. I stood inside the entrance, my wide eyes taking in the display.

“Have you worn a bathing suit before?” she asked, frowning up at me, making me realize I must look like a bumbling fool who had no idea how to handle this situation. My family made our clothing from fabric my mother had delivered to our home. I’d never . . . purchased it before, and never in such shrill colors.

“I never wear a bathing suit when I swim,” I croaked, hoping she didn’t hear the uncertainty in my voice.

“What do you wear?”

“We cover our entire bodies,” I said in such a soft voice, I doubted she could hear. From what I’d seen, humans wore swim fabric that hugged only parts of their bodies or loose items like pants only without the full legs that would protect skin from sharp thorns or attacking creatures. And we wore dark clothing, never anything in colors like this that would draw a predator’s eyes. “I don’t know what to purchase. I worry I’m going to embarrass you.” And that was the true shame of all this. She was perfect while I was . . . not.

How had I thought I could come here with her and convince anyone that this lovely being by my side would choose me ?

“I’ll help you.” Her simple words held an understanding I didn’t realize I was seeking, and I told my heart to stop galloping on top of my belly.

I winced, not wanting her sympathy. A mate sought the other’s love. Their affection.

They didn't hold their hand as if they were a terrified youngling.

Yet in some ways, her helping was a sign of affection. She wasn't laughing like some people did when they interacted with an orc. She wasn't pointing. No, she was taking my hand and with a gentle smile, she was leading me forward.

"Alright." I could barely force out the word.

I allowed her to take me farther into the shop, the cool air washing over my exposed skin. This was no cave. How could the air suddenly feel cold? I peered at the ceiling, but didn't see anything that might cause this effect.

"You're going to look awesome in a swimsuit," she said, stroking my arm.

Heat spiraled through me from her touch.

It didn't mean anything.

She was just being kind.

But how I wished it was real.

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Chapter 8

Rosey

I felt bad that he was uncomfortable with the situation. Maybe he hadn't brought much money with him, and he was worried about how he'd pay for a suit. I mean . . . gold?

He couldn't hand over precious nuggets like that everywhere we went.

I'd handle this. He'd mentioned not bringing any "slices" of money with him.

Later, I'd assure him again that this was an expense-free vacation for him. Paying for what he needed was the least I could do when he'd come all this way just to pretend I was his girlfriend.

As for swimming, I reminded myself that his people lived underground and in what was basically a completely different world.

He said his people wore what sounded like full bodysuits to swim. Now he'd wear what might feel like almost nothing.

Ostor. Wet. Wearing almost nothing.

My mind spiraled at the image, and I was startled at the direction my thoughts were taking. Pictures of him in the water, his bare green skin glistening, fluttered through me. A flush burned its way up my neck, and I hurried toward a rack marked, "Orc

Sizes”.

“Oh-kay, let’s see what they’ve got, shall we?” I sorted through the rack. At least they had plenty of options. “No worries about which one. Whatever you like, it’s yours.” Would that reassure him that he wouldn’t have to pay? If not, he’d see when I insisted at the register. I tugged an orange pair dotted with pink hibiscus flowers and bright green palm trees from the rack and held it up in front of him.

Kinda cute. The green would look good with his skin.

Ostor stared at the fabric like I’d offered him a gown made out of seaweed. He frowned, his brow ridge scrunching in confusion, and his tusks shifted as he slowly spoke. “Is this what human males wear to swim? It’s . . . unusual. You’re sure males wear pants without the lower halves and in colors that might draw predators?”

Predators?

“Um, yes,” I said. “They wear suits like this.”

He continued to frown as he stared at the swim trunks. “And they are able to hold onto their lower legs?”

“Why wouldn’t they?” I wasn’t sure where he was going with this, but his uncertainty was sweetly endearing. “We can skip this one that would be better for a beachside luau.” After returning it to the others, I spotted one possibility and held up a plain black pair. “Maybe you’re not a flaming orange and pink flowers kind of guy. How about this one?”

“Perhaps.” His brow wedging further, Ostor slid the suits along the metal bar, finally tilting his head, his eyes lighting up at another option. He tugged out a pair in a bright blue with thin, wavy yellow stripes running across the fabric. His eyes met mine and

he grinned. “How about this? It’s calming, like water, and it may blend in enough that predators won’t notice. Is this something a human male might wear despite his ever-present fear of sacrificing his lower legs?”

I blinked, trying not to laugh because I had no idea what he meant. But with a clerk hovering nearby, listening in on everything we said, I would hold my questions for later. I would do and say nothing that might make this guy feel uncomfortable.

This suit would look good on him. Actually, with his size and build, the suit was going to look unfairly great on him.

“Yup,” I said. “That’ll work.”

I couldn’t wait to see him in this suit. We headed to the checkout, and after I’d insisted on purchasing it, Ostor grabbed the bag like he was handling precious cargo.

Back at the room, I entered the bathroom to change first. I shimmied into my floral two-piece bathing suit, leaning forward to wiggle my boobs into the cups. I tugged up the thankfully high waistband shorts. After, I stared in the mirror, turning this way and that, sucking in my gut and thrusting my boobs forward.

I looked . . . okay. No, no, that wasn’t right. I looked fantastic. Mindset, and all that. No one would point at me and say I shouldn’t be wearing a bikini. They’d better not or I’d snarl at them, because the best bikini was the one the woman chose to wear.

Why, then, did I feel exposed?

The seven-foot-tall reason waited in the bedroom. Knowing I was about to walk out in front of Ostor wearing very little clothing made me feel like I was fifteen again, dressing up for the school dance and fretting that the cute guy wouldn’t look my way. Maybe I should've brought a one-piece, because my belly . . .

“You look awesome,” I told my mirrored image. “He won't be looking at you that way.”

The thought made me sad, but I shored it up with the reminder that this was supposed to be fake. He wasn't going to stare at me like he wanted to eat me.

My heart flickering with nerves, I opened the bathroom door and eased out into the room. “You're next.”

He'd been sitting on the edge of the bed, but he rose when I appeared wearing only my bathing suit and slappity-slap flip-flops.

There wasn't anything more confidence-boosting than seeing a hot guy's jaw drop and his pupils dilate—unless he was so horrified he was going to back out of our fake dating agreement.

“Rosey,” he breathed. “You . . .” His gulp took a very long time to make its way down his throat. “Orc females do not wear clothing like this.”

Oh, no. Was I too exposed?

My spine quivered with dismay. “Are you telling me that because you think I'm not wearing enough?”

He stalked toward me.

My skin tingling in a delicious way, I backed until my butt squished against the long table holding the TV.

Sadly, he stopped before our bodies brushed together. Except, wait. I didn't want our bodies or anything else brushing together.

Did I?

My overheated body said maybe it did.

“Everyone should wear suits like this.” His gaze scorched a path down my frame, and heat swirled low in my belly. “You’re beautiful.”

“Thank you. Some women wear one-piece suits while others choose bikinis like this. They come in all sorts of colors and patterns and—” My mouth had taken control of my brain. I clamped my lips shut to halt the flow.

“It’s lovely.” The words rumbled in his throat. “ You’re lovely.”

“I appreciate that, Ostor.” Liking his words too much, I eased to the side and busied myself with grabbing the sundress I'd use as a beach cover-up off the bed and dragging it over my head, trying to distract myself from his heated gaze.

“I will . . .” He blinked a moment before he held up his bathing suit. “I will also don my bikini.” A frown crinkled his thick brow. “No, I’m missing a top.” His wry smile rose. “And breasts that will be covered by a top. Should we have purchased something similar to cover that part of my body?”

“Nope. Guys don’t wear bathing suit tops. Sometimes, they wear shirts that block UV rays, but not bikini tops.” Did I mention he was adorable?

“Orc females do not have round blobs of flesh on their chests,” he stated.

How curious. “They don’t?”

“When our young are born, soft tubes project from their chests to feed the orcling. No round blobs that I assume must do the same thing.”

“We have nipples in the center of the . . .” I refused to call them blobs. “Our breasts. Our young suck on our nipples and the milk comes out. Somehow. I’m not exactly sure about the biology of all that.”

He stared at my breasts with what I hoped was utter fascination but could actually be distaste. Did his look mean he didn’t find them sexy? In some ways, this was refreshing. In others, a total bummer. I’d never been a bounce-my-boobs-around-to-attract-a-guy kind of woman but mine were some of my best physical features. Good-sized but not too big that I couldn’t run without them smashing around. Large enough to give an average guy a handful to hold onto.

An orc? They must seem strange to Ostor.

Not that my blob-boobs mattered in this equation.

“Do you find the soft tubes sexy?” I asked as he passed me, aiming for the bathroom.

He turned, his frown deepening. “No. Why would I?”

Ah, interesting.

Ostor entered the bathroom, and I sat at the edge of the bed, unable to keep myself from imagining what would happen when we reached the pool. How could I act natural the first time I saw Jacob?

A few minutes later, the door creaked open, and Ostor stepped into the bedroom. I had to remind myself to blink. My eyes traced over him as he strode farther into the room like there wasn't anything awkward about him walking around half-naked.

The suit fit him well— very well. The blue and yellow could be considered bold, but the colors made his green skin pop in a way that was unfair. His broad chest was

made up of hard planes and endless muscles, and the fabric stretched against his thighs in a way that made me forget for a brief, silly second that this wasn't actually real. And his abs? Let's just say, if abs were a competition, Ostor would win gold, hands down.

He continued toward me while I stared at him like I'd never seen a half-naked guy before. His deep, dark eyes flicked over me nervously. "Is it . . . wrong? Should I wear something else?" His huff rang out. "I know it must be wrong to expose my lower legs in the water. Something is going to gnaw them off and I'll be left with stubs."

"No, no! Nothing will eat your legs." Well, we might need to avoid the ocean. "The pool is a manmade body of water. No creatures are allowed."

He raked his upper teeth across his tusks. "You're sure?"

"Completely. Your lower legs will be perfectly safe." As I studied his gorgeous frame, my heart did funny things in my chest. "As for the suit, you look great."

More than great. Astronomical. Like runway model gorgeous.

I was so out of my league.

"It's perfect," I added. "You'll stun everyone. They're going to think you're . . ." I needed to stop talking. Seriously. Whatever coolness I had left was dissolving into a mess at the sight of him.

Ostor's cheeks darkened, and his posture softened, almost awkwardly. He sent me a tusk-filled grin, a mischievous, satisfied expression that did things to my already weak knees. "Thank you, tiny one. Now, let's put on the show for your family, shall we?"

Ah, yes. This wasn't real. It was a show.

I didn't like how pitiful that made me feel. This was what I wanted, right? He wasn't going to offer me anything else.

With a sigh, I rose. My hands trembled already, and my belly kept flipping around in an unpleasant way.

His smile faded. "What is it? Again, is the problem me?"

"Nope. It's me. Only me." My swallow refused to go down. "I . . ." How could I explain?

He remained quiet. Waiting. Looming, but not in a threatening way. More like he was a solid presence in a storm I wasn't sure I'd survive.

"I'm just . . ."

He brushed my hair back, sweeping it away from my face with rough fingers. They stilled on my nape, warm and steady, and I forgot how to breathe.

"They're only people." His thumb grazed along my jaw to the front, where he tilted my chin up to make me meet his gaze. His black eyes shimmered with something I couldn't quite define, a sweetness I hadn't expected from a huge warrior-like guy wearing a cowboy hat. "You control everything, Rosey. Not them and not what they've done to you."

His words slid through me as if he already knew the shape of the pain I carried. Real or not, this moment felt unsettling. And something about that thought terrified me. But it helped too. His calm, his strength, it was seeping into me.

“Ostor.” I couldn't find the words. Not for this. Not for the way his gaze clung to mine and refused to let go, like he'd made it his mission to protect me, even from myself. Even from the ghost of pain twisting its way through my insides.

“It'll be alright.” His deep voice coasted across my skin like a caress. “You'll face them, but I'll be beside you.”

It was too much and not enough all at once.

Before I could talk myself out of it, I stepped forward, wrapping my arms around him. I sunk into his chest, seeking the steadiness only this male could provide.

It was a hug. A harmless hug.

Except nothing about us felt simple.

His heart thrummed through his chest, infinitely soothing, and it hit me like a gust of wind, how amazing it felt to be this close to him. His arms drew me in, and my anxiety melted away.

How was it possible for someone I barely knew to make me feel like this? He was comfort wrapped in sinew and heat and strength.

“Never forget. You don't need to carry this alone.” His breath warmed the top of my head.

I stiffened, my chest pulling tight. This isn't real, I tried to tell myself over and over. He was my fake wedding date. A pretend solution for a painful problem. But now I stood in his arms, feeling like I'd crossed an invisible line I wasn't supposed to get near.

Holding him felt like letting go, at least for a few seconds.

Maybe that's all I needed, just a few seconds of not thinking, not worrying, not picturing how I'd have to put on a bright, forced smile when I saw Jacob and Macy wrapped up in their love bubble a few feet away.

I pulled back, letting my hands drop to my sides.

"Thank you," I said. Odd, but I felt more awkward about whatever this was between him and I than about what I was about to face at the pool.

"Any time. You're ready?"

"Yup. You?"

His lips curled up on one side. "For you? Always." After stuffing his cowboy hat back on his head and his sunglasses on his face, he held out his hand.

I reminded myself that this was part of the show. He didn't truly want to hold my hand.

We linked fingers and left our room, taking the stairs down and walking out into the sweltering sunshine. We followed a path weaving through the lush vegetation, exiting out into the pool area. My heartbeat thudded harder than before, and the tropical-scented air felt too warm. It was one thing to imagine seeing Jacob again after all these months, but doing it while playing pretend with a male like Ostor towering beside me? A whole different ball game.

Reaching the front pool where Macy said they'd be waiting, I spotted them sitting on stools under a large stone awning at the swim-up bar.

My sister's voice broke through the throbbing music like a loudspeaker, her curly blonde hair bouncing as she spotted us from across the pool. "Rosey. Rosey. Over here!" She flopped her arm in the air as if we hadn't seen each other in years, her excitement a tidal wave about to bowl me over. "Come join us. Oh, Ostor. Nice to meet you! Bring him too."

The bulge in my stomach flipped over, and I gulped, tightening my grip on Ostor's hand as we took the steps down into the pool.

This was it. Showtime. All the fabricated confidence and fake smiles I'd been storing up had to work. Nothing would keep me from drowning in the moment unless I let it.

The water shimmered around us.

Ostor plucked his way down the stairs, leaning forward to study the teal tiles and the clear water, before he straightened and sent me a sweet smile. "You're right. No creatures to eat my lower legs. Amazing."

I couldn't imagine where he'd been swimming, but that must be why orcs wore full clothing when entering the water.

"No worries," I said, though I meant the words for myself as much as for him.

His fingers tightened on mine. "No worries."

When we reached the base of the pool, I stopped, and Ostor waited beside me.

"Ready?" I whispered.

His eyes meeting mine with genuine understanding. And for the first time, with this tall, green-skinned orc cowboy in a striped bathing suit by my side, I felt the bulge

that had been building in my belly finally giving way. Maybe, just maybe, this was going to be okay. Or as good as pretending could be.

With a deep breath, I waded toward them along with Ostor, his cowboy hat slightly askew and his massive hand never letting go of mine.

I wasn't walking into the dragon's lair alone.

I had Ostor by my side.

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Chapter 9

Ostor

When we got close to where a cluster of humans about our age sat on chairs suspended in the water and in front of a bar, the woman who must be Macy because she and Rosey had the same face, leaped off her seat. She floundered through the water and jumped into Rosey's arms. The two females laughed and hugged, and I was happy to see that they loved each other.

It would make this easier for Rosey, and that was all that mattered to me.

The two women finally pulled apart as the laughter died down between them. A tall male with light hair, his body toned, though not enough to wrangle even a sorhox youngling to the ground, waded over, his eyes landing on Rosey before flicking to me. I saw neutrality there—and a touch of concern. But it was Macy he reached for, wrapping an arm around her waist. He pressed a kiss to the top of her head.

The way his face softened around her made this obvious. He loved Rosey's sister. Without question. That, at least, gave me some peace.

But a quick glance at Rosey told another story. Her smile wavered around the edges. Hurt clung to her like a shadow. She held herself too stiffly now that the other male had joined us.

Of course it hurt. This was the male she'd had feelings for. No wounds healed that fast, even for the strongest.

Following the male's lead, I slid my arm around Rosey, tugging her against my side. She sucked in a breath, then melted into me. That's what it felt like. Like she relaxed, her body going soft and pliant. She fit perfectly against me. I bent my head and pressed a kiss to the top of her head.

Melty. That was the look in her eyes when she glanced up at me. Soft and warm, like something inside her was easing up.

At least I hoped that's what it was.

This wasn't entirely pretend. Not for me, at least. Everything inside me churned with the strange emotions that came with the mate bond. Things I couldn't control. Things I didn't want to control. I wasn't faking. Not with Rosey. Maybe we were playing at being a couple, but for me, nothing had ever felt more real.

Rosey cleared her throat, snapping the tension between us. "Macy, this is Ostor." She gave my waist a quick squeeze. "Ostor, this is Macy, my sister."

"Pleased to meet you." I offered Macy a grin. "I've heard a lot about you. Rosey talks about you all the time."

Macy's bright laugh broke through the air, and her eyes warmed when they turned back to her sister. "Oh, she does, huh? I'm glad." She leaned into the guy at her side and gave him a playful nudge. "Jacob, this is Ostor, Rosey's," her eyebrows went up ever-so-slightly, and her lips curled knowingly, "boyfriend."

Boy. Friend. I was no boy. I wasn't sure I was even a friend. But when one combined the words, they meant something much more than they did while separate. Rosey's boyfriend. The word sent a pulse of possession through me. But I stomped that feeling down deep because I didn't want to show too much. Not when the male Rosey had cared for was standing there, his eyes darting between me and her like he was

assessing my dominance, my determination, and my confidence. The latter was lacking most of the time, but this was a show, and I'd do anything to please Rosey.

Jacob's expression stayed neutral, but his gaze wasn't. It did that whole up-and-down thing a male sorhox might do when it measured a challenger. My protective instincts stirred, as if my body was lifting back hackles in a show of strength.

I forced my face to relax, to keep my expression easy. "Jacob, it's nice to meet you."

A handshake would've been the natural gesture for a human, but the problem was, my hands were locked around Rosey, and leaving her was not an option. So, I gave him a chin-nod, my gaze locking with his just like a male sorhox would do when he wanted to show a youngling he was quite willing to attack if threatened.

Jacob didn't smile, not exactly, but he gave me a short nod back. "You too. You're . . . with Rosey, eh?"

"Yes." My smile widened. "She's wonderful."

His eyes shot to her, and when I read a hint of protectiveness in his gaze, I relaxed. Somewhat. He'd still need watching.

Macy, completely oblivious to the undercurrents running between us, clapped her hands. "Come sit with us! Mom and Dad will be here tomorrow, but the rest of the crew has arrived! Drinks are flowing, the sun's shining. And we're in Mexico for my awesome wedding!"

Rosey exhaled, the tension draining from her in one whoosh. I was going to make sure she relaxed if it took everything inside me.

"Yeah, let's go hang out." She flashed a quick, almost real smile at her sister. We

trudged through the water together toward the cluster of humans lounging around the bar. The whole scene was bright and loud, everyone's voices mingling with the splash of water and clinking glasses. Shouts from those playing in the water behind us.

A cacophony of names flew around as one person after another introduced themselves. Some were males who'd stand with Jacob at the wedding, while the rest were Macy's female friends. Macy's crew, as she called them.

I couldn't keep track of them all. So many unusual names. They blurred into one long, exhausting string of syllables.

Rosey must've noticed my wince. She tugged at my hand, urging me to bend down close to her. Her lips brushed my ear, sending a jolt of awareness through me. "Don't worry about remembering everyone. I'll help you later."

