



# Hold my Reins (Monster Match season two)

**Author:** TJ Nichols

**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** Can a human man capture a kelpie's heart?

Assassin Lynck Whitehorse fled the monster realm and has built himself a good life in the human realm, teaching violin and serving coffees. He's used to the stares and the comments about his ears and hooves, and the hook-ups that only want to experiment, but going home is impossible because of the chain around his neck. If he steps through the portal, the monster who captured him and took him away from his herd will once again control his life, forcing him to kill, and he won't get the chance to escape again.

Since his mother's death Gideon 'Rox' Roxburgh has been adrift. He quit his job as a mechanic and has been traveling, seeking a place to call home. After six months on the road, he arrives in Elder Ridge, one of the monster portal towns, to work in the auto repair shop. While in a monster town, he takes a chance and downloads the app, not expecting any of the monsters to be interested in him. Especially not the tall and impossibly pretty kelpie he matches with...

But the closer they become, the more secrets are revealed, and it's only a matter of time before the past catches up with Lynck and Rox finds his world, and heart, ripped apart again.

**Total Pages (Source):** 27

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:32 am*

one

At first glance, Elder Ridge looked much like the other small towns Rox had passed through while traveling. Quaint houses, local shops and the occasional tourist gimmick, so people stopped and spent some money.

Rox paused at the lights, letting the differences soak in. It was one thing to know it was a monster town and to hear them talked about on the news, but another to be sitting in his truck watching something—someone—tall and furry walk past.

That was an actual monster.

He blinked and followed the creature's progress to the other side of the road. The car behind him honked, and Rox realized the lights had changed. He dragged his attention to the street and his quest to find the motel he'd booked until he'd gotten a feel for the town.

While he'd accepted a job at Elder Ridge Auto Repairs, if he hated the place, he wasn't sticking around. Life was too short. But so was money after drifting aimlessly for the last six months. He needed to stick this out long enough to put some money in his bank account in case he wanted to leave.

So far, he hadn't found anywhere that made him want to stay. A few places had actively wanted him gone because he didn't fit in. To which he said, 'fuck you.' They didn't like the way he dressed or the color he painted his nails; he didn't like their attitude.

While small towns had their problems, he wasn't ready to return to the anonymity of a big city, so when he'd seen the job advertised in a town with a monster portal, it was an opportunity to try something very different.

His phone guided him around the corner to the motel, which appeared to be less rough than some of the places he'd stayed. One had been so bad he'd slept in his truck instead of risking the bedbugs and roaches. He parked and wiped his hands on his jeans.

He tapped the visor where her photo was tucked and got out, feeling every stone of the asphalt through the worn sole of his runners as he crossed the lot to the office. Would there be a monster behind the desk?

Not that it mattered if the person was a monster, but he didn't want to startle or act weird.

He pushed open the door. A human woman sat behind the desk reading a book. She glanced up. "How can I help you, honey?"

"I've got a reservation, Gideon Roxburgh." He'd never hated his name until he'd met his father. After that, he understood what kind of man named his son after himself.

Her nails clacked on the keyboard. "Three nights, with the possibility of extending?"

"Yeah."

Her gaze skimmed over him. She appeared to be his mother's age. He squashed that thought down because his mother would never have another birthday, and he didn't want to think about that.

"Are you here on holiday or looking for work, honey?" She put a piece of paper on

the counter and offered him the pen.

Rox stood a little straighter, body tense. It was none of her business.

But she was smiling, not asking like she was going to make trouble.

He took the pen, wrote his truck's plate number, and signed. "New mechanic." He exhaled. "So I'll be here until I find somewhere to rent."

Unless his new boss took one look at him and wanted him gone. Without money, he wasn't going anywhere. He wasn't precious about work—he'd never had the luxury of being able to pick and choose—and there'd be other work in town he could do. But he wanted to do what he was qualified to do.

She nodded. "Did you travel far?"

"I've been on the road for a few months...looking..." He wasn't sure what he was looking for. At first, he'd just needed to get out of the city because he couldn't breathe, surrounded by tall buildings. The apartment he'd shared with his mother until she'd needed to go into care had been full of sickness and grief, which consumed all the happy memories. Then he'd lived for adventure and the experience, with no care about what happened next—that had required antibiotics, after which he'd stopped being so reckless. The last couple of months, he'd been trying to work out who he was and what he wanted, and he still had no fucking idea.

"Looking to settle here?" she pressed.

He shrugged. "Don't know."

"Well, I hope you find what you're looking for." She put a room key on the counter. "You're on the ground floor at the end. Keep the noise down after ten. No parties."

She pulled out a couple of flyers. “Map of the town. Auto shop is about a ten-minute walk. Beastly Brewhouse is popular with tourists who want to say they’ve seen a monster, and also with locals because they have the best coffee.” She drew a little asterisk on the map, marking the motel as she talked. “There are activities by the lake if you’re interested. Emergency information.” She grabbed the next one. “Places to eat.” She flipped it over. “And other local services.”

Rox didn’t need dog grooming or a hairdresser, but the local real estate agent might be handy. “Thanks.”

He gathered them up and headed out to grab his bag out of his truck, scanning the brochures as he walked to his room. There was a bar down the road that might be a good place to grab a meal and check out the locals.

He unlocked the door, glad that the room appeared clean, and dropped his bag on the floor while he checked out the bathroom and bed. Finding them both satisfactory, he firmed up his plans for the night.

Shower, unpack, redo his nails, and grab a beer.

But only one. He had work tomorrow.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:32 am*

two

Rox ran his fingers through his hair, then pulled some of it back into a messy ponytail so it was out of his face. It was a look that worked best with some smudgy eyeliner. He hesitated, then erred on the side of fuck it. He might as well find out on the first night what the town was like.

He grabbed his jacket and pulled it on, which ruined the effect of the mesh undershirt and T-shirt, but he wasn't freezing his ass off to look good. Six years ago, he totally would've. He gave the room a quick once over to make sure there was nothing obvious to steal sitting out, then grabbed his phone, wallet, and keys and headed out.

The bar promised to cater to all and had live music on Friday and Saturday nights. He wasn't sure a town of this size had a dedicated gay bar, and he wasn't sure if this was the more touristy one or the one the locals used.

The only other bar he'd found in walking distance had been a sports bar that boasted about its TVs, which was not his scene. He wanted a meal and a drink and to suss out the vibe of the town. That was all.

Maybe see if he got any hits on an app...

Although he wasn't sure he could be bothered after a six-hour drive. Collapsing into bed, spread out like a starfish until his alarm woke him, had an undeniable appeal.

The sidewalk was busier than he'd expected, with people moving between venues and talking with their friends. He drew in a breath at the sight of several obvious not-

humans. Monsters . They really were everywhere in the portal towns. He glanced away before he was accused of staring, even though he wanted to stare.

Actual, real life, reach out and touch them, monsters.

What a fucking rush.

While he'd done a bit of reading about the monster towns, he didn't know much about monsters. There were the usual doom-sayers, claiming that monsters would take jobs, eat children, and steal women, but most people who lived around them didn't seem to have a problem.

He pushed open the bar door and stepped inside. The air was warm and smelled of chips and beer, and too many perfumes and colognes. There were people at the bar and sitting in booths eating. The hum of chatter blended with the music.

He glanced around until he saw an empty table that must have been recently vacated from the pile of plates and sat. For a couple of seconds, that was all he did.

“Let me clean that up.” The waitress gathered up the plates. “I’ll be back in a moment to wipe the table and take your order. There’s a menu there.” She nodded to the end of the table, where a pot of cutlery and napkins sat.

“Thanks.” He scooted along and grabbed the menu, scanning the prices and wondering how long until he got his first paycheck. Sure, there was a little left in his bank account, but not enough to splash out. He’d bugged out of town one too many times.

This time, he needed to stick it out, if only to rebuild his cushion.

Besides, he was qualified to do the job, and it paid better than cleaning and waiting or

serving beers. And the town had monsters.

Those two things should be enough to keep him in one place for a bit. If only so he had some stories to tell.