I nodded.

"Okay, everybody. Tequila time!" Macy's voice boomed across the pool, and they all turned toward the bar.

There was that word again I'd heard in the lobby.

Macy signaled the dark-skinned male standing behind the bar, dressed in a black suit with a white shirt. He looked so formal, he must be the owner. Nice of him to join us, to welcome us with his bright smile. He laid a row of tiny glasses on the smooth, glossy surface and grabbed one of the many bottles lined up between us.

"What exactly is this teek-eela?" I asked, remembering how the boob-ly pain drink made me feel silly, how it made me sing. Everyone around us laughed or joined in with my song. If I behaved in a similar manner, would this group do the same?

“Tequila.” Rosey said it slowly and for my ears alone, and I practiced it until it came out seamless. She settled on a floating mound of a chair, and I moved to stand behind her, placing my palms loosely on her shoulders. She gave one of my hands a squeeze, leaning back against my belly and looking up at me. “Tequila’s a popular drink in Mexico. It’s made from agave, and it’s really strong. You shoot it.”

I stiffened, peering around, though I spied no weapons. “We’re not shooting anything.”

Laughter erupted from a group nearby, one of them letting out a snort loud enough to echo across the pool.

Rosey’s face tightened, her eyes narrowing into hard slits as she turned toward the offenders. Their laughter faded, and the ones who’d been chuckling suddenly became interested in their drinks, as if the floating foam garnish on top might explode and smack them in the face.

I hoped it did.

She was protective, my Rosey. My chest warmed at the thought. A pit of awkwardness tingled there as well. I hadn’t meant to say something wrong, but it seemed I did almost every time I opened my mouth. What did ‘shooting’ mean for humans if it wasn’t linked to combat? Human nuances slipped past me too often. By the fates, I needed to do better. I wanted Rosey to be proud to have me standing here with her.

I shifted my feet, trying to shake off the awkward feeling clinging to me like vines in a dark cavern. Thankfully, before the silence could stretch too far, the owner of this fine establishment nudged the tiny row of glasses filled with amber liquid toward us.

The others sprinkled white crystals on the web of skin between their thumb and index

finger and each took a slice of a green and white thing that could be a vegetable, a meat, or even a fruit.

I did the same, wanting to fit in.

Rosey leaned into my belly. “You don’t need to drink it.”

“I want to.”

“You’re sure?” At my nod, she grinned. “This is going to be an interesting experience for you, Ostor. I hope you like it.”

Why wouldn't I if I shared it with her?

She handed me one of the tiny glasses, and I wrinkled my nose at the sharp, pungent odor wafting from the glass. Golden, it appeared almost oily. Repulsive, if I was being honest, though I didn't state that to my new friends.

Humans drank such a thing? Or did they use it as a skin emollient or to clean dirty objects? It reminded me of the fermented rock crushoons we used for certain orc celebrations, the scent of their cooked bodies strong, almost acrid as the chef piled them onto our plates. Fortunately, the odor didn't come through in the taste. Perhaps this liquid was the same, repulsive smelling but with a delightful flavor.

Macy raised her glass high into the air, and her “crew” went silent. “Here’s to the weekend! To Mexico! To my wedding the day after tomorrow! To my soon-to-be husband, Jacob! But especially to my bestie, my big sis, my favorite person in the whole world—”

Jacob coughed, his face darkening.

She leaned back into his side. “You're special too, babe. I named you first, didn't I?” Her glass wavered, still held at eye level. “But this toast is for my maid of honor, my sis, Rosey. You'll get your reward later.”

Her friends grinned. Jacob curled around her to kiss her cheek, placated by the promise of a favor.

“To Rosey,” Macy said simply, her eyes shimmering as she gazed at her sister.

Cheers rang out from our friends and even Jacob, but all I could focus on now was my mate, whose eyes sparkled with happiness tinged with a touch of sadness that maybe only I could see.

“To Rosey.” The others upended their tiny glasses, draining them before smacking them back onto the counter. They followed that up with licking the white crystal that I'd already misplaced. I hoped it wouldn't cause problems with the pool water. Licking was chased by each sucking on the green and white thing.

Rosey watched me. Waited, most likely, to see if I would join in on the dubious fun. When her glass lifted, her brow furrowed while she glanced from me to my drink from behind her long lashes.

I'd follow this woman anywhere, even into the bottom of this tiny glass.

I raised it, cupping it carefully between two fingers. No one else seemed concerned about how sharp the liquid's smell was. To them, it appeared as nothing. It would be the same for me.

Rosey sent me a quick sideways grin. “Don't think too hard about it. Just drain it and get it over with. Follow it up with the salt and the lime.”

“I have misplaced my salt.”

“Here.” She held out the clear glass tube full of the stuff and carefully poured some onto my finger webbing.

I clinked my glass against hers before holding my breath and tipping the drink back in one swift motion, aiming to shoot it the way everyone else had.

The tequila cauterized my mouth and throat like dragon fire. It scorched my belly when it hit, and it was all I could do not to hurl it back up. While scattering white crystals into the pool may be allowed, I suspected vomiting tequila was not.

Coughing, my eyes dumping a river of tears into the pool, I gagged, barely holding the tequila down.

Rosey’s laugh burst, genuine and sweet, and she leaned into my chest, blinking up at me. “There you go, Ostor. Lick that salt and suck on that lime. This is almost like an initiation.”

I did want to fit in.

“Salt, salt,” the others chanted, followed by, “lime, lime”.

The salt made my mouth pucker, but I sucked on the lime, gasping at the sharp tang.

Somehow, the two made everything right, as if they blended together and neutralized the harsh drink.

Rosey's smile filled my world, and it exploded.

“You're doing good,” she whispered. “Thank you for giving this a chance.”

If she smiled at me like that every time, I'd shoot anything down my throat.

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:50 am

Chapter 10

Rosey

This was going to be okay. No, maybe better than okay. Solely because I was sharing this time with Ostor.

Somewhere between finding him adorable and sweet, to him singing on the plane, to him chatting with Macy's friends, I'd started to realize this felt much better than fake. Since I didn't know what to do about it, I gave up trying. I'd ride along with my orc cowboy to see where he took me next. We might end up galloping toward the sunset or drowning in a swamp, but if he was by my side, I'd follow.

We lounged in the pool for the rest of the day. Ostor sang after drinking the tequila. The rest of us did too. The sorhox song was catchy and fun.

As the sun dipped below the horizon, we left the pool and went to our rooms to shower and dress up, joining everyone at the entrance to the buffet. Ostor's eyes bugged when he saw all the food available there, and he pronounced salsa food fit for the orc king. This turned into a competition among the guys to see who could eat the hottest salsa at the buffet. I loved that they included Ostor in the game.

He blended in with our group, maybe even better than me, but I liked that about him too.

After, with the sun long gone from the sky and the moon shining down to light our way, we walked hand-in-hand along the stone path lined with palm trees and lush

vegetation, aiming for our building. We'd left the others at the entrance to the buffet, them heading to the beach bar for more fun, us feeling tired from our flight and eager to go to bed and sleep.

My skin prickled whenever I thought of lying beside him in the bed tonight. The bed was big, though. Would I even know he was there?

"I consumed an entire bowl of chips, salsa, and guaca-mosshie," he pronounced.

"Guacamole," I said slowly, repeating it until he got it right.

He stopped and turned me to face him. "Thank you."

I gazed up at him, admiring how gorgeous he was in his collared shirt open just enough to show his beautiful green skin, to his jeans that molded to his ass as if it had been carved by a master, to the way his tousled hair hung to his shoulders. He'd left his cowboy hat inside the room. "Why are you thanking me?"

"For many things." He stroked a strand of wayward hair off my face, smoothing it across my shoulder, his fingers lingering on the bare skin exposed by my spaghetti-strap sundress. "For bringing me to Mexico. I never would've come here on my own. For sharing your family and friends with me. For being kind enough to help me pronounce all these strange words. For not laughing."

I knew what he meant. I'd seen how his face flushed when those people laughed at him at the bar, and I'd wanted to smack them. Toss tequila in their faces. Tell them that mean girl was so twentieth century. Instead, I'd glared and swallowed the words. I had no problem telling someone off, but I hadn't wanted to embarrass Ostor further.

"I'll never laugh at you, only with you." My voice came out much huskier than I expected. But my emotions felt brand new, and I didn't know how to interpret them.

This wasn't supposed to be real, but already, I was beginning to wish that it was.

"And that's why I . . ." His gaze fell into mine, and he leaned close.

His lips brushed mine, soft at first, and tentative, like he was gauging my reaction. Something spun in the pit of my stomach, a need I hadn't realized was there.

The kiss started innocent enough, similar to the one at the airport. But this wasn't for show, because there was no one watching. This was for us alone. His body pressed closer, the warmth radiating from him intensifying with every subtle movement.

The hand that had lingered on my shoulder now trailed down my back, his rough fingers grazing through the thin fabric of my dress as if he was mapping out the curve of my spine. I swayed into him. A low growl rumbled in his chest, vibrating against mine, and I swore that sound alone could've melted me into a puddle.

Ostor's other hand cupped the back of my neck, pulling me closer, his big, solid body surrounded me like a protective wall. The rest of the world, our fake dating charade, my sister and Jacob, and even the tropical night air, faded until all I could think about was the way he was kissing me. The intensity of it left me breathless. Like he'd been waiting his whole life for this exact moment. Like I was the only thing that mattered.

I could've made him stop. Pulled back. Reminded us both that we'd just met. That this was pretend. A game. But I didn't.

Couldn't.

Instead, I leaned in deeper, my hands sliding up his chest to link them around his neck. His hair slid between my fingers, thicker than I expected, soft in comparison to the hard muscles under my palms.

His lips parted, urging mine to do the same, and the moment they did, his tongue swept in, stoking the heat burning through me. A tiny gasp escaped me, and he responded by pressing deeper, his fingers brushing the hollow of my jaw in a way that sent tingles down my spine.

This was no trial run. This was Ostor claiming me, giving me all the control if I wanted to step away. What kind of person would leave a kiss like this unfinished?

His hand shifted lower to skim along the back of my waist, the fingers of his other hand rubbing soft circles into the sensitive skin under my ribs. My breath caught as he shifted his angle, kissing me deeper, slower, as if he had all the time in the world to explore and taste me. As if he'd die if he didn't keep touching me.

Every nerve in my body felt exposed, wide open to this male alone. I was falling, tumbling into him, but I couldn't bring myself to care. His grip on my waist tightened, and I half-wondered if he was trying to stop himself from pulling me against him even more.

My skin heated where his hands roamed, but they stayed respectful, never venturing to intimate areas. Yet the way his fingers curled possessively around my waist sent a different kind of fire through me.

I wished my dress wasn't keeping us apart. Even so, the fabric might as well have not existed. His presence enfolded me, and I leaned into it, savoring every second.

He pulled back, his lips hovering close. His forehead rested against mine. I felt more connected to him now than I had with anyone in a long, long time, if ever.

“You taste like the very fates themselves,” he growled.

I wasn't sure if it was the wine I'd had with dinner or the way his words seemed to

strum every nerve in my body, but my lips trembled into a grin. “You’re not bad yourself.”

His hand slid up to cup my cheek, his thumb brushing over my bottom lip, gentle compared to the heady heat I’d just felt. His gaze, almost feral, met mine. Neither of us spoke for a beat too long. Instead, we stared, breathing each other in.

This wasn’t supposed to matter, yet every part of me was responding like it absolutely did.

“That was more than I’d planned.” My voice barely came out a whisper.

“In a good or a bad way?”

“Oh, definitely good.” Amazing. Stunning. Life-altering good.

His eyes softened, though the hunger I found there hadn’t waned. If anything, it pulsed stronger now. “This was real for me, Rosey.”

Those five words pushed against something locked tight in my chest, something I wasn’t ready to face yet.

“Yeah,” I whispered. There was no point pretending otherwise.

Could we go back after this?

I might be damned, but I didn’t want to go back, and I suspected he felt the same.

He took my hand, and we walked slowly to our building, taking the elevator to our floor, and entering our room. A flick of the switch bathed the hall in light.

“You take the bathroom first,” he said. “I’ll follow.”

Was he suggesting this to give me time to settle in bed, to pretend I was already asleep when he slipped between the covers? I didn’t know, and I didn’t want to ask.

“Thank you,” I said instead.

Inside the bathroom, I stared into the mirror while scrubbing makeup off my face with practiced moves. Beneath the splash of water, worry lingered like a shadow I couldn’t shake loose.

Rinsing my face, I massaged my cheeks, the cool water mixing with warmth from my skin.

“You do not look different,” I told my reflection as I toweled dry. It was getting pretty hard to ignore the turmoil in my chest that disagreed. It felt silly, but really, how could I not look different? Inside, everything had shifted. Whatever happened tonight had sent my world spinning.

How did one kiss, though a phenomenal, belly-fluttering kiss, do this? And more importantly, why did this fake wedding date situation feel too real?

Taking a deep breath, I peeled off my clothes, dragging on my sleep shirt that hovered just above mid-thigh. I left the bathroom, flicking off the light.

Ostor was sitting on the deck outside, his broad silhouette framed by the open sliding glass door. The night air stirred around him, playing with his hair. His back remained to me, but at the scuff of my bare feet on the tiles, his head turned, his gaze locking onto my frame.

Everything inside me flushed like I had a fever. I wasn’t sick. No, this was something

hotter. I felt alive and pulsing from one look alone.

He rose gracefully, considering how large he was. That simple movement pulled nearly all the air from the room, leaving it thick and swirling with something unnamed. Passing by me on his way to the bathroom, he said nothing, but the weight of his stare clung to the space he left behind. I wanted him to touch me. Just . . . graze my arm. Or my waist. Anywhere. I itched for it.

Snapping out of those thoughts, I went around the side of the bed and threw the covers back. I climbed in, shaking off whatever madness had filled my head without permission.

I reached over and turned off the lamp, letting the room sink into darkness. The muted sound of the bathroom door clicking shut mingled with the whirl of the air conditioner mounted above the hallway entrance. I stared at the ceiling, letting the cool air settle against my skin. Such an odd contrast to the heat swirling inside me.

Minutes passed. The sound of the bathroom door opening snagged my attention, followed by his soft, padding footsteps making their way to his side of the bed. Through the blur of shadows, I watched him pause before he finally climbed between the sheets.

The mattress dipped under his weight, yet we didn't touch. Close, but not close enough. Somehow, the space between us was the only thing keeping my sanity in place.

“Goodnight, Rosey,” he said in a bare whisper as if he really did think I'd already fallen asleep.

“Goodnight, Ostor,” I said, grateful my voice didn't come out strained.

We laid in place, both on our backs, me staring into the darkness while my mind raced with everything that had been said and unsaid between us today.

Such an amazing kiss, and I'd experienced two of them in the same day.

My breathing slowed after a while, and I shifted, turning on my side to face him. Ostor turned too, mirroring me. His dark gaze found mine in the semi-dark as if he could see me as clear as day. His deep black eyes bore into me with something tender. Gentle. A touch concerned.

Was he worried? No, there was no regret in his gaze. He'd told me our kiss felt real.

This might not be all pretend anymore.

My lips curled into a smile. I wasn't sure I could fight whatever was happening to us even if I tried.

He smiled back, giving me a slow, honest grin that warmed the air between us.

"We've done well, so far," he said, his voice gravelly. "I know tomorrow will be even better."

Before I could respond, before I could think about that, he reached across the gap and pulled me gently against his chest, tucking me into him. The warmth of him, the hard wall of his body, wasn't suffocating. It felt steady. Protective.

Perfect.

His hand found its way to my back, and he started rubbing slow, light circles, each one pulling out tension until my limbs softened. I released a breath and sunk into his embrace, letting it wrap around me like a safe harbor.

Whatever this was, real or fake, it made my worries melt away one by one.

Maybe tomorrow would be better. Maybe this long, wild weekend wouldn't feel like a mess.

Maybe this could actually be the start of something more between me and Ostor.

And with that hazy thought, I drifted to sleep.

Chapter 11

Rosey

“Wake, Rosey,” Ostor half-bellowed from somewhere close by. The balcony door hissed as he slid it open, and warm air rushed across my exposed skin. “The sun is rising and it’s glorious outside. The day is beginning, and we need to grab onto it and make it ours.”

“Not a morning person,” I mumbled, dragging the covers up over my head, burrowing down into the warmth left behind by his body. I’d slept in his arms all night, and it had been amazing. Almost amazing enough to crack open my eyelids and watch him move around the room.

He really was pretty.

With a roar, he leaped onto the bed, wrapping himself around me without, somehow, squishing me against the mattress.

In addition to being pretty, he was also agile.

“Wake up, tiny one,” he growled in my ear.

“Sleepy,” I groaned, snuggling deeper.

He bounced on the bed like a pup humping a fuzzy blanket, and that thought made laughter bubble up inside me. I peeled back the covers and scrunched my face as I

looked up at him.

He was close, much too close, actually. All I'd need to do was lift my upper body a smidge, and I could plant my mouth on his.

Pretty tusks too. They shone in the early morning light as if he'd recently brushed them.

"If you don't get out of bed, I'll . . ." His gaze fell on my mouth.

As if he'd flicked a switch, my body came to life, humming with need I suspected only this male could satisfy.

"If you keep looking at me like that, I might do something about it," he said gravelly.

"You're the one who jumped on top of me. Who humped me."

"When I hump you, you will know it, tiny one," he said in a sly voice.

"Prove it."

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Chapter 12

Ostor

If I were a wise male, I'd back away from Rosey, a woman I'd only known a short time, and resist her challenge.

My family had never called me wise. Clever in some ways, perhaps.

But never wise.

I should've climbed off Rosey. I should've resisted the wild lilt of her voice, the way her lips turned up in that mischievous smile that made my heart roar with yearning. But should didn't exist when you'd found your fated mate. No, that wisdom soared off this room's balcony, leaving only instinct and a bone-deep hunger for what was meant to be behind.

Rosey was mine.

Laughing beneath me, her breath feathered across my cheek. She waited for my next move. Her eyes appeared too bright, too knowing, plus thrilling in a way that pulled something feral from deep inside me. Her words, Prove it , rattled around in my skull, urging me to show her all a big orc like me could offer.

I hovered my mouth over hers, my voice low as it rumbled from my chest. "I don't only prove things, Rosey. I claim them."

Her breath hitched, a sharp intake that made me grin.

I brought my mouth down on hers. Soft at first, testing, as though her lips held the secrets to something ancient. It wasn't enough. It would never be enough. Our kiss deepened, and I couldn't get enough of how wonderful she felt against me. As if the moment our lips met, the very air around us shifted, shimmered, and settled into something amazing. There was nothing fake in this. I was a fire burning brightly, and I blazed for her alone.

She arched against me, her hands sliding into my hair, pulling me closer. A sweet moan slipped from her lips, and that sound . . . by the fates, I'd level mountains to hear it again.

Her small, human body fit perfectly beneath my large frame. I cupped the back of her head, dragging her up because too much space existed between us. The space needed to disappear. My other hand wandered, snagged by the heat radiating from her. I let it drift down to her waist, then lower along the curve of her hip where the hem of her sleep shirt had ridden up. Lush skin greeted me, smooth and far too tempting. It made something come to life inside me, a beast demanding more.

I would stop at nothing to claim every bit of this tiny female.

Our kiss deepened, full of need and something I'd never experienced. I wanted to devour her, but each stroke of my tongue, each sweep of my lips, filled me with a strange calm. This felt familiar, as if my body had known her all my life. The way her mouth worked against mine, the way her hands slid through my hair, it was like she had somehow been made just for me.

I slid my hand higher, teasing it up to brush against the swell of her breast.

I lifted my head, watching her face as I touched her through her clothing.

The softness on her chest shot fire through my veins, making me hesitate for the first time. Not out of fear.