Some that didn't involve scars.

"Are you waiting for anyone?" The waitress ran her cloth over the table.

"No, just me. I can move if you need this table—"

"You're fine. What can I get you?"

"Chicken burger." It came with fries and salad, so it was a decent meal.

"And to drink?" She gave him a list of beers on tap, and he chose the local one. Because why not?

Then he was left on his own to people-watch. Monster watch. There was a big, hairy guy behind the bar. He must be seven feet tall. Most people in the bar weren't giving the monster much attention. They must be used to seeing him. Which meant he felt as though he was staring simply by looking around.

He felt as though he was the only person sitting alone.

Even if that were true, it didn't matter. He was used to being on his own.

The waitress returned and placed his drink on a coaster.

"Thanks."

He took a sip, not sure what to expect, but it wasn't bad. As he went to put it down, he stopped. The logo on the coaster caught his eye.

Monster Match.

He'd heard about it and laughed about it along with others when it was discussed. Who'd want to hook-up with a monster, right? That was weird. LOL.

But now he was in town and seeing monsters in the flesh for the first time, it might be fun to hook-up with one.

It would certainly be a story.

And if he didn't take the chance now, when else was he going to?

He pulled his phone out of his pocket, typed in the app details, and downloaded it. Then he needed to answer questions he'd never considered.

What was he looking for? A friend, romance, sex, or kinky sex?

Wasn't sex with a monster already kinky? Or was he boring?

Why wasn't there an anything option? He could make friends if he tried...if he stuck around. He used other apps for sex if an uncomplicated, no-strings fuck was all he wanted. But it might be his only chance to hook-up with a monster.

His finger hovered over romance. He liked the idea of more, but people left. They couldn't be relied on, and what was the point in giving his heart up only to have it thrown back at him?

Fine. Sex it was. That was easy, and he knew what he was doing.

Well, he did with humans.

Next was a list of questions, and he needed to come up with a name...and not the one he usually used.

He started typing, then deleted it as it was stupid. He tried again.

I\_can\_drive\_a\_stick

That was just as stupid and very un-subtle, but he couldn't think of anything else. Fine, it's not like he needed to do anything. He was curious. Exploring options.

He was pretty sure he'd said much the same the first time he'd gotten his hands in another guy's pants and driven his first stick. He'd never tried anything else after.

His burger arrived, and he ate as he filled out all the information. He even found a half-decent selfie that he'd taken about a month ago.

Profile complete.

Now what?

He chewed on a fry, waiting for matches to pop up. Nothing. Ah well, the app had kept him entertained for a bit and made him think about what he wanted and liked. Knowing what he didn't want and didn't like only went so far.

Which is why he'd been on his own for the last six months.

Before that, he'd been folding up his mother's life with no room for anything but grief. He swallowed the lump forming in his throat. She'd put off holidays and such, always thinking she'd have later to enjoy the things she wanted to do. That was one

of the reasons he'd packed up and left. The other was the way all the memories were too sharp. It didn't matter which way he turned—he got cut.

His mother wouldn't be checking out the monsters from behind her beer glass. She'd be talking to them and wanting their life story. And because she'd been that kind of person, they'd tell her. She liked people...and she'd ended up with him. He'd been the weird loner at school, more interested in pulling things apart to see how they worked than hanging out with the jock and cheerleaders.

Together, they'd made a good team.

His phone pinged. He had a match.

So, some algorithm had matched his data to a monster's. Given that he wasn't sure about some of his answers, he didn't trust the accuracy of it, but he was curious to see who he'd been matched with.

His username was Whitehorse. The photo was of a man—no, a kelpie—according to his profile. Whatever the fuck that was. He had skin like moonlight, and ears like... Oh, a kelpie was a horse shifter. He had horse ears. His hair was also white, with streaks of green. Were they natural?

Wait, if he was a horse shifter, was he hung like a horse?

Was his junk normal or...monstrous?

He'd only drank one beer. Not nearly enough for this kind of thing. He put his phone on the table and concentrated on finishing his fries until it pinged again.

Who—and what—had he been matched with this time?

But it wasn't another match.

Whitehorse had sent him a nudge, as if aware that Rox had viewed his profile.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:32 am*

three

L ynck flipped the chairs and stacked them on the tables so he could mop the floor of the Beastly Brewhouse. It was only him in the closed store, so he'd turned off the music. The only sound was the tapping of his hooves on the wood floor as he did all the close-of-business chores. He much preferred closing to opening.

Opening was the wind up to chaos.

This was a peaceful unwinding.

As the mop bucket filled, he checked his phone, which had been buzzing in his pocket. The Monster Match app had found him a new human. He stared at the notification for several seconds. The last three men he'd matched with had wanted sex, with very little talk. Which was fine, but he preferred to get to know someone a bit before meeting up.

For the last couple of months, he'd been tempted to switch his profile to romance because he was so over monster-card-punching humans who only wanted a story to tell from the time they visited a town with a portal. But he hadn't changed his profile because romance meant more than a casual relationship, and there were things in his past that he couldn't talk about.

Which left him in a place of dissatisfaction with only himself to blame.

He needed to delete the app.

But he liked sex. What he wanted was what humans called friends with benefits. Something more than once off but less than offering his heart and the truth.

He checked on the bucket, but it was only half full. The sound of the rising water made him want to go for a swim after he finished up. The weather was warming up, and because of the new moon, there wouldn't be many people by the lake.

He tapped the notification to check out his human match.

His gaze landed on the photo, not taking in any of the important details. While the man's lips curved in a smile, his eyes were sad. His dark blond hair stuck out from beneath a gray knitted cap dusted with snow, and his cheeks were pink from the cold.

Lynck's interest inched up.

But hot humans were everywhere. So far, this guy, I\_can\_drive\_a\_stick, wasn't anything special. Lynck smiled at the username.

So, he had a sense of humor, also not rare.

He scanned the rest of the info.

Pronouns: He/Him

Age: twenty-six

Orientation: gay

Likes: cars, pulling things apart and putting them together, playing the piano, open spaces, bright nail polish, ripped jeans, coffee, homemade chocolate chip cookies

Dislikes: selfishness, my given name, vanilla (overrated scent and flavor)

That was an eclectic collection. The only clue as to why they matched was that Lynck also liked open spaces and coffee and taught the violin.

He turned off the tap. Was this human only seeking to hook-up?

His screen dimmed as he contemplated his options: ignore, wait, or do something. He scrolled back to the photo. `I_can_drive_a_stick` didn't look like he was after sex. Those guys showed a bit more skin—though it had taken him a while to notice the trend—and didn't have that sadness in their eyes.

After another moment of hesitation, Lynck sent him a poke to acknowledge the match, leaving what happened next up to the human man.

Halfway through mopping the dining area, his phone buzzed in his pocket.

Hi...I'm still figuring out this app.

So he was passing through and playing around.

Also, I've never been in a monster town...

He definitely wanted to fuck a monster for bragging rights.

Lynck waited for the question that usually followed when they realized he was a kelpie and what a kelpie was.

Anyway, I'm the new mechanic—unless he hates me on sight. I saw the app when I grabbed dinner and here I am. Rambling. What do you do? How long have you been here?

Lynck stared at his screen, not sure what to say, only that he wanted to respond because the human hadn't behaved as expected, and now he had questions. Why would the man who ran the auto repair shop hate him on sight? Where was he having dinner? And did he feel like joining him for a swim?

He nixed the last one, as he much preferred swimming on his own in the human world. In the monster world, things had been different, but he pushed those thoughts away. This was his home now, and he couldn't go back.

I teach violin and work at Beastly Brewhouse, and I've been in town a little over a year.

Long enough to have made himself a life, to miss his herd and his home and all that went with it. He glanced at the old piano in the corner of the shop. It wasn't used very often, except by children, and they made noise, not music.

There's a piano in the Brewhouse if you ever want to play.

I haven't played in months. I can't play with an audience.

Lynck hesitated, even though he really wanted to tell him to stop around at closing time. He'd need to clear that with the owner after he'd met the human in person.

If you want to miss the crowds, don't come in at opening.