I was embarrassed .

What kind of male calls something this perfect a blob?

Rosey was soft where she should be and curved like a dream that was too beautiful to hold onto. Yet she was somehow mine to touch. Orc females had nothing like this, nothing warm, pliant, or impossibly desirable on their chests.

There was nothing remotely sexual about their nursing tubes.

But humans . No, Rosey .

Infinitely sexy.

For the first time, I understood why human men worshiped their females' chests. Nothing could tug at my need more than the press of her breast against my rough hand.

Her moan urged me to do more.

Cupping her breast fully, I thumbed the nipple, the small peak I'd seen beneath her swimsuit the day before. It strained against my touch, tight and perfect. She arched into my hand, soft whimpers falling from her mouth.

All I wanted was to lean down and taste it. To shred her sleep shirt with my tusks and expose her to my view. My touch. My tongue. I'd take that small bud into my mouth. Something wild inside me demanded it.

“Ostor,” she whispered, my name full of wanting. Her voice, roughened by the pleasure I was giving her, made possessiveness burn through me.

Her hands trailed up my back, curling over my shoulders, her nails grazing enough to make my body sing. Everything about this simple act of touching each other felt like a start of something bigger.

My hand slid down her side, trembling slightly as I reached the hem of her shirt. The fabric felt delicate beneath my fingertips, just like this woman I adored too much already. I hesitated, my breath catching as I waited for any hesitation on her part, any indication that this was too fast.

But it never came.

Her blue eyes met mine, wide and trusting. She didn’t stop me. She didn’t flinch. Instead, her lips parted in surrender, and her throat worked around a swallow. Heat surged through me, the sheer weight of her unspoken permission filling me with a craving I couldn’t deny.

I lifted the edge of her shirt, inching it up slowly. The fabric brushed against her skin, exposing more and more of her soft belly, her ribs. The sweet dip of her waist that made my mouth water in anticipation. My movements were hesitant. Reverent. Like I was unwrapping a gift too precious to touch, too pure to be mine. But it was, she was, and I didn’t intend to waste a single second.

When the shirt finally lifted enough to reveal her breasts, I froze.

By the fates.

Beautiful .

Rounded, firm, but still somehow soft as they lifted and fell with her breathing. Breasts , not spiraling tubes. Not blobs. No, no, not that at all. They were perfect, beyond anything I could've imagined. A pang of embarrassment tunneled its way behind my ribs because I'd pretty much brushed them off as appendages on her chest like an orc female's tubes.

They had buds at the tips, just like she'd explained. And I'd felt . Hard and tight and much too tempting.

I resisted no longer.

I circled one nipple with my thumb, watching in fascination as it responded to my touch, tightening under my hand. Her back arched off the bed, a soft gasp escaping her lips. That sound? It killed me.

Leaning down, I kissed the swell of her breast, savoring the way her skin tasted. Warm and sweet. Rosey let out a breathy moan, the sound weaving through me like a spark destined to set me aflame. I moved higher, closing my lips over the nipple, sucking.

By all the ground-covering beasts in our kingdom . . .

Her nipple was a treasure. Hard beneath the warmth of my tongue but still somehow giving. A sharp zing coursed through my body, as if it wasn't just her pressed to my lips but her very essence. I knew no other taste but hers would ever compare.

“Oh . . .” She sucked in a shaky breath, her fingers curling through my hair, tugging on it as if this was her only hold on reality.

I flicked my tongue over the crest of her nipple, grinning at the way her body trembled beneath me. She was incredibly responsive. Alive in every sense, pulling

me in deeper.

I sucked gently, shallow enough to feel her pulse thrumming against my lips. I kept my other hand on her, threading my fingers through the peaks and valleys of her other breast and feeling the soft, warm pressure as she arched into my touch. She wanted this as much as me. We were becoming entangled in something beyond our control.

The way she reacted to me? There were no words. Sweet noises fell from her lips as if she was unable to hold back how much she craved this, craved me .

I wanted to lose myself with her, tearing off pieces of my sanity as I went. If I thought about this too long, if I tried to remember that this was supposed to be fake, I'd question everything. Dive back into how dangerous this balance between pretending and feeling already was. But there were no obstacles right now. Nothing was preventing me from seeking what she had to offer.

I took in the rise of her belly as it fluttered with excitement. Unable to resist, I kissed down the soft curve, tracing her tender skin with the same reverence I'd used on her breast. The sweet scent of her filled the air, a mixture of the floral essence I'd come to associate with her and something distinctly her own.

Arousal.

Moaning, I dropped my mouth onto her skin and kissed lower.

I trailed my mouth across Rosey as if she was sacred ground. I reached the crease where her thigh met her torso and paused, looking up at her. Her eyes were hooded with desire, her lungs raging with short gasps. She was beautiful, laid out before me like this.

Me . Ostor.

“Are you alright?” I asked, my voice rough with need. “Do you want more, or should I stop? I want to. . .” My swallow took a long time to go down, “I want to taste you.” I searched her face for signs of discomfort, but all I saw was trust and the beginning of bliss.

She nodded, her voice a whisper. “I'm alright. I want more.”

A growl rumbled in my chest. She was giving me permission to explore her in the most intimate way. Gratitude and honor surged through me. This wasn't only about physical pleasure; it was about trust and connection, things I sought from this woman above all else. What had I done or said to make the fates believe I was worthy of this gift?

I kissed along the crease of her thigh, then slowly spread her legs wider. I took a moment to admire her, to appreciate the sight of her laid bare before me. She was already wet. The fact that she was wet because of me , because of what I was doing to her, filled me with pride and awe.

Leaning down, I kissed along each of her thighs, taking my time, savoring the softness of her skin, her heady scent. She trembled beneath my touch, her breath hitching with each kiss. I was determined to make this good for her, to show her how special she was to me already.

As I moved closer to the juncture between her thighs, the scent of her arousal filled my senses. My cock kicked forward, as eager as me. I wanted to bury myself in her, to lose myself in loving her forever. But I held back, taking my time, wanting to draw this out for as long as I could.

When I finally reached her core, I hesitated, looking up at her again. She watched me, her eyes dark and hooded. I leaned in, dragging my tongue across her opening, groaning at how amazing she tasted. She was warm and wet and sweet. Nectar from

the fates themselves.

I explored her eagerly, discovering the places that made her react with gasps and moans. I wanted to know every bit of her, to remember her taste and scent. My goal was to give her pleasure unlike any she'd known before.

As I teased her sensitive spot with my tongue, I gently slipped a finger inside her. Her immediate moan made me smile, encouraging me to coax more sounds of bliss from her. She was tight and warm around my finger, the sensation almost overwhelming me. I alternated between sucking and stroking her with my tongue, gradually increasing the pace as her cries became more intense. I moved my finger, searching for that magic spot inside her that would send her over the edge.

Her hips rocked up against my hand and mouth. She was close, her body tensing and her breath coming in short, quick gasps. I wanted her to reach her peak solely from my touch.

I increased the intensity, targeting her most sensitive area. At the same time, I moved another finger in with the first, ensuring I hit that special spot with each slide. Her body tensed, on the brink of release.

Then she surrendered, climaxing with a cry, her body shaking, and her inner muscles squeezing my fingers. I continued my movements, intent on extending this for as long as I could.

When she finally came down, she sagged on the bed, her thighs splayed wide and fingers clenching the covers.

As I looked up at her, pride filled me. I had done this for her. I, Ostor , a male who possessed nothing distinctive or special, had made her feel good, had made her come.

Rosey had let me in, had exposed herself to me in the most vulnerable way. We were building something real here, something that could not be dismissed.

We weren't just two strangers pretending. We were two people with open hearts, two people who had a chance to find something meaningful in each other.

I moved up her body, kissing her belly and breasts, before dropping down beside her. I held her, my eyes smarting, though not with sadness.

Such joy filled me.

There were no words that could express the feelings roaring through my veins, so I said nothing. I wrapped my arms tighter around her and prayed to the fates and whoever would listen, begging them not to steal her away.

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Chapter 13

Rosey

As I brushed my teeth, showered, and tugged a sundress over my head, stuffing my feet into my sandals, I kept grinning.

Ostor . . .

I didn't know what to make of what had happened this morning, but I'd spent so much time analyzing what I had and hadn't done with Jacob to do it all over again with my new sorta boyfriend. There was nothing wrong with letting this play out however life intended.

When I emerged from the bathroom, I found him sitting on the deck, a cup of coffee in his hand.

"Yum." I swiped it from him and with a laugh, took a long drink. I gagged and coughed, smacking my chest, my eyes watering. "What . . ." I croaked, glaring down at it. "What is this?"

"The coffee smelled weak, so I emptied many of the tiny containers into my cup along with the pale brown water. I strained the contents of the containers out when they kept catching on my tusks, but did I miss some of the grit?" He looked up at me with complete innocence.

"They're called pods, the insides are called coffee grounds, and usually, one pod is

enough per cup.”

“Not for me.” He fed me a tusk smile. “In case you haven’t seen, I’m strong. It takes a hearty drink to maintain my power.” He flexed his arm, making an impressive muscle I wanted to run my tongue across. Would he let me?

He totally would. And because I knew that for a fact, I didn’t do it. Coming from his magical tongue and fingers was one thing. Licking him in return was another bridge I wasn’t yet sure I wanted to cross. We barely knew each other.

How long did it take to decide if someone was “the one”? I’d heard others say they knew the instant they met the other person.

Was that what the dreamy feeling in my heart was trying to tell me?

Macy said she knew the moment she met Jacob. It was clear he’d felt the same.

And that thought made my smile fade. I handed Ostor his mug and glided my fingers across his shoulder, because I didn’t want him to think I was upset with him, I went to the hallway and made myself a cup of coffee—using only one pod.

He passed me in the hall, his big hand stroking along the back of my waist as he strode into the bathroom, shutting the door behind him.

I’d finished my drink by the time he emerged, his hair wet and tousled, dressed in a snug white t-shirt and his swim trunks. After plunking his cowboy hat on his head, he joined me on the balcony, where he drained the rest of his coffee and stared toward the ocean.

“Let’s have breakfast at the buffet,” I said. “And then we can take a walk on the beach.”

“I’d love that.” He shot me a shy smile, as if he was as unsettled about what we’d done in bed as me, but also like me, he didn’t know how to put it into words.

And maybe we shouldn’t. We had three more days together. We’d talk, have fun, and when we returned home, we could decide if we wanted more.

Although, I was beginning to believe I wanted much more from Ostor than one long weekend.

We ate breakfast and strolled through the resort, aiming for the front and the turquoise water of the Gulf of Mexico.

When we reached the beach, we left our sandals near the outdoor shower, tucking them beside neatly stacked others, his comically larger than all the rest. He wasn’t the only orc here, just the only orc cowboy I’d seen so far.

“Do you always wear that hat?” I asked, squinting up at him before sliding my sunglasses off my forehead to cover my eyes.

“I don’t have any other hat to cover my face.” He stroked his fingers across my cheek as if the gesture was completely natural. No one was watching, so he didn’t have to pretend.

And I loved it.

“Would you rather I didn’t wear my hat?” He tugged it off and swept it out, giving me a cute bow. “My oldest brother, Dungar, insists all the gals love a male in such a hat.”

“Gals, huh?”

He nodded fast.

I grinned because he was right. I couldn't stop staring at him, touching him, though I kept my gestures as casual as I could. Did he feel the same way? “You do look amazing in your hat.”

He placed it back on his head. “I won't wear it to the pool today. I don't mind if it gets wet. It's a working hat. But I noticed no one else was wearing one. They're wearing . . .” He frowned. “I don't know what that style of hat is called. It's snug to the head and has a brim across the front shaped in a half oval.”

“Baseball cap. We can get one of those in the shop.”

“Only if you allow me to pay this time. Not only that, but I also want to buy you something special. Something you can keep and look at or wear and . . .” His swallow took a long time to go down. “Something that'll help you remember.”

I had a feeling I was never going to forget this weekend and Ostor. “Alright.” I tried to keep my voice breezy, but it came out in a croak, because emotions kept lashing through me. I didn't know what to make of them. I'd liked Jacob and look where that got me.

What would keep Ostor from doing the same thing?

The second the thought went through my mind, I stomped it flat with my heel. The two males were completely different. While it hurt when it happened, Jacob was honest with me. How could I be upset when it was clear he adored my sister? I wanted Macy to be happy, and that happiness was linked with Jacob.

When had I started to accept that fact and find peace with it in my heart?

Not long after I met Ostor.

We stepped onto the beach and paused.

“This place is paradise,” I breathed.

The soft, powdery sand was speckled here and there with tiny pearlescent shells and fragments of coral that glinted in the morning sun. Grains moved like silk against my soles, and the air felt warm but not hot, carrying with it the familiar briny smell of salt water, fresh air, and seaweed.

Ostor stepped beside me, rolling his muscular shoulders as if the ocean breeze was massaging the tension out of them. He bent to touch the sand, sifting it slowly between his fingers, studying it as if he was determined to memorize its texture. “The surface world is full of wonders, isn't it?”

“Yeah.” I smiled and watched as he brushed the sand off on his thighs, sunlight glistening on his green skin. “Does the orc kingdom have similar places?”

“Somewhat.” His brow furrowed. “The ground below isn't bright with sand like this.” His attention dropped to the gritty white grains. “In our kingdom, the sand is darker, almost black, and small crystals mixed in make it shimmer like polished silver. This . . .” He gestured with his hand. “It's as if the earth stretches out to meet the brightness of your sky.”

It was hard to explain how it felt, hearing him talk like that, as if everything was exciting because it was my world and not his. Warmth settled somewhere deep in my belly, and I sent my gaze to the horizon where the sky met the endless expanse of ocean, blending from turquoise to indigo to the palest of blues.

He reached for my hand, pausing as his fingers brushed mine. I looked up, catching his eyes—dark, questioning. Vulnerable.

Did he think I'd shrug off his touch?

A part of me wanted to say something light, to pass this off like touching, looking at each other, and what happened in the bedroom this morning didn't pull at my heartstrings. But trust flickered between us, him offering, me accepting. That mattered more than the overanalyzing thoughts pinging around in my head.

With a smile that held some of my own vulnerability, I wove our fingers together, squeezing his hand.

His gaze softened. My heart gave a little kick, and something akin to warmth unfurled there too. It was too soon for more. Too early to say what this feeling was. But if anything, I knew Ostor wouldn't hurt me. And that was enough for now.

He tugged his sunglasses from his bathing suit pocket and slipped them on to shield his eyes, and we walked down toward the ocean, our footsteps scrunching on the sand. When we reached the waterline, I stared at the vast beauty. A wave rushed in, washing over my toes, making me grin. Cool water swirled around my ankles, splashing before retreating.

"It's colder than I expected," I said, a freeing laugh rising up my throat.

Ostor contemplated the water as it swept across his feet. "Not too cold." He took a step forward, letting more wash over him, his green toes wiggling in the buffeted sand. "So strange. It feels alive."

I joined him, the water splashing against my knees. "Alive?"

"Yes." He watched the next wave roll in. "We have vast rivers. The water flows endlessly there. But there's nothing that moves like this in the orc kingdom. It roars in and then backs away, only to come at us again. Alive, like a fluid beast."

I waved toward the slice of a moon nearly hidden in the sky. “Tides create the rush of water up the shore, the waves, but don't ask for an explanation beyond that. As I said, science has never been my forte.”

He nodded. “Our lakes sparkle from the minerals coating the bottom. but the currents move sluggishly compared to this. They never catch you by surprise. Can you turn this off?”

I laughed, picturing him trying to wrestle with a stubborn current or the moon itself. “It's endless, timeless. The water flows up and retreats. Like life, I suppose. We're born, we live, and we die. Then the cycle is repeated with someone else. The ocean's got a mind of its own. You can't tame it or slay it.”

“I don't think I'd want to,” he said, half to himself, as the next wave hit our legs. “It fights, but there's a beauty to its battle.”

We turned and walked parallel to the water, the waves teasing our feet. On our right, grand resorts gleamed and palm trees swayed in the breeze. Fellow tourists strode along the shore while others jogged on the packed sand. Couples strolled hand in hand like us, and kids holding bright plastic buckets and shovels built fortresses in the sand. The wind kicked up little gusts, shooting warmth around us, and I could tell today was going to be another scorcher.

Peace settled over me as we took it all in.

“So, what do you think?” I asked, glancing up at him.

He didn't answer right away, his gaze locked on where the ocean met the sky, his fingers snug around mine.

“I think . . .” He smiled a grin so unguarded it made my chest expand. “I think it's

nice to be here because I'm with you."

For once, I didn't overthink my response. I let the feeling settle, let this moment linger to give it what it deserved.

"Yeah," I said, squeezing his hand. "It is."

Sunlight glimmered on the water's surface, casting the world below in shifting silver and blue, so bright I still had to squint behind my sunglasses.

There was something about walking here with Ostor, something about just . . . being with him alone, that did something wonderful to me, though I couldn't define what the feeling might be. It didn't need a label. I didn't need to think about what came next or try to figure out where whatever this was between us could be going.

For once, I was okay with not knowing.

I'd been holding onto anxiety about this weekend, about Jacob and Macy, about the whole awkward situation of faking a relationship with a guy I barely knew. But walking with Ostor made all that drift away.

We continued in comfortable silence for a while, swerving around clusters of people, tracing the tide's edge as it ebbed and flowed against the pearly white sand.

As we passed a group of kids splashing in the shallows, Ostor tilted his head, curiosity creeping into his voice. "What do your sea gods think of all this water?"

"Some cultures have myths about sea gods, but most people just come to enjoy the beach without thinking about it that way. It's a place for relaxation, family time, fun."

"Hmm." He squinted out at the waves, as if searching for a deity shrouded

somewhere in the foam.

We turned to head back, but he stopped walking, shifting around to face me. He tucked a strand of my hair behind my ear, his fingers lingering on my cheek. “Thank you again.”

“For what?”

“For this. For everything. I know this weekend isn’t what you expected, but I want you to know that you’ve made it something more. Something special.” His brow pinched, like he was trying to find the right words. “The orc kingdom is far, far away, but I don’t believe I’ve ever felt so at home.”

My chest tightened in the best way possible, and I held his gaze and smiled back.

“Me neither,” I whispered.

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Chapter 14

Ostor

We returned to the resort and sat on lounge chairs in the shade near the pool, watching people play in the water. Staff came by and offered us drinks of every color and taste imaginable. After tequila, I was cautious.

Mary of the blood was not a favorite.

But I adored the pee-pee-na cool-ada, which was as chilly as the “cool” part of its name. Although . . .

“Please tell me there’s no true pee in this beverage,” I said, studying the foamy white drink in the tall glass topped with a smooth stick piercing a round red blob and a square of peen-apple. I’d tasted peen-apple at the buffet at breakfast, and while I was grateful not to taste pine, or pee, for that matter, in the fruit, I also didn’t taste apple.

Why did humans give everything names that made no sense?

“It does not,” Rosey said. “You’ll love it.”

“As much as tequila?”

“Even more.”

“Hey, there you are!” An older human couple strolled toward us, the female dressed

in a dress splattered with big pink flowers and the male wearing a button-up, short-sleeved shirt that matched over teal-colored swim trunks.

They marched over and stood in front of our loungers, the woman's warm gaze gliding from Rosey to light up when it reached me.

The male did the same, studying us both, me most of all.

"Mom," Rosey said, rising from her lounge chair. "Dad. You arrived."

"Not long ago, sweetheart," Rosey's mother said. "We unpacked and came down to the pool, hoping to find you or Macy." She peered around. "Where is your sister, my gorgeous soon-to-be-blushing-bride? Where's Jacob?"

"I assume still in their room," Rosey said. Her smile slid to me. "Mom, Dad? This is Ostor Bronish, my date for the weekend. Ostor? These are my parents, Brandon and Jenny."

"Nice to meet you, Ostor." Jenny leaned close to Rosey. "You didn't tell me you had a new boyfriend. He's cute."

Rosey's smile widened. "I keep telling him that, but for some reason, the thought of being cute makes him glower."

Not too much. If "cute" came with a tease or a kiss, I was all for it.

Rising, I extended my hand toward Brandon in the human way of greeting. "Welcome to Cancun."

"Date for the weekend?" he barked. "What are your intentions toward my daughter?"

My smile wavered, but I shored it up with a jolt of confidence I didn't feel.

"Dad," Rosey sighed, rolling her eyes. "Please. I'm twenty-eight years old. I don't need you vetting my dates."

Her dad winced. "There's no harm in asking." His level gaze met mine. "I don't want you taking advantage of my daughter."

"Dad!" Rosey slid between us. "Stop."

"Come on, now, Brandon." Jenny sent me a warm smile as she pinched the sleeve of her mate's shirt and tugged him to her left. "Let's go find a palapa before they're all taken. It's nice to meet you, Ostor. Rosey?" She winked. "Fill me in later."

With that, they walked away, rounding the pool and dropping their things on two lounge chairs with a palapa overhead providing shade.

"Sorry," Rosey said. "Dad can be protective."

"No problem." I'd find Brandon later and assure him that my intentions were good. While I'd licked his daughter this morning, and I was eager to do more, I wouldn't take advantage of her. He'd no doubt be reassured when he saw the mating marks on our arms.

Something I had to fill Rosey in on soon. She must've noticed her own.

"Thanks for being gracious," she said, and we sat again, her reading on her phone, me dozing in the chair.

Her parents joined us for lunch, her mother sitting beside Rosey, whispering and shooting me big grins, her father watching me with a speculative gleam in his eyes.

As for Macy and Jacob, they strolled into the dining area as we were finishing, a good thing for me, because, when they joined us, Rosey's parents stayed to chat with them while Rosey and I slipped away.

We went to the shop and bought me a based-ball cap in orc-size. Now I could fit in, and that made me feel less awkward. I couldn't mask my larger-than-everyone-else frame, but I could dress and behave like all the human guys did.

Before we left the shop, I guided Rosey around, lifting one thing after another, hoping to find a special treasure that would remind her of me. Then I saw her gazing with longing at a rack of pretty dresses and urged her over to them.

She tugged a pale blue one out but returned it to the rack quickly after spying the dangling tag. "Too much."

"Nothing is too much."

"You're a cowboy. You and your brothers are starting a new business. Perhaps things are tight?"

"To some extent, but not truly." How could I tell her that while the king had helped fund our new venture, all of us were considered wealthy by human standards. The sparkly rocks we tossed around when we were kids or collected to melt down and turn into plates or items to put on display were made of something humans treasured above almost everything else.

Gold.

The initial orcs who formed the treaty with humans saw right away how much humans treasure this mineral, and we universally decided to keep secret the fact that it lay on the ground for anyone to pick up.

When an orc moved to the surface, they brought a small amount with them, implying that we'd worked hard to extract it from stone and that it was as rare below ground as it was up here. But we all slowly trickled in enough to make us wealthy by human standards.

I could buy everything in this shop. The resort itself if I wanted to, and still have plenty left over to spend on whatever caught my eye.

I wanted to spend all my hoard on Rosey.

"I can afford it," I said. "Try it on. Let me see how it looks on you."

She frowned. "You're sure?" The look of longing on her face when she stared at the dress . . . I'd kill to give this to her.

I nodded as her fingers lingered on the silky fabric. Her resistance only made me want to give this to her more. By the fates, I'd give her the world if I could. Buildings, jewels, dresses—anything. But more than that, if she wore this dress, every time she slipped it on, she'd think of me. I needed her to remember because I was never going to forget. Not one second of this long weekend I was spending with this female I was beginning to love.

"Okay," she finally said, her lips turning up, shy but with enough excitement to spin my heart.

She took the dress to the changing room, glancing back once more, her eyes questioning as though she still thought I might stop her. I grunted and nudged my chin, urging her to try it on.

While she was gone, I let my fingers trail across the flowing fabric of the other dresses, each as soft and delicate as the one she adored. Maybe I should buy her more

than one. Maybe I should buy the entire rack. My people back home would think I was foolish, using my wealth on fine dresses when I could be investing in my business. Wealth meant nothing to me. Knowing I could make Rosey happy was all that mattered.

Kindness, strength, and beauty. Rosey carried all those traits in abundance. I was blessed that the fates had brought her into my life. I couldn't stop the gnawing fear that in a few days, she'd decide this was fun but that she didn't need a male she'd only recently met in her life. Certainly not an orc from beneath the ground who didn't understand her world like even the simplest human.

But this morning . . . I grinned at the memory. When I'd touched her, when I'd kissed her, she gifted me with her pleasure. Even if she didn't realize it yet, I knew in my heart. We had a beginning, and beginnings could lead to something wonderful.

The curtain to the changing room fluttered, and Rosey stepped out.

I could not breathe.

She spun slowly in front of me, her hand smoothing the fabric as it swirled around her thighs in a whisper. The pale blue brought out her eyes, making them shimmer even more the sky and the sea combined. She looked down with yearning.

“What do you think?” she asked, her voice quieter now, uncertainty creeping in all over again as she studied my face.

I swallowed the emotions tangling up inside my throat and tried to shape my thoughts into words that wouldn't fall short of what I felt seeing her in something I'd soon gift her. I crossed the small space between us, my gaze roving over her like she was the most precious thing I'd ever set eyes on.

Because she was.

“You’re beautiful.” I kept my voice low. “More beautiful than the golden lakes of my kingdom. The dress is pretty but it's only fabric. You glow like the reflection of a star on the clearest water. You . . .” I paused, letting the passion behind my words settle deep, hoping this would help me find the words I needed to tell her everything. What I wanted to say felt unworthy, too flat to capture the depth of my feelings. Finally, breathless with longing and awkward, yet needing to speak, I whispered. “You are why I dare to dream.”

“Ostor,” she croaked.

My face overheated. “I'm sorry. I misspoke.”

She shook her head. “No, you didn't.” Reaching up, she stroked my chest, pressing her palm against the area above my heart. “Thank you. I’m afraid because . . . I've been dreaming too.”

“Dreams should bloom like flowers after the rain.”

“You're right.” She glanced down at the dress. “It really looks okay?”

“It looks amazing. Perfect.”

Crimson flooded her cheeks, coloring her skin in a way that only made me want to kiss every bit of her. She coiled her finger between us, and I bent down, thinking she was going to say something saucy that went with the expression on her face. Instead, her lips pressed against mine. The kiss was too quick and held only a hint of a promise. I’d hold it tight within my heart.

She backed away, leaving my lips tingling and my pulse surging in my throat.

My mate was bold in ways that startled me. Thrilled me. Was I dreaming, or did she actually want me?

Rosey watched me, obviously pleased that she'd stunned me, but also a little unsure. Maybe she was wondering if she shouldn't have kissed me. Or if I'd changed my mind about buying her the dress.

"The dress is yours," I said simply.

After a moment, she nodded. She changed back into her other clothing while I stood outside the changing room with waves of protectiveness and need swirling through me.

Pride filled me when I handed the dress to the cashier and paid for it with a gold nugget, without a second thought. Gold appeared as welcome here as slices of money if the woman's wide-eyed stare at it and eager nod when I asked was anything to go by.

We left and returned to our room, Rosey clutching the bag holding the dress like it meant something to her, as if it was so much more than scraps of fabric.

Inside our room, she carefully hung the dress in the closet, smoothing it with a smile that twisted my heart in all sorts of painful ways.

"I'll wear it tonight for the rehearsal dinner." Her voice brimmed with happiness.

My heart swelled so big I figured it would burst free.

I, Ostor, had helped her feel this way. I'd made her smile.

The knowledge was overwhelming and quiet all at the same time. To think that I

could touch her heart if only in a small way.

It was enough to make me bloom like flowers after the rain.

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Chapter 15

Rosey

Where are you? Macy texted. Are you and Ostor in bed or something?

Nothing like that, I replied.

Ostor's hot. Cute. Incredibly sweet. If it was me, I'd be rolling around in bed with him myself. She added a bunch of suggestive emojis.

We . . . What could I say? As she'd said, he was wonderful. Cute. Hot. Sweet.

If I wanted him, would he be mine?

Where are you guys now? I asked.

At the swim-up bar, of course! Mom and Dad are here, too, though they're staying in the shade. When you've finished (take your time!!!), join us. She signed off with that.

I changed into my swimsuit, and we went down to the pools, dropping towels and my beach bag on lounge chairs under a palapa beside my parents. The sun sliced through the palms overhead and cast dappled shadows across the bright turquoise water. The scent of sunscreen filled the air, mingling with the sharp tang of the sea. Music thumped from hidden speakers, a tropical beat that had the whole pool in a rhythm of its own. People swam around while others tossed balls or played games in the water. It was paradise wrapped in sunlight.

“Hello, hello,” Mom said, giving me a smile and a wink. Truly, she had more hope for my love life than I did. Although, Ostor and I had fun this morning. Maybe we’d have more fun later.

Dad grunted but rose from his chair, his gaze on Ostor. “Your friend and I need to talk.”

“Dad,” I warned.

“Now, honey. I promise I’ll be nice.” The look in his eyes as they remained on Ostor didn’t appear nice, but we might as well get this over with. Dad wouldn’t stop until he’d laid down his rules. I was sure Jacob had gone through the same routine when it was clear he and Macy were getting serious.

“You don’t need to do this,” I told Ostor.

He gave me an easy smile. “I don’t mind. Your father is within his rights to ask this of me, and I welcome it.”

More power to him, then.

He looked completely out of place in the best way possible. His large frame stood out among the milling crowd of human males, and he towered over my father. Surely Dad wouldn’t take this too far.

“This way,” Dad said, waving to the path that meandered around the outside of the resort.

“This may take a few minutes.” Mom nudged her chin toward Dad’s chair. “Sit. We can chat ourselves.”

Our talk would be nothing like the grueling barrage Dad was about to drop on Ostor. How would he handle it? I cringed, wishing this wasn't happening.

"Rosey," Mom said. "Sit."

With a grumble, I perched on the edge of the lounge.

"Tell me more about Ostor. I didn't know you were dating anyone."

"We haven't been together for long."

"Long enough to invite him to your sister's wedding." Mom's penetrating gaze snagged mine. "If Ostor makes you happy, I love him already."

And there was my mom, always kind to others, behaving as if she was okay with whatever it was me and Macy did, even if she might have hidden doubts. She'd always urged us to jump off the cliff, so to speak, and we could because we knew she was there to catch us if something went wrong.

She was the only one who knew how heartbroken I was when Jacob ended things with me to pursue Macy.

"He's a great guy." That was neutral enough, but what could I say? I wasn't mentioning that this had started out fake but was beginning to feel real, because for all I knew, nothing would come of the weekend.

"I'm glad. Bring him by for dinner once we're home?"

I shrugged. "I'll see when he's available." And make up excuses if he wasn't.

Dad and Ostor returned, Dad wearing a pleased smile, Ostor looking a touch shell-

shocked.

I got up, and Dad dropped onto his seat. He lifted the playing cards sitting on the low table between the two chairs and gestured to the board. “Your deal or mine, Jenny?”

“Mine, I think,” Mom said, taking the deck from him. “You kids go have fun!”

While Mom dealt the first hand, Ostor and I slipped into the pool, wading through the warm water.

“Everything okay?” I asked him.

“Excellent.”

I wasn’t sure if I was glad to hear grim satisfaction in his voice or not. “He didn’t, like, grill you about us, did he?”

“I explained and he seemed quite pleased with me.”

“About what in particular?”

“You,” he said, looking down at me. “You.”

I wasn’t sure I wanted to hear more. Maybe he’d pretended, like this was all pretend. I decided to shrug this off. Dad was just being Dad, and Ostor . . . well, Ostor was an easygoing guy. I was sure he’d handled Dad’s inquisition with ease.

As soon as we made it close to the swim-up bar, Macy's squeal lit up my ears. She left her stool and floundered over, her arms outstretched, the bounce of her curls sending sprays of water across her shoulders.

“There you are!” She wrapped herself around me in a wet hug that nearly knocked me off my feet. “Saw you and Mom and Dad. Things go okay?”

She must know why Dad dragged Ostor off for a “walk”.

“Fine. Just fine.”

Macy leaned back, studying my face. “Oh my god, Rosey! Look at you. You’re glowing! Seriously, I’ve never seen you look this happy before.” Her smile turned into something more knowing. “Is it because of him?” Her eyes flitted toward Ostor, who stood behind me, his warm fingers lingering on the back of my waist.

“Maybe, but I’m not saying anything else.”

Macy squealed.

My cheeks heated but there was no denying I liked Ostor, not to my sister who could see all the way to my soul. I tossed out a casual laugh but didn’t confirm or deny. The words got caught somewhere between my brain and my heart because she was right.

Everything inside me glowed.

I glanced up at Ostor, and I felt like I was in the sea with the tide pulling and tugging me in all directions at once. My heart was full and light and heavy all at the same time.

I was falling for this orc.

Not just attracted to him.

Falling. Hard.

And the scariest part? I wasn't sure if I wanted to stop it from happening.

His dark eyes locked on mine, and the air between us did that strange thing again, snapping taut like a rubber band. Macy's grin spread, mischievous for sure, and she leaned in close. "If this is how I look at Jacob, you're in trouble."

Trouble could be a thrill or a warning.

When the weekend came to a close, would we say goodbye under the dull airport lights? I worried about building a dream that would never have time to bloom into anything beautiful.

Macy took my hand and started dragging me toward the bar. "Come on! Bring your cowboy along with you. It's time to party."

I rolled my eyes but grinned. Macy was always like this. Full of energy, determined to tilt full speed toward everything in life. She had no chill. Not that she needed it, but tomorrow's wedding had amped her energy to something superhuman.

Maybe Mom's steady influence would relax her.

Or not.

The rest of the wedding party greeted us when we reached the bar, even Jacob, who leaned against the counter, his gaze squarely on Ostor. His gaze flicked from Ostor's hat to the wide expanse of his muscular chest, down to the top of his swim trunks, and back up again to study his face.

Such a leveled, assessing look. Not one of curiosity, but something almost . . . competitive. Was he sizing up Ostor? He had no reason to do anything like that. Unless Macy, in her usual, gushing way, had been chatting about how amazing Ostor

was.

Jacob could be jealous.

Nah. I shrugged it off. Jacob had a lot on his mind with the wedding. That was all this was.

“When are your parents arriving?” I asked him. When we first went out, he’d mentioned they were divorced. I didn’t know anything else about them.

“Not coming,” he said lightly, though his gaze darted away from mine.

“I’m sorry.”

He huffed. “It’s not a surprise.”

I didn’t ask why.

“What do you two want to drink?” Macy asked. “I’m buying!”

Ha ha. Sure. All-inclusive included alcohol too.

Before we could order drinks, a voice boomed over the speakers. “Alright, people. It's time for pool games!”

Excitement rippled across the water as a few hotel workers began tugging a large inflatable bridge—basically a brightly colored bouncy walkway—across the middle of the pool behind us. People started wading towards it like kids being called out for recess.

“Oh, we’re doing that.” Macy spun, stroking Jacob's side. “You too, babe, right? All

of us.”

He nodded and kissed the tip of her nose.

“What do you think?” I asked Ostor. “I assume the game will involve running along the walkway without falling into the water.” I’d seen enough similar games on TV reality shows to size this one up.

Ostor chuckled. “If you want to do it, tiny one, I do too.”

“Yes,” Jacob drawled as he and Macy passed us, aiming for the starting point of the game. “Show us what you’ve got, Ostor.”

Jeez.

We and the rest of our group swam over to join Macy and Jacob, milling around while the hotel staffer explained the simple rules. The person to make it all the way across won. If more than one could do it, they’d repeat until one fell in before the end. The man held up a small bottle of tequila, the prize.

Other hotel guests gathered to watch, Mom and Dad included.

Macy clapped like a cheerleader. “Easy, right?”

“Who wants to go first?” the staffer called out.

“Me.” Macy waved her arm in the air. “Pick me!”

He pointed right at her with a big grin. “Come on up.”

She sashayed up the ladder and scooted over to stand beside him while he spoke in a

low voice, maybe giving her pointers on how to win this. His hand flicked toward the walkway.

After giving him a nod, she extended her arms out and started running across the unnatural, wobbly surface. Her arms flailed wildly as she nearly fell a thousand times, and I burst out in laughter along with everyone else.

“You can do it, sweetheart,” Mom called out, me echoing her words.

Halfway across, Macy tripped and toppled sideways into the water with a huge splash.

Everyone cheered.

She soon popped up, tossing her wet hair back. “Hey, hey! I’m fine. The bar's still open, right?”

Someone laughed and shouted tequila .

“You go next,” she told me when she’d joined us, giving Jacob a big kiss and Mom a hug.

Cool, cool. I could do this. I climbed the stairs and strode over to the staffer.

“Keep your arms out and go as fast as you can,” he said. “When you're ready.”

No time like now.

I stepped out onto the walkway. It wiggled beneath my feet. I flapped my arms like a bird and bolted toward the end of the inflatable. Three quarters of the way down, my right leg went one way while my left decided to go the other. With a shriek, I tumbled

into the pool.

When I surfaced, Macy was already laughing. “That was amazing, Rosey! You're so good at this.”

“Well done, sweetheart,” Mom said with a grin.

Dad shook his head. He smiled up at Ostor as if they were buddies, and that pleased me more than anything else.

I wasn't hurt by the fall. Honestly, it felt freeing. The kind of free that clears your mind of everything that isn't today, right now.

“Next up,” the staff member shouted. “Jacob!”

My future brother-in-law climbed up onto the side of the pool, water slicking down his body and his hair plastered to his head. He studied the walkway as if analyzing it for flaws and cracked his knuckles. When a few women cheered, he flexed his muscles, and spun around to wiggle his ass, thrusting his hips forward to their shrieks. Turning back to face us, he swept his grin across the crowd, focusing on his bride-to-be, who he blew a kiss to.

“Caught it, babe, and right back at ya,” Macy shouted. “Run, babe. You can do it.”

His grin replaced with determination, Jacob stepped down onto the beginning of the walkway, sending his arms out to hold his balance. He glanced Ostor's way, and there it was again, that competitive gleam in his eyes. Why did guys have to turn everything into some kind of stupid gladiator match?

“Go,” the staffer cried.

Jacob focused, taking it slow, his movements smooth as he worked his way forward. I had to admit, he was doing pretty well. Until about two-thirds of the way across, when, just like Macy, his foot slipped on the slick material. His limbs went flying in all sorts of directions as he slapped into the pool with all the grace of a shot-down bird.

Macy screamed, “No,” and swam over to him, giggling. “You were close, babe.”

He dragged his hands down his face, but when Macy arrived and planted a kiss on his cheek, his scowl eased.

“Who's next?” the staff member cried.

“Mom? Dad?” I asked.

“Never,” they vowed in unison. With a shared smile, they started wading across the pool, aiming for their palapa.

“Me, Ostor,” he called out. “I’m next.”

“Come on up, then, my friend.” He scanned the crowd. “Anyone else? No?”

No one else waved to show they were interested in competing.

“Alright, then, Ostor is our last contestant!”

Ostor climbed out of the pool, and man, compared to Jacob, this guy was hot with a capital H. His gaze fell on me and with a quirky grin on his face, he turned his baseball cap around to make the brim hang down the back of his neck. That only made him look hotter, evidenced by a few women making whooping sounds.

Some guys would've performed for their view—Jacob had—but Ostor's attention remained on me.

I gave him a thumbs-up, and he returned the gesture before turning to study the walkway.