Got ya. Can I ask your name or is this all anonymous?

It's not anonymous unless you want it to be.

He wanted to know who this man was. Which meant he needed to take the first step.

I'm Lynck. Whitehorse is the surname the human government gave me.

The name was something he'd needed for the visa to live and work in the human world. He hadn't realized that when he'd fled the monster world. He'd been so desperate to be approved to stay that he'd done whatever they asked. He touched the silver chain around his neck. The only thing he hadn't done was tell them what the necklace meant and what he'd done.

Rox.

Not your given name?

He asked, remembering the man's dislikes.

Haha...no. My nickname. Short for Roxburgh, which is my surname. So how does the horse shifter thing work, or shouldn't I ask that?

Lynck re-read the conversation, wondering if Rox was being polite before asking if Lynck had a horse dick. He wasn't sure.

It doesn't in your world.

At first, it had bothered him, but he'd gotten used to it. He'd come to terms with never going home, which meant never running on four feet. A small price for his freedom.

Oh, that must suck. So what are you up to now?

There it was. Lynck sighed. He'd been enjoying the chat. Now, it was getting to the point of the match. He put his phone on a table and moved the bucket, scrubbing at the floor even though he shouldn't be annoyed. They'd matched, and they wanted the

same thing...but he was tired of being a checkmark in a box of experiences.

On the other hand, Rox was hot, and interesting, and not passing through. He had a job, which meant they might cross paths again.

Which was dangerous. If he told the truth, word might reach the government's ears, and then he'd be tossed through the portal before having a chance to plead his case.

But at the same time, he didn't want to ignore the request. His interest had been spiked. With a stamp of his hoof, he set the mop aside and replied.

Not much. Want to meet up?

Would Rox get cold feet? Was he just dipping his toes in and seeing what would happen? Lynck waited for a reply, but one didn't bounce back. He'd scared him off with the direct request. Was that not what Rox had wanted?

He huffed and finished mopping the floor. Checked that everything was locked and headed to the lake. Now he needed to swim to burn off the annoyance—at himself for getting sucked in, and at humans in general—eddy through his veins.

He tugged at the silver chain, wishing the magic that bound it to him had been broken as easily as the power over him had been when he'd stepped through the portal.

Until the bridle was gone, he'd never be truly free.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:32 am*

four

Rox shrugged out of his jacket and tossed it over the chair. It was ridiculous to be excited about a little chat with a monster. But Lynck didn't look monstrous...or at least not in a scary way. He appeared luminous, magical, and impossible. But then, most monsters seemed impossible, like they shouldn't exist, which was probably monster-phobic of him. They probably looked at him and thought he shouldn't exist.

Some humans did too.

He curled his fingers and stared at his nails. Instead of redoing them, he should've cleaned them off and gone into work looking as boring as hell. But if the people around here accepted monsters, a bit of nail polish on a man shouldn't freak them out.

He checked his phone and saw that Lynck had replied with an offer to meet up.

Rox licked his lower lip, his pulse hot and heavy.

He shouldn't...

It was his first night in town, and he had an early start. Plus, he'd only had one beer, and he wasn't sure he that jumping into monster sex was a good idea. It probably wasn't that different from any other sex, a little weird and awkward at first if he didn't know the person while they negotiated what was on offer, followed by some fun.

But he wanted to...

And if it was an app filled with horny humans, he wouldn't be thinking twice. Instead of lying awake worrying about tomorrow, he'd be getting laid and relaxing.

So why hadn't he flicked open a human app and started scrolling at the bar? Why had he jumped into the Monster Match app?

Because he knew what to expect from a human man, and he was bored.

That was why when he'd been looking for actual jobs, this one had moved to the top of the list. He wanted something different.

He wanted to be different.

Though he couldn't say how. He'd been the only child, the carer, the grieving son...his entire life was defined by how he related to his mother. And now she was gone.

He'd do anything to ask her what he should do.

But that was the point, right?

He couldn't ask, and he was on his own, trying to figure out shit, and it was terrifying and liberating, and he had no idea what was going on.