I waded closer, my heart hammering more than it should. Why was I hoping he'd succeed?

Ah, I knew. I wanted him to beat Jacob. There it was, me seeking vindication, as if me being with the hottest guy in the place and watching him one-up the man who'd rejected me would make everything better.

Actually, it kinda would.

Macy swam over to my side, her eyes sparkling as she shoved wet hair out of her face. “This is so much fun. But our guys . . . They're ridiculous, right?”

“Men. Leave it to them to turn a pool game into the Olympics.”

“Ostor's gonna crush it, isn't he?” Macy whispered, her gaze flicking between him and Jacob. “All those muscles. He's ripped. I bet he works out all the time.”

“He's actually a true cowboy.”

“Gotta love a man who builds his body the natural way.”

I sure did.

Everyone fell quiet as Ostor lowered his massive frame onto the wobbly surface. Even Jacob, recovering from his barely there loss, had his eyes locked on my orc

date.

“Our last contestant!” the staffer announced.

I held my breath.

“Go!” A whistle blew, and Ostor charged forward, his powerful legs churning as he barreled across the inflatable walkway with a grace that shouldn’t be possible for anyone of his size. Every step he took was measured and fearless. Despite the jiggle of the bridge, his footing remained steady. Confidence radiated off him in waves.

The last few paces seemed to slow, like the moment was stretching out longer than it should. The crowd watched in silence as he neared the finish. My heart tumbled up into my throat, pounding in rhythm with the thud of his feet on the rubbery surface.

He launched himself off the end, diving neatly into the water.

“Whoa,” Macy breathed.

Jacob scowled.

Mom and Dad hooted.

And the rest of those in and around the pool exploded into cheers, a few letting out wolf-whistles as he disappeared beneath the surface.

My heart raced as I caught sight of him slicing through the water, heading straight for me.

When he burst up in front of me, he rose with all the beauty of a sea god, shimmering wet and perfectly sculpted.

Something inside me snapped. I reached for him as he pulled me close, sweeping me up in one fluid motion, spinning us both through the water. The rush of air mixed with the laughter around us, but none of it mattered. The only things I could feel were his hands, his arms, and that buzzing desire slamming through me with every spin.

He came to a stop, and his lips crashed against mine.

This wasn't a kiss performed for my sister. This kiss was real, filled with possession. His mouth claimed mine in a way that left no room for pretending anymore.

I melted into him. His fingers curled into my waist, holding me as if nothing else existed beyond us. My body flared, everything inside me aflame.

The cheers around us blurred into white noise as my soul hummed with emotion, with arousal, with something much deeper than us playing a dating game.

When we broke apart, he whispered against my skin. "You're mine, Rosey."

My heart clenched. Tight. Warm. Ready to burst.

I wasn't going to argue.

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Chapter 16

Ostor

We all went to the swim-up bar, me holding the bottle of tequila I'd won. I'd share it with my brothers when I returned home and laugh at the faces they'd make when they tasted it.

A few of the others stabbed tiny glasses of tequila and . . . No, not stabbed, shot the drink. I'd get all this straight in my mind eventually.

“Good job.” Jacob slapped my shoulder.

“Thanks.” I'd feel better about his congratulations if his eyes shone with happiness too, but they remained sharp, and he kept looking from me to Macy, who wiggled through the water over to my side. Then his protective gaze fell on Rosey. Did he now see himself in the same role as her father, a person needing to watch out for the woman I was falling in love with? They didn't need to worry. Rosey could take care of herself.

“That was amazing, Ostor,” Macy said, looking up at me much like a sister would. I liked her already. What she presented to the world was who she was, and that was a rare thing among both humans and orcs.

Jacob tugged her against his chest, wrapping his arms around her waist. “Stop admiring other guys, babe.”

She giggled and tilted her head back for a kiss, which he gave her. “Jealous? No need to be. I only love you.” She slipped from his grasp and hopped over to stand by Rosey on my other side. “Well, Rosey too, who is equally amazing.” Leaning against her sister’s shoulder, she grinned. “I’m so glad you came. Glad you brought Ostor. He’s wonderful, sis. Definitely a keeper.”

Jacob’s smile grew, but there was no mistaking the irritation on his face. It was sad that he didn’t feel confident about the woman he’d soon marry.

But then, I wasn’t confident about Rosey.

Although, she’d kissed me as if she liked me. There was no mistaking her arousal in bed this morning.

She hadn’t denied she was mine—unless that was part of our pretend relationship. She may have thought I was faking it when I expressed the words to whoever might be listening.

I hoped we figured this out soon. I leaned over to kiss the top of her head.

“So, what have you been up to?” Jacob asked Rosey, sidling close enough to wedge himself between us.

“This and that,” she said.

“No, like what?” He took her hand and held it. Most would see it as a friendly gesture.

I saw the proprietary gleam in his eyes. He did feel as if he had a say in her future.

This male had rejected her. Hurt her. Bound himself to her sister, who he’d soon

marry. He had no right to inject himself into Rosey's life any longer.

"Nothing new," she said brightly, extracting her hand from his and stepping around to come up on my other side.

What would the group think if I growled at him to back away?

An orc would do it if a male approached and touched his mate in such a way, but these were humans with much different customs—ones I'd only started to learn.

Jacob's laugh cut through the hum of voices around us. It wasn't the kind of laugh that invited you in. No, it held a sharp edge, like he was issuing a challenge.

"You know what I'd like to do?" Jacob leaned toward me, a smirk twisting the corner of his mouth. "How about a little arm-wrestling contest? Ever tried that before, Ostor? It's a manly tradition."

Arm wrestling? The skin around my eyes tightened as I tried to piece together what that might mean. Was it some kind of combat? If so, I hadn't brought my sword.

This human tradition could be done prior to a mating or to prove one's worth among other males.

"I don't understand." I kept my tone measured. "What is arm wrestling?"

Jacob's brow climbed so high, it nearly disappeared into his damp hairline. "It's just for fun." The glint in his eyes didn't appear playful. "You put your elbow on a flat surface, grip hands, and see who can pin the other guy's arm to the counter first. You know, to prove who's stronger."

Macy spun her eyes. "Jacob," she groaned, dragging out the syllables. "Do you really

have to turn everything into a competition? We're here to relax with our friends before the wedding, not throw testosterone around like confetti."

Jacob shrugged but didn't take his eyes off me. His smirk widened. "We're just having fun, babe."

"Orcs don't need to prove themselves with games." I coiled my arm around Rosey's shoulders. "We prove ourselves in battle." I angled toward Rosey and lowered my voice. "Why would we wrestle with our arms? Is this meant to shame the loser?"

Annoyance flickered in her blue eyes. She stabbed a look at Jacob before returning her attention to me. "It's a silly game." Her lips quirked into a half-smile, though the tension around her mouth showed her frustration. "You don't have to do anything like this if you don't want to. You're the best guy here."

Her words stunned me. I wanted to lift her, toss her over my shoulder, and take her to our room where I could show her more things my tongue could do to her body.

But if I'd learned nothing else growing up with nine brothers, it was to never leave a challenge unanswered.

Laughter tumbled around us from our friends. It wasn't cruel. They looked at me as if I fit in with them already. But they tittered like Jacob and I were putting on a show for their amusement. One of the guys—Vincent, I remembered—pointed at Jacob. "Man, you got this. Ostor's big, but you rule, dude."

His slap of encouragement on Jacob's back made my jaw tighten. Jacob's expression turned smug, as if he couldn't imagine losing. Heat rolled in my belly. How many times had he underestimated Rosey before dismissing her? I wouldn't let him do the same with me, not even once.

Facing him fully, hands loose by my side, I tilted my chin. “Alright.” My words came out loud enough for the group to hear. “I’ll give it a chance. Show me how this works.”

Cheers and whistles rippled around us.

We took seats facing each other on the corner of the bar. Jacob rolled his shoulders, extending his hand to me as if this was some grand arena battle to the death. His hand was small compared to mine, something I struggled not to mention as I gripped it and tried not to crush the bones outright.

“And here we have it, folks,” one of Macy’s bridesmaids called out, bobbing over to stand at the corner of the bar, between us. “The biggest arm-wrestling match of the century. In my left corner, we have Ostor, an orc.’

Someone chuckled.

“And on my right?” she said. “Jacob, a,” her laughter burst out, “a human who's about to get his ass kicked. Nothing personal, but my money's on the bigger guy.”

“Jeez,” Jacob said. “Thanks.”

“Frannie,” Macy said with a laugh. “Way to support my awesome fiancé.”

“ You're marrying him, not me.” Frannie leaned over and kissed Jacob's cheek. “Good luck, dude .”

Jacob locked his elbow firmly on the bar. “Ready when you are, Ostor.”

Rosey came over to stand partway behind me, her hand resting on my back as she leaned close. “You've got this, babe,” she purred by my ear.

Pride roared through me, her words giving me the strength of ten thousand orcs.

Frannie counted down. “Three, two, one . . . Go!”

Jacob’s elbow pressed hard against the polished surface as he pushed his palm against mine, his face contorting with strain.

I held my hand in the upright position, wondering when this was going to get started.

Beads of sweat gathered on Jacob's brow, and his jaw tightened as he put every bit of his energy into driving my arm backward to slam it on the counter.

It took a solid effort not to smile. His strength was admirable for a human, but it wasn’t even close to testing my limits.

He growled low under his breath, the tendons in his neck standing out sharply.

With barely a flick of my wrist, I pushed his hand down against the bar, impacting it with a decisive thud. The group erupted into cheers while Jacob sat frozen, his hand still locked in mine. With a hiss, he wrenched away from my grip, his face going red and splotchy. “Two out of three.”

Macy pressed her fingers to her temples. “Seriously, Jacob? Let it go.”

But he plowed on, his voice and color rising. “Or maybe something else then. Push-ups? A race around the pool. Hell, we could—”

I lifted my palm, silencing him. “Forget it.” I met his gaze. “You . . . nearly had a win there.” Not really. “Call it an even match if you want.”

“Two out of three,” Jacob muttered. “That's only fair.”

“I’m not here to play games with you. I’m here to have fun with Rosey.” Turning, I scooped her up. My hands curved gently under the warmth of her thighs as I settled her on top of the bar, easing her back until she laid on the cool surface. Her eyes widened, half-shocked but lit with humor and—most importantly—trust.

A few snorts echoed around us, but as I said, I was here for her only.

With a flick of my hand, the owner of this fine bar brought over a glass of tequila. I held it over her abdomen to the hoots of the crowd.

Her skin quivered as I poured a small stream of the liquid along her belly. It looped before pooling above her navel. By the fates, she shimmered like a goddess in the moonlight. The warmth of her, the scent of her. Everything about Rosey pulled me in completely.

Laughter bubbled up from her throat as she arched her spine against the tickling sensation. “Ostor, what are you doing?” Her voice rasped out softer than her laughter, almost breathless.

“Winning where it matters,” I said simply, my lips curling up before I lowered my mouth to her.

Her sharp inhale sent an echo through my chest. The moment my tongue flicked over her skin, tasting the light burn of the tequila mixed with her sweetness, a ragged groan tore through me. From her navel and higher, I traced every line and shift of her belly.

She gasped and squirmed beneath me. The soft peal of her giggle mixed with something warmer, something more open than anything I’d ever imagined.

Roars of approval filled the area, but I barely heard them. What mattered most was

this woman. Always her.

Lifting my head, I grinned with satisfaction. Her bright eyes found mine, hers filled with warmth, teasing, and something deeper I couldn't name. Something I needed to believe she felt as intensely as I did.

Jacob had fallen silent, too silent, but I'd just shown him up again, this time by proving I could treat my mate as she deserved.

"Let's see him top that," Macy said loud enough for only me, and probably Jacob, to hear.

I might've come here unsure of everything, fumbling with the weight of what could and couldn't be. But as Rosey rose to sit on the side of the bar, her legs going around my body, her hands warm on my shoulders, I knew one thing for sure.

I didn't have to prove myself to Jacob or anyone else.

As long as Rosey looked at me as she did right now, I would always be enough.

Chapter 17

Rosey

Was it possible to fall in love with a guy in only a few days? Because it was happening. I'd gone from thinking Ostor was gorgeous on the outside, which he was, to admiring everything about him where it truly mattered.

And I wasn't sure what to do about it.

So I was going to do nothing. I was going to enjoy what was left of this weekend, a total switch for me. Instead of crying on the beach while my sister married Jacob, I would make sure each second with Ostor counted.

We left the pool mid-afternoon, stopping to say hi to my parents, who were reading, before going to our rooms to get ready for the rehearsal. After, we'd all have dinner together at one of the beachfront restaurants. Tomorrow morning would be spent getting ready for the wedding and the early afternoon wedding would follow. We'd party after that and while they went off to their honeymoon suite, the rest of us could do what we pleased. I had so many ideas for what I wanted to do with Ostor. A walk on the beach? Dancing under the stars? No, we could return to our room and be together.

Because, if he was open to the idea, I wanted everything.

My heart might end up broken when we returned home, but if I didn't give him my all, I'd always wonder what might've happened if I did.

While Ostor sat on the balcony, admiring the view, I scooted into the bathroom to shower and change into the dress he'd bought me.

I stepped out of the bathroom, excited and nervous. The silky fabric skimmed over my body, soft and feather-light, the pale blue matching my eyes. I'd kept my makeup subtle, using only enough to highlight my features, and I'd left a few curls loose to dangle by each ear. I'd pinned the rest of my hair back in a neat twist.

When I walked into the bedroom, his gaze snapped up to find me. His chair scraped against the tile floor as he stood, and the soft groan that rumbled in his chest as he took me in made my stomach tumble like I'd taken a running leap off a high diving board.

He stalked toward me, slow and deliberate, his dark, luminous eyes devouring every inch of me as if I were something rare. Precious. The flicker of warmth in his gaze ignited embers beneath my skin. The way he was looking at me made me feel more than beautiful. It made me feel seen. Whole. A dizzying kind of confidence filtered into me, one I hadn't felt in years, if ever.

"Rosey," he said, his deep, gravelly voice curling around my name like he was revealing a secret. Once he stopped in front of me, he reached out, brushing one of the curls framing my face. He twisted it around his finger, tugging down, then let go, grinning as it bounced back into position. His knuckles grazed the shell of my ear. My breath hitched at the tenderness in his touch.

His gaze lingered on mine, and before I could say anything, he leaned in close. The world fell away as his warm lips met mine, soft and seeking. This wasn't a kiss for show, it was an honest moment between us, one filled with patience, longing, and a tenderness so deep it spun through every corner of my heart.

I slid my hands across his chest, savoring his hard muscles hidden by his shirt. My

lips parted for him, giving back as much as he gave, and I sank into him with everything I had. His hand cradled my jaw, keeping me close, as if even the air between us was too much space.

When he pulled back, his forehead pressed against mine, his breath ghosting over my mouth. “I’ll be the luckiest orc tonight because you’re with me.”

The words sliced across my heart and made a flurry of butterflies skitter through my belly. Did this mean he felt the same, that he was falling too?

I didn’t dare ask. Not yet.

“I should get ready.” He stepped around me and disappeared behind the bathroom door, the faint sound of running water following.

I drifted onto the balcony, where I leaned against the railing and let the balmy evening air settle my nerves. Palm leaves rustled, and the setting sun painted the sky with pink light.

When the bathroom door opened, my breath hitched again, except this time, it was for him.

Ostor stepped out, his jet-black hair damp and combed back, curling slightly around the edges of his jaw. He wore a crisp, short-sleeved button-down shirt, the white fabric contrasting nicely with his green skin, plus black pants that hugged his powerful thighs.

“You look good.” Way to impress him after he’d said such sweet things about my appearance. “Amazing. Wonderful. I could eat you up.” And I’d better stop talking.

“That’s great,” he said with a sheepish twist of his lips. He extended his hand toward

me. “Ready to go?”

My fingers slipped into his, and he gave them a squeeze as we left the room. Outside, we followed the winding stone path across the front of the buildings to the beach.

The bridal party had already gathered, and Mom and Dad stood to the side, beaming at Jacob and Macy. Their gazes slid to me and Ostor, and I read approval in both their eyes.

Candles in glass jars flickered on the top of wooden posts, illuminating the sand as the sun faded into the horizon.

Macy waved at us, her curls bouncing as she rushed over. “There you are! Finally! I was beginning to think we'd have to do this without my maid of honor.” She smirked. “Not really. I knew you'd get here soon. With such a sweet guy in your room, I can't blame you for hanging out before joining us.” She snickered, more jittery than usual. She extended her hand toward Jacob, who stepped forward to take it. He tugged her into his embrace, kissing the top of her head.

“Now we can get started,” she said. “You can wait with Mom and Dad, Ostor, if you'd like. Rosey, you're back here with me, obviously. Jacob? Go take your place at the end of the aisle, waiting for me to walk toward you with the others.”

He left us to go stand by the unadorned arch that would no doubt be covered with ribbons and flowers tomorrow.

Macy watched him walk away before turning back to us. Her voice dropped to a hushed tone. “Don't mind Jacob. He's just . . . Jacob right now. He'll learn soon enough he has no reason to be jealous.”

Jealous of Ostor? I vowed to smack sense into her fiancé if he took things too far.

There was no way I'd let him spoil this for Macy. I couldn't believe I'd ever thought I could care for him. What a joke, especially when I stood next to someone amazing like Ostor.

Macy corralled her bridesmaids and me into our respective places.

We rehearsed the flow of the ceremony a few times, and despite Macy's frayed nerves, things ran smoothly, her perfectionism making sure of that. After, we made our way to a gorgeous oceanside restaurant decked out with twinkling lights and Mexican decor. They served us at one long table, waiters bustling around, serving one delicious dish after another. Others kept our glasses full of our drink of choice.

I sat between Macy and Ostor, who took up most of his seat but somehow made himself comfortable. Jacob sat on her other side, and I was grateful to see him giving her all his attention and ignoring Ostor.

Mom and Dad were farther down the table, though Mom waved my way whenever I looked.

When Jacob turned to speak to his best man on his other side, Macy leaned close to me. "I love my guy so much. And he loves me. I can't wait to say I do."

"Good," I said. "If he didn't, I wouldn't let you marry him."

She snorted, her grin exactly what I needed to loosen the tension in my chest. "I love you all the more because of that." Her gaze shot to Ostor. "Keep that in mind with him."

"Will do." But really, we were nowhere close enough to worry about something like that, though I had hope we would be.

After dinner, he and I strolled back to the room under a velvet sky speckled with faint stars. Ostor's hand warmed mine all the way, his thumb brushing soft, lazy arcs across the funny tattoo that appeared after I met him. I'd barely thought about it since, but I did now. Was it some kind of orc thing? Because he'd licked my palm, and it appeared. It must mean something.

I hoped it meant something.

If I asked him, would he tell me?

Better not ruin the mood with something like that.

I glanced up, taking in the strong line of his jaw, the way the light from the tiki torches lining the walkway flickered across his green skin. He caught me looking, his lips tipping into that crooked smile that turned my insides to mush.

"I enjoyed tonight," he said, his deep voice a rumble rolling over me.

"Me too." The truth was, I'd enjoyed it because he was with me. The setting sun, the yummy dinner, the romantic blue dress. None of that would've mattered if Ostor wasn't by my side.

We reached our building and took the stairs to our room.

"I'm going to get ready for bed," I said.

"Take your time. I'll be waiting out here." He stepped onto the balcony, his broad shoulders silhouetted against the soft golden light spilling from the resort grounds below.

Inside the bathroom, the quiet click of the door behind me seemed louder than it

should. I released a breath and sagged against the countertop, pressing my hands flat against the cool marble surface. My heart hadn't stopped doing high jumps since dinner. One look from him, one soft smile, one gentle kiss, and I was undone—and he didn't even seem to know the power he had over me.

For now, though, I let myself retreat into the rhythm of brushing my teeth, each stroke of the toothbrush giving me something to focus on. But even that did nothing to quiet the rapid-fire thoughts swirling through my head. I thought about the way his deep laugh seemed to vibrate in my chest, about how the pad of his thumb had stroked over the back of my hand during dinner like it was second nature to him. I thought about the heat in his eyes whenever they landed on me, and how it couldn't be pretend. It had to be something more.

I carefully removed my dress and secured it on a hanger. I skimmed the soft fabric, and a small, crooked smile teased across my mouth. He'd insisted on buying it for me, and I couldn't shake the memory of him standing outside the changing room earlier, his dark eyes consuming me in a way that sent my thoughts spinning. Something had shifted between us then, but neither of us had said it out loud.

I slipped into a soft tank top and sleep shorts that hit just high enough on my thighs to make me mildly self-conscious. Staring into the mirror, I loosened the arrangement I'd made with my hair earlier and tugged my brush through it, smoothing out the curls. My reflection smiled back at me in the mirror, and I wasn't sure if it was the way the pink still flushed my cheeks or the way my chest felt lighter than air, but the realization hit me.

I couldn't wait to see where this would take us next.

With flutters zipping through my belly, I stepped out of the bathroom, catching sight of him framed by the balcony light. "The bathroom's free," I called out. As I crossed the hall to hang my dress in the closet, he glanced over his shoulder, his brows

quirked.

The hallway narrowed as he moved toward me, and when he passed, his hand drifted down my spine. It was faint, only a gentle trace of his fingers, but the gesture burned through me like it was the most deliberate touch in the world. My breath caught, but before I could react, he was gone, disappearing into the bathroom and leaving me standing outside, my fingertips pressed against the warm fabric of my dress.

I shut the closet door and walked toward the bed but then stopped in my tracks. What now? Should I lie down and wait for him there? Crawl under the covers and pretend I wasn't overthinking everything?

He might think me slipping into bed was too forward. The last thing I wanted to do was make him uncomfortable, not when things between us felt delicate, too easy to break.

Decision made, I stepped onto the balcony. The night wrapped around me like the softest blanket, warm and sticky and filled with the rustle of palm leaves swaying in the breeze and the faint, briny tang of the ocean. Stars winked out against the clouds, tiny promises scattered across a dark sky, while bats swooped through the moonlight.

It was peaceful here. The kind of quiet that stretched and soothed until any knot unraveled on its own. My eyelids slid shut as the wind lifted the ends of my hair. I didn't know how it was possible to feel completely at home beside someone I'd just met a few days ago. But with Ostor nearby, nothing else seemed to matter.

The sound of footsteps coming up behind me brought me to attention. His presence filled the small space as he joined me, his strong hand brushing the curve of my shoulder.

His face seemed carved by the moonlight, softened only by his tusks and the quiet

gaze of his eyes. There was so much to him. He was strength and gentleness wrapped together in a way I didn't understand yet. But I wanted to, more than anything.

I turned to face him. For once, his towering height didn't feel intimidating. My awkwardness melted beneath his warm gaze. Whatever barriers had been built between us before, they crumbled under his quiet confidence.

He cupped my cheek, his palm rough. His thumb brushed across my lips, sending a sharp pang of longing through me. Heat coiled through my belly and shot lower.

"You're beautiful, Rosey," he said. "I don't feel worthy."

"Worthy of what?"

"Whatever you might offer."

"What would you like me to offer?"

"You," he groaned. "Only you."

My throat tight, I kissed his palm. "I'm here for you, Ostor. I'm not going anywhere."

With a muffled growl, he tilted his head, leaning forward to brush his lips against mine. Our kiss deepened, the pressure growing as his other hand circled my waist, pulling me against his hard body.

His fingers grazed beneath my breast, and my moan ripped out.

He lifted his head, staring down at me. His dark eyes drifted down to where his hand hovered on my breast, and the look he gave me when he glanced back up was filled with such intense longing, my entire chest spasmed.

“I want you,” I said. The words left me in a breathless rush. “All of you.”

His gaze locked on mine, and his fingers trembled against my chest. When he nodded, his voice came out low and rough. “You already have me.”

“Ostor.” I leaned into him.

He lifted me, and I curled my legs partway around his chest.

He kissed me again, harder this time, as he carried me into the bedroom.

Chapter 18

Ostor

My mate. My precious mate.

She wanted me. Ostor. No one else if only for tonight. I would show her everything. All my strength and even my vulnerability. I would bare myself to her and pray to the fates that she wouldn't reject me.

Still kissing her, I carried her to the bed and laid her on the soft surface, following her down, curling around her body that already strained toward mine.

Rosey's sweet scent drifted through the air around us, wrapping around me in ways I'd never experienced before. Her soft lips molded to mine as I traced my hand along the contours of her body with reverence. I didn't want to break the moment, to rush this.

Moonlight filtered in through the open curtains, highlighting her curves, her smooth, flawless skin that glowed like the finest jewel. Her eyes, those pools of blue, locked onto mine, reflecting a mix of wonder, longing, and trust. This made me crave her even more.

I kissed her again, and she clung to my shoulders, her nails gently grazing my neck, drawing a growl from deep within me. I molded my palm to her breast, feeling the softness yield under my touch. Every caress drew out a gasp from her, feeding my eagerness to explore her in any way possible.

She nudged me up, and I backed onto my knees, watching as she quickly removed her sleep top. The dim light fell on her body, creating dancing shadows in the valley between her breasts. Those perky points called out for my attention, beckoning me to taste and worship them.

Lying back, she tugged me down onto her again, our mouths meeting in a searing kiss. Our tongues entwined, and every panting breath she took echoed through me. She explored wherever she could reach, frantic as if she couldn't get enough, as if every bit of her was unraveling to reveal a new layer of need.

I kissed down her throat, savoring the way her pulse fluttered. When I reached her breasts, I lingered, drawing out a moan from her as I stroked and kissed each peak. The sounds she made sunk through me, and my cock jerked upward, eager to find its way inside her.

A part of me still feared I wouldn't be enough. I was a big, bumbling orc who didn't understand human traditions or even basic human conversation. She deserved more, someone who could move through her world with ease. Not a brutish male like me who knew more about wrangling sorhoxes than social customs.

But when Rosey moaned beneath me, her body arching to meet mine, my worries began to fall to the side. She stroked my face and shoulders with a fury, as if she was driven by a need that matched my own.

I wanted her more than air, food, or even my survival. This longing wasn't only physical; it ached in my bones, a deep, visceral yearning that encompassed everything I was and would ever be.

As she panted beneath me, reacting to my simple touch, I kissed down her body, savoring how sweetly she responded, how amazing she tasted. I traced the gentle curve of her hip, her thighs, until I reached the warm, inviting space between her legs.

She spread for me, welcoming me in a way that echoed across my soul.

I slid my fingers inside her, and a shuddering growl tore through me. She was perfect, her body opening for me, her lungs releasing sharp gasps as I stroked her. I found her clit and circled it with my thumb, drawing out a deep moan from her core.

She bucked up to meet my hand. I wanted to consume her, to claim her in every way possible. My body vibrated with a visceral ache. My every nerve was on fire for her alone.

The scent of her arousal filled me, driving me nearly feral. I licked across her center, and her taste exploded on my tongue. I licked and sucked, desperate to hear her cries of joy, to feel her body pulse with release.

Her thighs tightened around my head, her hands clutching my hair as she arched against my mouth. Every quiver of her body, every gasp and moan she let loose, showed me how much she needed what only I could give her. I savored every shudder she gave me, every moan that showed I was making this as perfect as I could.

As her climax shook through her, I pumped my fingers harder and faster inside her, determined to push her over the edge. Her cries filled the room, her body quaking as she reached the peak. I drew out her satisfaction, swallowing every gasp and moan like the sweetest of orc wines.

When she finally came down, her body falling to the bed, limp and sated, I lifted my head to meet her gaze. Her eyes were hooded, her cheeks flushed from the pleasure I, Ostor, had given her.

I gave her a moment to savor the glow still suffusing her face. Her breathing slowed, and her body relaxed into the soft bedding. My aching need to join with her was a beast clawing at my insides, demanding to be set free.

I slowed the rhythm of my fingers, savoring the slickness coating them. Her wetness glistened on my skin, and I marveled at how she'd responded to my touch. It was a gift, one I cherished with every part of my being.

Reaching up, I stroked her breast, teasing her nipple into a tight bud. I watched, transfixed, as her eyelids fluttered closed again, her lips parting on a soft purr. The sight of her like this, lost in the pleasure I was giving her, was more than I could've ever dreamed of.

I continued to pump my fingers slowly in and out of her, loving the way her hips began to move to meet them. When I was certain she was ready for more, I ran my thumb across her clit, circling the sensitive nub, coaxing her body back to the brink of where I needed her most.

Her moans grew louder, her movements more frantic. When I could tell she was teetering, ready to fall, I withdrew my fingers and brought them to my mouth. Her taste made my head spin.

Her eyes dark with desire, she rose, stroking a fingertip down my erection through the fabric of my briefs. "I want all of you, Ostor." I nearly came from the husky longing in her voice. "Will you give everything to me?"

My heart swelled. This incredible woman was asking for me, the orc who had stumbled into her life not long ago. How could I deny her anything when she looked at me with such open desire and trust?

"Take me. Love me," I rasped. Such a heartfelt plea in my croaky voice.

She continued to rub me, her fingers tracing up and down the length of my cock. I groaned, the sensation almost too much to bear. I'd never felt this cherished, this wanted.

Sliding off the bed, my heart thundered like a wild sorhox racing across the open plains. I reached for the waistband of my briefs and pushed them down, stepping out of them with nervous heat. My cock, long and thick, jutted up, the emerald-green shaft engorged with need.

Rosey sat on the edge of the bed, her eyes level with my straining erection. A soft gasp escaped her lips. “Your cock is beautiful. So different than any I've seen before.” Tilting her head, she took in every detail, her curiosity hanging in the air between us.

I had to explain, had to make sure she understood my differences from a man.

“This is a coorail.” I pointed at one of the spiraling strands adorning my shaft. “They're natural to orcs, unlike the piercings your kind possess. They mature as we do, growing along with every other part of our body. Each coorail has a bead along the thin strand that vibrates when we're aroused.” I studied her face, worried I'd find fear or revulsion, but all I found was wonder and a deepening need.

“And these?” She gently traced a fingertip along one of the thick veins snaking across my cock, making me quiver.

“They carry additional blood when we're excited.” The words came out husky, my voice betraying the depth of my arousal. “They help with stamina.”

“I'm all for stamina.” A smile curled her lips. “I can't wait.” She wrapped her fingers around my shaft. The feel of her touch sent a jolt of bliss through me. “I've never seen anything like it before.”

I groaned as she stroked me, her grip tentative at first, then growing bolder as she found a rhythm that matched the guttural cries rising from deep within my chest. The beads on my coorails pulsed, adding an extra layer of sensation. “Rosey,” I growled,

my eyes closing as I savored how wonderful it was to be with her like this.

“Does it feel good?”

“Too good.” I thrust my hips forward, pushing my cock deeper into her grasp.
“Amazing. You’re going to make me come.”

“Not too soon. Remember, stamina.” Her laugh came out throaty. “I’m just getting started.”

My breath hitched as her tongue darted out, tasting the precum beading at the tip of my cock. Her eyes widened in surprise. “Cinnamon? I need more.”

As she took more of my shaft into her mouth, I wove my fingers through her hair, gently holding her in place. The sensation of her wet heat surrounding me was too much to bear. Every part of me trembled with the effort of holding back, of not thrusting forward to bury myself deep in her throat.

I watched her, this incredible woman who was fearlessly exploring my body, and my heart swelled with awe. This wasn't just about physical pleasure. This was Rosey showing me that she accepted all of me in a way I'd never dared hope for.

Tension shot through me, a rising tide that would soon sweep me away. When I could bear it no longer, I nudged her away, my chest heaving. “Enough.”

“Nowhere near enough,” she said with a sly smile, dropping back on the bed and stretching. Her hands rose to pinch her nipples, and my groan ripped up my throat. While she continued to tug and roll one nipple, her other hand slid down between her legs. She stabbed two fingers inside her wetness, and my cock throbbed, eager to replace her hand.

I moved over her, my body shaking with the force of my desire, and tugged her fingers away, positioning myself at her entrance.

With a deep, shuddering breath, I pushed forward, slowly entering her. Tight and wet, the feel of her surrounding me was going to make me explode.

I paused, giving her time to adjust to my size and my coorails with their quivering beads.

“My god,” she moaned. “Where have you been all my life?”

My laugh snorted out. “Waiting for you, Rosey. Only you.”

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Chapter 19

Rosey

I 'd died and gone to cock heaven. Natural Jacob's Ladder? I couldn't imagine why orc cocks weren't the topic of conversation everywhere. Move out of the way, human males, because orcs were going to drive everyone wild.

As he started to move, those glorious coorails stroked my inner walls while the bead-like things hummed. I wrapped my legs around him, pulling him deeper. "I need more."

"And you shall have it." With a growl, he began to move harder within me, pulling all the way out and driving his cock back inside.

He was big and long, but just right for me, and he was going to drive me out of my mind within seconds.

Ostor pounded into me, the headboard thudding against the wall with each powerful thrust. The vibrating beads on his coorails teased my inner walls, driving me closer to the cusp of a mind-blowing orgasm. My legs clung to his waist, urging him deeper as need consumed me.

Just as I was about to tumble over the side, he pulled out, leaving me panting and gasping for more. I writhed, desperate for him to fill me again.

"Wait, wait, no . . ." I said.

“I know, tiny one.” His low, rough voice tickled across my skin. “I want you to feel every inch of me, to know what it's like to be taken by an orc.”

His words made my mind spiral. I loved the intensity, the confidence he showed now. It was clear he wanted to please me in ways no man ever had.

With a growl, he flipped me over onto my belly, lifting my hips to position me on my knees. He spread my thighs wide and pushed back into my wetness from behind. His powerful thrusts soon had me moaning and clutching the covers beneath me, completely consumed with the bliss only this male could deliver.

The vibration of his coorails combined with the depth of his strokes shot me all the way to the stars. I trembled with anticipation, desperate for release.

“Ostor,” I moaned, my voice ragged. “Please.”

His response was a guttural growl. He intensified his movements, driving me to the brink of ecstasy. Our moans filled the room, and I clung to the feelings, lost in the rhythm of his thrusts.

Every stroke brought me closer, but he knew how to drag out my pleasure, making it last until I could barely stand it. My mind turned into an inferno of sensation, his every touch sending me higher.

When my orgasm finally crashed over me, I cried out his name, my body convulsing around his cock. He roared his own release, his body shuddering as he pumped into me, filling me harder. Faster.

Finally, he slowed and came to a stop, his head hanging above mine, his breathing jagged.

We collapsed onto the bed together, our bodies slick with sweat. Ostor pulled me against his chest and wrapped his arms around me. I felt cherished, loved, and utterly content.

“That was amazing,” I said, still quivering with aftershocks deep within me.

“You are amazing.” Warmth filled his voice. “I’ve never felt this alive or as complete as I do with you, Rosey.”

His words tugged at my heart, and I felt seen and loved in a way I never had before. This moment with Ostor felt poignant. We were establishing a strong connection, one I wanted to hold onto forever.

I was falling in love with my fake orc boyfriend, and it felt far better than any fantasy could.

Sometime during the night, I woke to moonlight streaming through the gap in the curtains and the sound of Ostor’s soft breathing beside me. Rolling onto my side, I studied his peaceful face, his breath leaving a warm spot on my forehead.

I adored this guy like no other, and I hoped that what we were building would last. I wanted more than just a long weekend. What would he think if I asked for not only his body but his heart? Because I wanted to make this real. We could live together. I’d stand by his side as he and his brothers built their new venture, giving him anything he needed. My heart blazed with the dream of a future where he was always with me.

He stirred, his eyes opening. He gave me a tusk smile, drowsy and sweet. My gut clenched with longing.

“Hey,” he said. The sleepiness in his eyes went away, replaced with a flicker of need.

My body ached in delicious ways, but I was more than willing to be with him again. Those coorails! His cock itself. While it was big, it wasn't so huge I couldn't enjoy it fully. He hadn't hurt me, not one bit. And I knew he never would.

His arm tightened around my waist, drawing me against him.

His eyes . . . they sparkled like the sky outside, full of diamond stars and moonlit bliss. I cupped his face, pulling his head down to claim his mouth with a kiss that soon made flames roar through us.

His hands roamed my body in a lazy manner at first but soon with growing heat. His cock rose between us, nudging comically at my knees, reminding me that he was so much taller and bigger than me.

Ostor's gaze met mine. The warmth there stole the breath from my lungs. He looked at me as if I was the most precious person in the world. I either wanted to cry or shout out to the world that he was mine. All mine. His fingertips skimmed down my side, leaving a trail of goosebumps behind. I quivered, yearning for his touch.

In one fluid motion, he rolled us over, pinning me beneath him. His weight pressed me into the mattress. I wrapped my arms around his neck, pulling him closer as he continued to kiss me. This male was so tender and sweet. I'd never get enough.

He explored my mouth with a reverence that stunned me, because I felt the same. This moment meant everything; he meant everything.

Breaking away, he explored my skin with feather-light kisses, his fingertips dancing across my collarbone and down my arms, before gliding up to my breasts. My nipples hardened, and I was soon begging for more.

He took one of my nipples into his mouth, the sensation jolting pleasure straight to

my core. I bowed my spine, pressing myself up to him, wanting more of his exquisite torture. His other hand slid down my stomach, teasing the curve of my hip before finally, finally, reaching between my thighs.

When his fingers grazed my clit, I gasped. He stroked me, sending waves of bliss through me. I was on fire, my body a blaze of sensation.

He kept his movements steady and slow, as if he had all the time in the world to bring me to the brink. There was no past, no future, only the pulsating heat connecting us now.

As my orgasm barreled through me, his eyes locked on mine. He didn't look away, not even for a second. He watched me, his expression a mix of lust and fascination, as if he couldn't believe I was letting him do this.

The wave crashed over me, my body convulsing with the force of my climax. Ostor rocked me through it, his eyes still sinking into mine. As the last of my shudders subsided, he shifted his position, spreading my legs to nudge the head of his cock into my soaked entrance.

With one powerful thrust, he filled me completely. The sensation was overwhelming, my body stretching to accommodate him. After a pause, he began to move inside me in a slow, almost lazy way.

My moan ripped out, and I shoved my hips up to meet each of his drives. He continued to pump, building my heat all over again. Soon, I was completely lost in the feel of him pulling out and plunging back inside. He reached between us and stroked my clit, sending my body higher. His eyes remained locked on mine through it all, as if he needed to see my desire unfold, needed to watch as he gave me this gift.

The vibrations of his coorail beads made heat roar through me. Every stroke was

aimed to draw out my bliss. I soon perched on the edge again.

He leaned in, his breath hot on my skin as he whispered, "Does it feel good?"

"Yes," I gasped, clinging to his shoulders, my nails digging into his flesh.

He pushed harder, driving me deeper into the abyss. With each thrust, I squeezed his cock with my inner walls, contracting around him. I couldn't handle much more.

"Now," I pleaded, my body beginning to ride through the pleasure.

His coorails vibrated harder, matching the relentless rhythm of his hips.

"Ostor," I cried out, clinging to him.

"Take it, Rosey," he growled, his eyes blazing with passion. "Take all of me. Everything I am and everything I will ever be."

With one final, powerful thrust, he sent me careening over the side. I convulsed beneath him, waves of pleasure crashing through me. He groaned, his own release roaring through him as he filled me completely.

After the rush subsided, Ostor pulled out of me and rose from the bed. He returned with a warm, wet washcloth, and the tender way he gently cleaned between my legs made my heart swell with affection.