Sure. I'm at the motel on Third Street.

His chest tightened with anticipation as he waited for a response and undid his boots. He knew how this went, and he liked these moments of in between. When it was going to happen but was still forming. When it might all fall apart and leave him with only his hand.

He was really doing this.

Inviting a monster over.

He remembered some of the taunts thrown around by the haters about the humans hooking up and settling down with monsters. A lot of guys were worried that monsters would lure human women away. If a monster stole their women, they were doing a pretty shit job of being a partner.

I'll be there in ten. Room number?

9. Got any preferences?

One of them needed to ask. Had Lynck hooked up with a human before?

He set his boots aside and rummaged through his bag for condoms and lube. Did monsters catch human STIs? Could humans catch monster STIs? He pulled back the covers on the bed and tossed the supplies on the pillow. Not subtle but easy to grab.

You. Naked.

Rox laughed. Like he hadn't heard that before.

I'm pretty open.

Or was that a given since he'd invited a monster round?

He brushed his teeth and pulled off his T-shirt, leaving him only wearing the mesh shirt and ripped jeans. His dick pressed against the zipper as lust and nerves jumbled together and made him dizzy.

This rush was almost as good as coming.

He checked his phone, but there was no reply.

That didn't matter, as Lynck should be on his way. He paced, then busied himself by pulling out his clothes for tomorrow. Dark blue work pants, a plain black T-shirt, his work boots, socks, and briefs. He'd tie his hair back and watch his mouth, and hopefully, everything would go smoothly.

He'd do as he was told and learn how the owner liked things done, and if it sucked, he'd stick it out until he had enough saved up to move on. Two months ago, he'd thought about sticking around, but he'd hated doing deliveries, and the guy he'd been thinking of staying for was a liar.

No, if he stayed, it needed to be because he wanted to, not because of someone else.

Footsteps that didn't sound right snapped him out of his head. He ran his fingers through his hair and tugged out the elastic, tossing it onto the pile of clothes.

Then someone knocked on his door.

Lynck.

He couldn't breathe as the tension wrapped around him and pulled tight. His pulse drummed in his ears as he padded over to the door in his socks. He checked through the peephole that it was Lynck.

A man with white skin and horse's ears stood on the other side. Aside from the ears and skin color, he appeared human. Rox forced himself to take a slow breath and then opened the door.

Oh, fuck, Lynck was tall and broad-shouldered—his photo hadn't done him justice. Not that Rox was short. He was pretty much what appeared in the dictionary as average in every way. Completely ordinary and forgettable. Lynck was anything but.

“Hi...” Blink and breathe.

“Hi.” Lynck's voice was deep and melodic. The kind of voice that would be easy to listen to for hours. Nothing worse than being attracted to someone until they opened their mouth and ruined everything.

“Come in.” Rox stepped aside, and as Lynck walked past, he realized the kelpie had hooves and a tail.

Hooves.

And a tail made up of long white hair also streaked with green, braided and tied into a neat loop.

Definitely not human, even though Lynck's face made him appear to be at first glance. Rox shut the door and locked it. He leaned against the wood, feeling like a grubby little spider next to Lynck.

Lynck turned. “Having doubts now you've seen a monster up close?”

Rox shook his head. “You're prettier in real life.”

Lynck laughed and placed his hand on the door next to Rox's head. “And so are you.”

Rox tilted his chin to hold Lynck's gaze. His eyes were like ink. And this close, it was easy to see more differences. Lynck's lips weren't pinkish, they were gray, and his skin, which had seemed white in the photo, only appeared that way because of the

dusting of white hair that covered his skin.

Rox lifted his hand but stopped just before touching Lynck's face. "Can I?"

Lynck gave a small nod, and Rox feathered his fingers over Lynck's cheek. The white hair was soft to touch, and his skin was warm. Since they were doing this, he needed to make a play. Rox rolled onto the balls of his feet and kissed him. Lynck's other hand closed around Rox's hip and pulled him close, leaving no doubts about what Lynck wanted. The hard length of his cock pressed against Rox's stomach, not quite lining up with his.