"Orcs have lots of cum," he whispered, a touch of embarrassment in his voice. "As I said, it's our nature."

Even this simple touch aroused me again, my body sensitive yet still craving more of him. He must've noticed, because he gave me a shy smile before focusing on my

lower body, his fingers brushing my clit.

“Come for my fingers,” he said, his gaze locked on mine. “Show me how much you need this; how much you need me.”

I gasped, my body responding, building the heat all over again. He stroked me masterfully, drawing out a sharp, unexpected orgasm that left me shaking. As I came down, he tossed aside the washcloth and gathered me into his arms, holding me as we both settled into silence.

We soon drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 20

Ostor

Something was vibrating nearby, and it wasn't me or Rosey.

She moaned, and my cock kicked up all over again. How could I crave her again so soon?

I worried I'd wear her out. Or wear out the heat I'd ignited inside her.

She lay in my arms, her body sprawled across my chest, still deep asleep.

The vibration started again.

Ah, a phone?

"Rosey?" I said softly, stroking my fingertips up and down her spine.

"Again?" she whispered, rubbing her leg across my stiffening cock. "You amaze me. You're like a teenager," she mumbled against my skin. "I'm gonna do all I can to keep up with you."

My laugh snorted out. "I'm thirty. Not the age of the teens."

"You know what I mean." Lifting her head, her gaze met mine. "Can I ride you this morning, cowboy?"

Fuck, I'd give anything to see her sitting on top of me, lifting before dropping her body back down on my cock.

"Your phone," I said, hating to speak. But if it was ringing, someone might need her.

Her fingers paused on their path across my belly, and her brow scrunched. "What time is it?" Her head spun to the closed drapes where bright light struggled to peek through. "Oh, no. The wedding. I was supposed to get up early to get ready for the wedding!" She slid off my body and scooted to the edge of the bed, sitting while grabbing her phone. "Macy. Macy. Macy. She's called me, like, twelve times. It's 10 a.m. Ten!"

Rising, I stroked her back. "No riding your cowboy."

Her low chuckle tickled down my spine. "Not now, unfortunately. I was supposed to be in her suite by nine for hair, nails, the whole works, and I'm an hour late. She's going to kill me." Hopping off the bed, she hurried toward the bathroom, dialing and placing the phone to her ear. The door banged shut, but I could still hear her speaking. "Yeah, yeah, I know. I'm sorry. I'm late, but I'll be there super-fast. Let me take a quick shower and do my teeth or you're not going to be happy with how I look. Or smell for that matter."

The urgency in her tone snapped the fog of lust lingering in my body. Anxiety replaced it, coiling in my chest. She didn't deserve anyone being upset with her, not after giving me the kind of night that would live in my bones forever.

I rubbed my hands over my face, then swung my legs off the bed. The cool tile beneath my feet settled me. I couldn't sit here while she rushed to make up for lost time. What kind of mate did that make me? Not the kind Rosey deserved.

Grabbing my pants and shirt from the chair, I dressed quickly. The fabric strained

around my thighs but fit well enough for the purpose. I rolled the sleeves up to mid-forearm and grabbed my cowboy hat from the small table by the balcony door. My fingers brushed the brim, and I paused for a moment. Rosey had smiled so brightly when she saw me wearing this that first day in the pool. That image fueled my grin as I dropped it firmly on my head.

By the time Rosey shot out of the bathroom, a towel wrapped around her head and her face flush from her quick shower, I was mostly ready. She darted to the closet, yanking out a sundress.

“No time for coffee,” she muttered to herself. Slipping the dress on over her head, she smoothed it across her hips. “Does this look decent enough for getting ready for Macy and Jacob's wedding? The dress I'll wear during the ceremony is inside her suite.”

I closed the small gap to her in a few strides. My hands found her waist, and I leaned down to capture her gaze head-on. “You’re stunning, Rosey. Always.”

The tension in her shoulders eased, her soft exhale of relief puffing against my chest. “You’re too good at this, you know.” A quick smile curved her lips, but she shook it off, backing away from me to slip on her sandals.

By the time we stepped out of the room, Rosey’s phone was buzzing again. Another look at the screen made her sigh. She picked up her pace, her fingers lacing with mine as we weaved along the resort’s stone paths toward the oceanfront building where her sister had booked a suite.

We climbed the stairs and rushed down the hall.

Jacob left a room farther along the corridor, and his face lit up when he saw us. Joining us, he leaned against the wall. A grin spread across his face. “There you two

are.” His blond hair was slightly damp, and despite the casualness of his posture, energy rolled off him. “Macy’s freaking out.” His grin didn’t slip, though. If anything, it widened with true amusement. “But that’s kind of her thing, right? She put a lot of time into making sure this would be perfect, and it only makes me love her more. I’ve never seen her this excited, and it’s making me crazy happy too.”

“I’m sorry,” Rosey said. “We overslept. I should’ve been here an hour ago. I don’t blame her for being upset.”

He waved her off. “Don’t worry about it. She’ll calm down. Once you’re in there, getting ready, she’ll relax.”

Rosey turned to me and curled her finger, urging me to lower my head near hers. She kissed me, and I wanted to lift her, press her against the wall. Instead, I tried to keep it chaste—sort of. There was no such thing as chaste when it came to Rosey. Pulling away, her cheeks pinkened and her smile matched the gleam in her eyes. “You.”

I knew very well what she meant, and I couldn’t keep the grin of pride off my face.

“I’ll see you at the wedding,” she said. “Why don’t you go get some brunch at the buffet?”

Jacob’s palm clapped against my shoulder before I could step away. “No need.” His tone came out brisk but warm. “Come with me. We’ve got food and drinks in the guys’ suite. You’re welcome to join us. I can see you two . . .” His face flooded with color. Was he having regrets for his prior behavior? “Anyway. It would mean a lot to me if you joined us.”

I hesitated, my gaze flickering between him and Rosey. She shrugged, mouthing, “Up to you,” before disappearing through the door of Macy’s suite.

“Alright,” I said, nodding my thanks. “I appreciate it.”

“Great, great.” Jacob urged me down the hall to another door. I stepped inside behind him to find three other men in various stages of dressing. Their chatter peppered with jokes and bursts of laughter relaxed me.

“Hey, guys,” Jacob said. “Ostor’s going to hang out with us.”

One male lifted a glass my way. “Welcome.”

The others joined in, their smiles making me feel included for the first time since I got here.

“We don’t need anywhere near as much time as the women to get ready,” Jacob said, pouring two drinks from a small buffet set up on a table along one wall. He dropped down onto a big sofa and clunked his shoes on the low table in front, settling back and sipping one of the drinks. “This is for you.” He held the drink out to me, and I went over to stand beside him, taking it with my thanks.

With a touch of seriousness on his face, Jacob patted the sofa beside him. “Have a seat, dude. We should talk.”

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Chapter 21

Rosey

“ I now pronounce you husband and wife,” the woman dressed in a brightly flowered dress said, beaming at Macy and Jacob standing in front of her. “You may kiss the bride.”

Cheers erupted as Jacob dipped Macy back into a kiss that could’ve come straight out of a movie. The sound of the waves crashing beyond them only added to the moment. I couldn't stop grinning. My sister looked absolutely radiant, her curls wild in the ocean breeze and her smile so big it could've lit up the entire coastline. For the first time in weeks, months, even, I didn’t feel that awful twist in my chest when I looked at them together. This was right. This was how it was supposed to be.

Standing beside Macy near the simple wooden arch draped with fluttering ribbons and tropical flowers, I felt like my heart was finally in the right place. Maybe because I wasn’t crushed by the memory of what Jacob and I almost were. Maybe because all I could think about was the orc in the last row of chairs, towering above the rest of the guests even while sitting.

As Jacob lifted his head and Macy gave him a sweet smile, the small group of guests cheered.

“Aw, sweetheart.” Mom and Dad rushed up to the happy couple, doling out hugs.

My gaze sought Ostor's, but he wasn’t staring at me. His eyes were locked on the

sand by his feet, the brim of his cowboy hat throwing a shadow across his face. My gorgeous orc cowboy. I couldn't wait to be with him again.

The officiant's voice cut through the applause. "Guests, you're invited to make your way to the ocean view dining area for the reception. The wedding party will join you after they've taken photographs. Don't worry, Jacob and Macy will be there in time for dinner. Wedding party and parents? Please remain behind."

Macy turned toward me, her cheeks flushed and her eyes sparkling. She grabbed my hands, squeezing them as she let out a squeal. "I'm married!" She beamed, like the words themselves were a spell she wanted to recite a billion times.

"You are." I kissed her cheek. "I'm so happy for you, Mace." I meant it, with every bit of me.

As the rest of our group began trailing toward the reception area, I caught Ostor's gaze. My heart softened at the sight of him standing so still, his hands stuffed casually into the pockets of the pants he'd brought just for the wedding. He must've run back to the room to shower and change.

I gave him a small nod. It didn't matter if he wasn't the loudest, most outgoing person here. It didn't matter that he didn't blend neatly into my world. Ostor stood at the center of it all. He didn't know it yet, but soon? Yes, he would. Last night had carved something new between us, something deep that felt steady and bright and secret all at once. Whatever doubts I might've had about us were gone. He was mine, and I was his. The rest was just details. I couldn't wait to go home and see where those details would take us.

"Rosey, come on, we have photos to take." Macy tugged on my arm, pulling me toward the wedding party now gathering closer to the arch.

I shot one final glance toward Ostor before letting her drag me along, my fingers brushing over the inside of my wrist where that strange golden imprint still shone—a mark that felt like a promise instead of a mystery. It connected me to him in a way I was eager to explore.

I'd read romance novels. I'd heard of mating marks.

Was that what this was?

I couldn't wait to ask him.

The photographer, a charming older man with salt-and-pepper hair and boundless energy, herded us into formation. Macy laughed through the whole thing, tossing out instructions of her own while Jacob stood beside her, grinning like he'd won the lottery. Pictures were snapped of the newlyweds, just them first. Poses of them holding hands, looking into each other's eyes were followed by photos of them with the rest of the wedding party. Mom and Dad.

Peace settled over me. It wasn't just that today had gone perfectly. It wasn't just that Macy was ridiculously in love, either. It was the thought of Ostor waiting for me to join him.

Finally, the photographer dismissed us, and we walked to the oceanfront dining room. The late-day sun cast long, golden streaks across the sand, making the entire beach glow like something right out of a postcard. Inside, the tables had been set with white linens, small vases of tropical flowers, and with tiny pink seashells scattered across the surface. Warm light poured through open windows, joined by the distant crash of waves.

Ostor sat near the middle of one of the long tables, a seat pulled out for me beside him. Relief filled his eyes when I joined him, and he slid his hand over mine under

the table, his palm warm.

Macy and Jacob had been ushered to their own table at the head of the room, and as the servers brought out glasses of champagne for the toasts, Macy glowed from the inside out.

Waiters swooped in, bringing dish after dish of amazing food I couldn't wait to taste. But before we could dig in, Macy's best friend Frannie stood with a champagne glass in hand, lifting it with a big grin. She clinked her knife to the glass. "Alright, alright, everyone. It's time for toasts."

Cheers rang out, and everyone lifted their glasses as Frannie began talking. One by one, others stood and took their turn, Jacob's best man finishing off his speech to a round of applause.

I stood and spoke as well. "To my sister, Macy. To her beloved husband, Jacob. May their lives together be full of sweetness and fire."

"Yay," Macy cried out, draining her glass of champagne.

I turned to Ostor, keeping my voice low. "What do you think? Have you seen a human wedding before?"

He startled, though I wasn't sure why. "No, no, I haven't. It was lovely. I'm happy for them."

I leaned against his chest. "Yeah, me too."

"Not sad?"

I shook my head. "Not anymore." Should I tell him that I'd put that behind me, that I

only wanted to focus on him?

Nah, I'd wait until we were alone. This time was for my sister and Jacob. Our time would come.

The newly wedded couple kissed again, sparking another wave of cheers. He whispered something in her ear, and she laughed, shaking her head before kissing his cheek.

“Let's eat!” she finally said.

As everyone dove into overflowing plates of food, I glanced over at Ostor again, catching the way he shifted in his chair.

“Are you okay?” I asked, and he shrugged. Unsure why his mood had changed and . . . Alright, I was uneasy about why his mood had changed, I stared at my plate before picking at the food.

After we finished, people danced, their laughter blending with the perky beat of the mariachi band, while the twinkle lights sparkled on the polished wooden dance floor. The reception had hit its peak. Our plates were gone, champagne glasses had been refilled, and couples swayed in time with a romantic tune. This was exactly Macy's vibe.

Ostor, though, seemed . . . off. Instead of looking like he was enjoying a party, he sat beside me, his hulking frame stiff and his focus on his hands clasped on the table. His cowboy hat cast a shadow over his features, but even in the dim light, I couldn't miss the furrow in his brow.

“Hey.” I nudged his arm. “Want to dance?”

His gaze flicked to mine before shooting away. A small, almost smile tugged at his lips, and he shook his head. “I don’t know how.”

“We can fix that.” I leaned closer and lowered my voice. “I’ll show you how. It’s easy, really. Just wiggle your hips and move your arms, and you’ll fit in with everyone else.”

This time, his smile didn’t even rise. He turned back to the table, picking at the edge of a discarded napkin. “Maybe another time.” His voice came out quieter than usual, with none of its usual playfulness.

I tried to brush it off. He was tired. We were up most of the night making love, and the rush to get ready for the wedding hadn’t exactly set a relaxed tone for the day. He probably needed some time to sleep. Relax. It was no big deal.

Still, something tugged at my nerves. It wasn’t like him to retreat into himself like this. Not after everything we’d done together. “Was Jacob okay earlier?” I asked, partly to urge him to speak, partly because I was curious. Jacob inviting Ostor to hang out in the guys’ suite had been a surprise. He hadn’t given me the impression he wanted to be with Ostor, though that could’ve changed. He couldn’t be jealous any longer; not after Macy said I do.

Ostor shifted in his seat, his fingers grazing the side of his glass before he lifted it and took a sip of water. “He was nice. Not acting strange at all. Just sharing some human customs.”

“Customs?” I frowned. “Like what?”

He placed the glass down, the movement careful, as if he was buying time to think. But subterfuge wasn’t Ostor’s way. “Simple things. How humans celebrate various occasions. How they build relationships. Choices.” His words came out loaded with a

meaning I couldn't pin down.

"That's . . . interesting." I tried to keep my voice light. Reaching for his hand lying on the table, I linked our fingers, hoping touch would shove aside whatever had come over him.

Ostor tugged his hand away and lifted his gaze to watch the dancers.

My stomach jerked sideways. "What's wrong?" A cavern was spreading through my chest.

He shrugged. "Things will go the way they're supposed to. You don't need to worry. Please don't worry."

But I was worried. His words felt sharp, and they made my heart sting. Something had shifted between us, but I couldn't put my finger on what it might be. Was he regretting last night? It could've been too much or too fast for him. I knew almost nothing about orc customs, which meant it would be easy for me to do or say something that might offend him. I told myself not to overthink it, but that cavern in my chest widened.

The day had been off-kilter for both of us. Rushed mornings could throw anyone off, right? We could talk later. I could fix whatever I might've done to . . . offend him—assuming I'd offended him. The rest of the night would be fine. It had to be.

The band took a break, and everyone wandered back to their tables. Macy and Jacob still swayed in the center of the dance floor, gazing at each other like no one else existed. That goofy, heart-pounding love they shared radiated through the entire room. Seeing them like that made my heart ache. Not with jealousy, but with longing. I wanted what they had, but I wanted it with Ostor.

“Maybe we should go back to our room,” I finally said. The guests were beginning to trickle away, a few stopping by to say goodbye to the happy couple who continued to sway, gazing into each other’s eyes.

Ostor’s attention shifted to me. “Alright.”

We left, strolling through the resort. His hand hung close to mine, brushing my fingers as we walked, actually, but he didn’t reach out. He didn't say anything either.

I searched his features for a sign of what could be churning in his mind, but his expression gave nothing away. His quiet demeanor usually calmed me, but tonight he felt distant, and I had no clue what to do about it.

Had I imagined the spark I’d seen in his eyes? The way he’d held me, kissed me, whispered my name like I meant something to him? No. This had all been real, as vivid as the golden mark on my wrist that flickered whenever I looked at it. If the fates or whatever cosmic forces linking us had brought us together, I had to trust they knew what they were doing. Trust in Ostor.

We reached our building, climbing the stairs to our room. He opened the door for me, his hand brushing my back as I walked inside. The touch reassured me, though I couldn’t shake the anxiety spiking through in my belly.

I slipped off my sandals and set them in the closet, glancing back at him as he followed me in. “I should pack. They're picking us up to take us to the airport really early.”

“Me too,” he said.

It didn't take long to gather my things, and after setting aside the outfit I'd wear on the plane, I wheeled my bag to the wall where it would wait until morning.

“Would you like the bathroom first?” I asked, eager to get out of my formal dress.

“You can have it.” Turning, he walked out onto the balcony.

Okay. I could deal with this. He wasn’t rejecting me like Jacob had.

It didn’t take me long to shower off the makeup and oodles of hairspray, plus scrub my body. I dressed in my PJs and did my teeth. But instead of leaving the bathroom, I stared into the mirror.

My sad eyes gazed back at me. “He’s not going to dump you. He cares as much as you do.”

But my eyes stung as I opened the door.

“All yours,” I called out with fake cheer.

Ostor rose from his chair on the balcony and passed me in the hall, his big body brushing mine in the narrow space. Nibbling on my lower lip, I watched him retreat into the bathroom. My heart gave a rogue thump. Another. And, oh, how it stung.

With a sniff, I slipped under the cool, crisp sheets of the bed, pulling them up to my chest. After turning off the light, I laid on my back, staring at the ceiling. Anticipation curled in my belly. Tonight felt different. Bigger. We’d connect again tonight, and everything would feel normal in the morning.

I waited.

And waited some more, but he didn’t come out of the bathroom.

The want in my chest began to shift into an ache I couldn’t deny.

A rustle told me he was moving around inside the bathroom. An eternity passed. Was he pacing? Making sure his tusks were super clean?

Worry started digging its claws into my confidence, and I started making up excuses. He was taking his time. He was nervous. Would it be strange if I checked on him? I didn't want to come across clingy.

The canyon solidified itself inside my chest, shoving aside the happiness I'd found over the past few days. I tried to convince myself this was nothing, to shrug it off as him needing space. But it didn't stop the stab of pain deep in my belly.

As my eyelids grew heavy, the light on the balcony faded.

The last feeling skating across my mind wasn't one of excitement anymore.

It was a quiet whisper of sadness.

Chapter 22

Ostor

I didn't say much the next morning. What could I say?

An apology might help, perhaps. Or I could get down on my knees and beg her to give me another chance to prove I was worthy.

Since I didn't know how to bring this all up, I said nothing as we quickly grabbed food at the buffet, as we rode in the transport vehicle to the airport, as we made our way through the check-in process.

"Oh, lucky you," the man behind the counter said, his gaze landing on me. "They upgraded you to first class. We've been trying to do this as often as we can with orcs, at least until we've fitted larger chairs in the main cabin."

"What about Rosey?" I asked.

"He speaks," she hissed in a voice almost too low to hear.

I wanted to tell her that I ached to pour out my heart to her, but I didn't know what I could say to fix this.

"I'm sorry." The man's smile fell. "But there's only one seat available. You don't have to take it. I'm sure someone else—"

“No,” Rosey barked, not looking my way. “Take the first-class seat, Ostor. I’ll be fine in the one I booked before the trip.”

“I’ll sit with you.” Maybe then I could find a way to tell her I was sorry.

“I insist,” she growled, backing away from me. “Take it. You need the legroom. I don’t.”

“I don’t want to—”

“I said I’ll be fine!” She lifted her big suitcase and slammed it down onto the scale. “You’ll be too cramped if you sit with me.”

“Alright.” Maybe I could compose my thoughts and figure out how I could correct all the mistakes I’d made. By the time we landed, I could pour out my heart and make this right.

If she’d listen. She seemed angry, though I already knew why.

I’d messed this up horribly.

We made our way through security and took seats on the other side to wait until they called for us to board. Before I could try to somewhat bridge the widening gap between us, she rose. “I need to go to the bathroom. I’ll be back. Watch my carry-on, would you?” She scooted away before I could say a thing.

She didn’t return until they were calling for us to board, and only then to grab her bag and sling it over her shoulder, give me a wan smile, and urged me to go with the rest of those sitting in the front of the plane.

I did as she suggested, but I sought her gaze as she made her way down the aisle. She

kept her eyes studiously on the floor, not looking my way.

Not even once.

I truly had ruined this for us both.

Chapter 23

Rosey

By the time our flight landed back home, I'd come to the realization that it was over between Ostor and I before it truly got started. I'd tossed my heart at another man, though honestly, I hadn't loved Jacob, but I'd been rejected even faster.

Ostor wasn't interested in having more with me. If he was, he would've made that clear. Maybe he was only looking for a weekend fling. Did orcs do that sort of thing?

All guys do, I chided myself. You thought he was different, but you were wrong. Terribly wrong.

If only there was an exit off the back of the plane. But, yay, first-class passengers got to disembark first. If I was lucky, I wouldn't see him again. Then I could go home, curl up on my bed, and sob for the rest of my life.

This felt so much worse than with Jacob . . .

. . . Because I'd fallen in love with Ostor. There it was. It only took three days of his charm, and I handed my heart to him only to have him chew on it a bit before tossing it back, mangled.

Every step I took, dragging my suitcase toward customs, felt like a fist tightening around my chest. It wasn't the physical weight of the bag. It was the load in my soul, this dense bundle of pain I couldn't shake free.

Of course Ostor would breeze through first-class customs and vanish without needing to wait. That was a perk of flying with the elite, though I wasn't mad about that. No, the bitterness coiling in my stomach came from the fact that he didn't even say goodbye. No quiet "take care" or even a fake, polite "it was fun." Just a long weekend, a handful of kisses and tons of mind-blowing sex, then he ghosted me at the airport terminal.

What did I expect? That he'd sweep me into his arms and declare his undying love, right in the middle of baggage claim? That this guy, who wasn't tethered to this peculiar human world of mine would decide I was enough to make him stay? Yeah, right, Rosey. You'd think after my bad luck with one guy, I would've known better.

My eyes burned, but I wasn't going to cry in public. Not here, surrounded by exhausted travelers clutching wailing kids' hands, old couples kissing like true love actually lasted, and teenagers gazing around with sullen expressions on their faces. No one cared about some girl whose sorta boyfriend didn't stick around long enough to say goodbye.

A stamp, a nod, a half-hearted welcome back, and then I was through customs. I scanned the crowd out of habit more than anything else, hoping for something I couldn't give name to. But nope. Ostor was gone.

The carousel was another kind of purgatory, its endless rotation of spinning bags that weren't mine mocking me. When my suitcase finally emerged from the blackened tunnel, I lunged for it. My hands trembled as I yanked it upright and smacked it on the linoleum floor, the wheels screeching as I pulled it toward the exit.

Outside, I tugged my bag along the sidewalk, the painted lines on the curb blurring. My chest felt hollow, achy. Just a few more steps, and this would all be over. I'd go home, lie on my bed, and spend the weekend crying about how stupid I was to think an orc cowboy would fall for me.

“Goodbye,” Ostor’s voice rumbled behind me, unmistakably his.

I froze, my grip on the suitcase handle tightening until my knuckles twitched.

I didn’t turn around. I couldn’t.

“I’ll communicate once I have a plan,” he said.

And what did that mean?

I wasn’t sure why, but his words stung more than an outright rejection. My feet wanted to move, to keep me from facing the mess of whatever this was. But my body rebelled, pinning me in place on the concrete sidewalk.

“Bye, Ostor,” I said, willing my voice not to break because, damn, it wanted to. “It was . . . fun.” Fun? That was all I could come up with? My nails dug into the suitcase handle, and I barely held back the wave of emotions about to smack into me. “Do you have a way home?” I asked stiffly, still not turning to look at him.

“I’ve texted one of my brothers to come get me.” His voice came out heavier than before.

“Good,” I snapped.

“Good,” he echoed, just as clipped.

Anger began churning through my veins, stomping through the sadness that I’d been drowning in through the flight. My steps quickened, my heels smacking against the pavement as I stormed out onto the crosswalk with only the clatter of Ostor’s roller bag behind me.

“Wait,” he called out with what I swore sounded like desperation.

Nah, it couldn't be.

But I stopped—right there on the crosswalk. A car waited to pass, the driver tapping his hand on the steering wheel. He tooted the horn.

“Yeah, you know what, buddy?” I snarled at him. “I'm here. Pedestrians rule. You can sit on your ass and give me a chance to . . .” Well, I didn't know what I was going to do.

A tiny, stupid part of me that still cared, that still hoped, won out. Slowly, I turned, expecting Ostor to look shamefaced, to fumble some generic explanation that would soften the blow of this parting.

What I didn't expect was to find Ostor kneeling right behind me. His hat fell to the side as he reached for my hands. The rough warmth of his touch sent a jolt looping through me, stabbing through that flicker of hope I'd tried to snuff out.

“I messed up,” he said, the words tumbling out of him at a frantic pace. “I messed up everything, Rosey. Human courtship, your customs— everything . I don't know how to do this, how to show you I care about you without ruining it even more.” His rough thumbs brushed against the backs of my hands, his dark eyes lifting to meet mine with a rawness that pinned me in place.

The car wheeled around us, tires squealing, but I could only see this gorgeous orc male who was turning my hand over and kissing the tiny symbol on the back of my wrist.

“Ostor.” My heart was breaking all over again because this felt much too real. “Why do I have this mark?”

He traced his fingertip across it. “It’s a mating mark. It means . . . It means . . .”

“What?” I croak. “Tell me.”

“That the fates chose me for you.”

It was all I could do to remain on my feet. “What do you think about that? Do you feel forced?”

He shook his head, not looking up. “How could I? But I messed it up, and I’m going to fix it.”

“I’m not sure what you messed up.” My brain was spinning, confusion stabbing the surface here and there, making it hard to think.

“I’m going to figure it out,” he said, his words gaining strength even as his voice cracked. “I’ll fix all of it. You deserve better than a male who fumbles around, not knowing what to say, what to do, or how to play volleyball.”

“Volleyball?”

“I shouldn’t have put my cock inside you. Or dragged my tongue through your warm wetness. Or sucked on your clit.”

“You go, dude,” a woman said, passing us. She gave me a bright smile. “Gotta love a guy with a good tongue.”

I shook my head, dismissing her, focusing on this guy who was finally looking up at me, his heart blazing on his face.

He jerked in a breath, and his grip on my hands tightened. “Jacob told me everything,

and I'm grateful.”

Once again, I wanted to kick Jacob. “What did he say to you?”

“Only good things. He said you’re amazing. That you deserve the best of everything. That he hates that he hurt you, though he couldn’t help loving Macy. He said you deserve someone who knows what they’re doing, someone who can handle your warmth and strength and every shiny thing about you that should never be dimmed.”

I blinked, the weight of his words knocking me sideways. “Jacob said all that?”

Ostor nodded, his gaze locked on mine like I was the only thing tethering him to the ground. “He was right, Rosey. You’re wonderful. Perfect. Sublime. The kind of person any man or orc would be honored to have by their side. He told me ways to win your love, how to be everything you need. And I ruined it. I . . . I . . .” Emotion clogged his throat, cutting him off, but I didn’t need him to finish.

I already knew what he was trying to say.

Tears spilled down my cheeks. This big, sweet, awkward orc was kneeling in the middle of a crosswalk because he couldn’t let me walk away without trying to tell me everything he felt for me in his heart.

“Get up,” I said, my voice half-laugh, half-sob as I tugged his hands. “Please.”

“How can I fix it?” His wide, black eyes searched mine, vulnerable and so painfully, achingly hopeful that it twisted my heart into knots. “Tell me. I’ll do anything you ask, whatever you need.”

“Get up, Ostor.” I tugged harder, and he finally rose to his feet, towering over me. “You’re too hard on yourself. Don’t you already know? I don’t need fancy dates or

bouquets of flowers or whatever else Jacob might have suggested. I only need you, Ostor. Nothing and no one else. Just you .”

“Does that mean . . . Do you mean you'll give me another chance to prove to you that I love you?”

“It does, cowboy.” My lips curved into a smile. “Because I love you too, and that’s all that truly matters.”

“You do?”

I nodded. “I do. I love you so much.”

“Rosey,” he groaned, cupping my face with a delicate touch. “ Rosey .”

I snagged his cowboy hat and smacked it onto my head. Then I leaped into his wide-open arms.

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ROSEY

Two Months Later

The sun hung near the horizon in a clear blue sky as the stagecoach creaked to a stop at the center of Lonesome Creek, the newly created “Wild West” town where Ostor and his six brothers would soon open a new tourist destination. It looked the part of a Western ghost town with its dusty wood-planked sidewalks, swinging saloon doors, and weathered signs for the general store, jailhouse, and a schoolhouse.

“This . . .” I trailed off, clutching the edge of the coach door. “This is amazing, Ostor.”

He hopped down first, his boots kicking up small puffs of dust. Spinning toward me, he grinned, tipping his hat back enough for me to catch the gleam of pride in his eyes. “Welcome to your new home, tiny one.”

The words were a little softer than his usual teasing, and my chest clenched at the way he said them. He’d dreamed of this moment as much as I had. This move was something we’d planned together, but hearing him call it my home out loud? It hit differently.

I’d quit my job and jumped all in with this new adventure, where I planned to help take care of the vast gardens they planned. Finally, I’d have a new use for the green thumb I’d had since I was little. They hoped to feed their guests completely from what they could grow and hunt on the surrounding land, and I would be a part of it all.

Taking both my hands in his, he steadied me as I stepped down. My sandals landed on firm ground, and before I could take in much of anything else, the air filled with a cacophony of cheers and running foot stomps. Six enormous orcs dressed in chaps, patterned shirts, open leather vests, and cowboy hats, waved and hollered as they rushed toward us from what looked like a combination barn and meeting hall on the town's edge. A slightly smaller orc woman with streaks of white in her short green hair led the charge.

Ostor grinned, his arm slipping around my shoulders as the group hustled over. "Here come my brothers and Aunt Inla."

Ah, the infamous brothers. I'd heard plenty about them over the past months, their names coming up in Ostor's stories every other sentence, but I'd only met Greel, who'd come to the airport to collect Ostor. He'd stared at me, his mouth slightly ajar, and said absolutely nothing. Ostor had mentioned that Greel was married to a woman named Jessi, and I couldn't wait to meet her. We could compare notes. Not about that . . . but about how amazing our orc guys were.

Sel, Hail, Dungar, Tark, Ruugar, and Greel. Six big, goofy, pointy-eared versions of Ostor. They were also terrifyingly huge and adorably lonesome. They all needed brides, and I was going to see what I could do about that.

They came to a stop and all removed their hats, holding them against their chests while shuffling their dusty boots across the ground, their dark gazes darting in all sorts of directions.

"Ostor." One of them leaped forward, giving my mate a back-slapping hug that looked like it could break a boulder. "Is this your precious human with the perfect name of Rosey?"

I grinned. "That's me."

Sel? Maybe Tark. One of the twins, for sure, gave me a sheepish grin as he scratched the back of his neck. “She’s small, like Jessi,” he whispered out of the corner of his mouth to Ostor.

Oddly enough, what looked like a raven perched on his right shoulder. It flapped its wings and pecked his cowboy hat before settling.

“Very small,” he whispered, but then, he was the biggest of the bunch, standing at least four inches above all the other orcs. And he was broader. The sweet look in his dark eyes belied his hulk-like appearance, however.

“I’m sorry.” The tips of Tark’s ears darkened. “I shouldn’t have remarked on your size. Greel didn’t mention how tiny you are.”

“Greel doesn’t say much of anything,” another brother said.

“I talk,” Greel said with a scowl.

“It’s okay,” I said, giving him a sympathetic look. “What’s your raven’s name?”

Tark’s face darkened to match his ears. “Sharga. That means Shadow in orcish.” He gently stroked the creature’s spine, his fingers appearing huge when compared to the bird.

Their aunt bustled forward and gave me a hug, lifting me off my feet and almost crushing the air from my lungs. “Welcome, sweetness. Welcome. Call me Aunt Inla, please.”

“Thank you.”

“Rosey may be small, but she has the biggest heart,” Ostor said. “Which you’ll soon see.”

“She must if she's with you.” Another brother stepped closer, holding out an enormous hand and tipping his head in greeting. “It’s nice to meet you, Rosey. I’m Ruugar.”

One by one, they introduced themselves, each offering shy smiles mixed with a touch of hope that made me feel happy and sad at the same time. None of them were married. From what Ostor said, few of them had even dated.

“I . . .” Color rose into Greel’s face as he patted my shoulder. “Jessi. Wife. Mate.”

“Jessi is amazing,” Dungar said. He peered around. “She’s here somewhere. I know she can’t wait to meet you. Jessi. Jessi!”

Greel glared at his brother. “Don’t yell at my mate.”

A lopsided grin rose on Dungar’s face. “I love her. You know that.”

“Don’t,” Greel growled.

Dungar laughed.

“You must be Rosey.” An older woman rushed out of the General Store, the swinging half-doors closing behind her. Reaching us, she gave me a big hug. “I’m Grannie Lil. You can call me that. I’m Jessi’s grandmother, but I’ve adopted every one of these guys and whoever they love, so that includes you.” She beamed.

Talk about being bowled over. “It’s nice to meet you.”

A woman with curly, shoulder-length brown hair left the General Store as well and joined us, leaning into Greel’s side. He wrapped her in his arms and curled his big body forward to kiss her cheek.

“Mate,” he sighed.

“I’m Jessi.” The woman’s bubbly laugh was infectious, and I found myself joining in as I shook her hand. “Welcome to Lonesome Creek. Where the cowboys are hot and orc and . . . hot.” She grinned. “I need to work on that logline, don’t I?”

“It’s amazing,” Greel said reverently, his eyes only for her.

“I’ll help if you want,” I said.

“That would be wonderful.” Jessi’s warm gaze scanned the guys looking raptly at me.

So many orc bachelors in need of love.

“I have plans for the rest of these boys,” Grannie Lil said. “Dating apps can work wonders.”

Greel’s face darkened, and he grunted.

“What woman wouldn’t want to meet one of my nephews?” Aunt Inla asked. “We’re setting things up, and we’ll rope in whoever is willing.”

Lil chuckled and nudged Inla with her elbow. “I do love using cowboy lingo, don’t you, partner?”

“It’s mighty fine,” Inla said. “Darn near perfect.” With a hand on her hip, she cocked an eyebrow at Ostor. “You’ve done well for yourself, nephew. A human bride, and a pretty one. When’s the wedding?”

“We haven’t picked a date yet,” I said.

Jessi’s smile widened. “I’ll help with the plans. I mean . . . if you’d like help.”

“I’d love that.” I could already tell I was going to love it here in Lonesome Creek. “I’ll reach out soon. I’m making a list.”

Ostor ducked his head, the tips of his ears twitching. “The wedding will be soon, Auntie.” We’d agreed on that. “I won’t risk her changing her mind.”

I snorted. “As if.”

“Smart boy.” Inla patted his cheek, her tusks glinting in the late-day sunlight as she turned her attention back to me. “And you are one smart cake yourself.”

“Cookie,” Lil said with a snort. “It’s one smart cookie.”

“Cake. Cookie. Whatever.” Inla grinned as she delivered the same stroke of her thumb to my cheek. “I can already see that you’re good for him, sweetness. His heart’s pure fymson.”

Their version of gold.

I leaned into his side. “I see that already.”

“Alright, then.” Aunt Inla clapped her hands. “Back to work, younglings. There's still much to do to get ready for our grand opening. Perhaps . . .” Frowning, she tapped her chin. “I wouldn’t normally suggest such a thing, but what would you two think of holding your marriage right here in town as part of one of the attractions?”

“We’ll discuss it,” Ostor said, glancing down at me.

I nodded. My wedding a performance for the crowd? I wasn’t sure what I thought about that idea. We hadn’t talked about what kind of ceremony we wanted. Orcs didn’t hold formal weddings like humans. A mating mark was the same as a wedding band to them.

The guys gave me sweet smiles before sauntering away, returning to whatever they were doing before we arrived.

“I’ll be in touch,” Jessi said over her shoulder as she and Grannie Lil strode back to the general store.

Greel watched Jessi before sighing and hurrying over to leap onto the back of a sorhox.

Aunt Inla stayed with us. “Take Rosey home and show her how an orc treats his new mate.” Taking my hand, she kissed the symbol of our love. Leave it to Ostor to wait to tell me about what the mark meant while kneeling in front of me at the airport. Although, it might’ve softened the blow I thought he’d deliver if I knew he already considered us married.

“Are you ready to go home, little one?” he asked me.

At my nod, he tipped his head back and released a guttural whoop, whoop, whoop sound.

The ground vibrated, and I spun toward the oncoming noise.

A minivan-sized sorhox thundered around the barn and rushed toward us, its cloven hooves pounding on the dirt, each hoof tipped with three forearm-long claws. Its spiked tail whipped and curled above its enormous body, sharp enough to slice through anything that got in its way. Its nostrils flared as it snorted, releasing a cloud of steam, and two massive fangs jutted from either side of its upper jaw. Thick horns spiraled away from the sides of its head; their sharp tips perfect for gouging through whatever obstacle dared cross its path.

The beast slowed as it drew near, coming to a halt beside Ostor. It lowered its head and nudged him hard enough to make his cowboy hat flop sideways.

“This,” Ostor said, using one hand to grab onto the beast’s horn-like ridge thrusting out from its brow. “Is Balo, my sorhox. Rosey, meet Balo.”

“Balo?” My voice came out higher than usual as I stared up at the beast, its massive eyes dark green and oddly intelligent as it snorted at me like a dragon waiting to blast something with fire.

“He won’t hurt you,” Ostor said. “Not now that he knows you’re mine.”

“Are you sure about that?” My knees knocked together, and I wasn't sure if I should stay put or bolt as far from Balo as possible. Seeing one at a distance was one thing. Touching it was something completely different.

Ostor reached for my hand, folding it into his own. “Do you trust me?”

“Yes . . .” The word stumbled out.

“Then it’s time to ride, my little one.” He wrapped his hands around my waist and tossed me up onto Balo’s spine, gently settling me in place.

“Oh no, no, no,” I flailed. “Where do I put my hands? Wait—where do I put my feet?”

“Let them hang.” In one leap, Ostor vaulted gracefully up behind me, his taut abdomen pressing against my back. His arms encircled my waist, steadying me, and he leaned close, his voice rumbling in my ear. “Are you ready, love?”

It wasn’t just the sorhox that made my heart race. It was the full weight of his words. Love. My chest swelled as I leaned back against him, relaxing into his embrace. “I am.”

With a nudge of his heels, he set the sorhox into motion. Its massive hooves struck

the earth like boulders as it galloped, and soon, the tourist town faded behind us. As the creature broke into a smooth, powerful gait, Ostor's arousal pressed against my back.

"Are you always like this when you ride?" A crooked grin curved my lips as I leaned further into his body.

"Only when I'm with you," he said.

As the sun started to set, streaking the sky with pink and orange, the sorhox carried us toward a horizon filled with promise.

"Yeehaw," I cried, lifting my arms over my head.

Ostor curled around me to kiss my cheek.