He opened his mouth, wanting more. And Lynck seized the invitation without hesitation, backing him up against the door. His back hit with a solid thud, and he pushed up so he could grind against Lynck in a much more satisfying matter. His hand slid under Lynck's brown work shirt with the Beastly Brewhouse logo on the breast pocket.

Lust and anticipation raced through his blood—this time, spiked with the unknown. This wasn't a human man. And every touch reminded him of that fact. It wasn't only the hair on his skin; his body was also warmer, his touch firmer.

They broke apart to breathe.

Rox wanted his clothes off. Perhaps he should've waited naked on the bed, but that seemed so impersonal. This had already crossed that line as they'd exchanged names and talked about things other than sex.

Rox flicked open the bottom button on Lynck's shirt. He wanted to undo his pants and wrap his hands around his cock. He needed to know what it looked like. "You never told me what you like?"

Another button popped open.

“I like this.” He touched the mesh shirt. He caught Rox’s hand and kissed his fingertips. “And this.”

He was all charm, and Rox couldn’t help but fall under his spell. “I like your hair. Is the green natural?”

“Yes.” Lynck studied him. “Is that what you really want to know?”

“I already asked...” Maybe he needed to be more direct. “Top, bottom, side, oral?”

“What are you expecting?”

“To come. If I was fussy about how, I’d have told you already.” He flicked open the last button and smoothed his hands over Lynck’s chest. No nipples, only more white hair. He’d been with hairy guys, and it wasn’t something he really liked. But this was different. It was a uniform, silky covering. Around his neck hung a silver necklace with a small disk dangling in the center.

“Get your jeans off and get on the bed.” Lynck plucked at the mesh shirt. “Leave it on.”

His heart kicked over. “Yeah? How do you want me?”

“On your knees, so I can mount you.” Lynck stepped back.

The image that was created in Rox’s mind was almost too much, yet at the same time, disappointing. He undid the button on his jeans and dragged open the zipper. “I’d rather be on my back so I can kiss you.”

Lynck's gaze tracked the motion. He shrugged out of the shirt and tossed it on the bedside table. "Okay."

His back was broad and dappled with gray, and his braided tail hung out of the back of his jeans. Rox bit the inside of his lower lip as his gaze skimmed lower, over his thighs, his calves, and then his hooves.

Getting railed had not been on his move to town to-do list...or at least not so close to the top. But he wasn't going to pretend that the idea of hooking up with a monster while there had never crossed his mind. Why else had he gone for the job in a monster town?

He shucked his jeans and tossed them on the chair and did the same with his briefs, giving his dick a stroke as he walked toward the bed, feeling both overdressed and underdressed.

Then he noticed the way Lynck watched him. The hunger in his dark eyes, as if Rox was everything he wanted in that moment.

He sat on the edge of the bed, close enough that if Lynck changed his mind, Rox would be able to lick his cock. "Need some help getting your pants off?"

Lynck stood right in front of him and undid the fly of his jeans. Jeans that had been adjusted for his tail. He pushed them over his hips, and Rox held his breath, waiting to see his dick, but it was swathed in a pair of dark, fitted boxers.

Rox smothered a frustrated groan. He reached out and cupped Lynck's balls through the fabric...and his breath caught. They were larger than expected. He glanced up, aware of the attention as he ran his hand up the hard length and then peeled down the waistband.

Whatever is in there, don't freak out.

The white hair disappeared, leaving his lower belly smooth. His dick caught on the boxers until Rox gave them a tug. Lynck's cock sprang free, thick and gray with a small pale patch on one side. There was no round head or crown but a blunt flare and a small taper before it thickened at the base. Different, not terrifying. He wrapped his fingers around the hot shaft and stroked, needing to get a better feel for the size. It wasn't going to impale him and rearrange his insides in a manner that would be felt for several days, nor was it thick enough to give him serious pause—though he wasn't going to rush into it either—assuming it even went in. That head did not allow for an easy entrance.

But it could be interesting...and it wasn't going to stop him from trying. He leaned forward and licked from balls to tip without breaking eye contact.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:32 am*

five

L ynck was unable to look away. Usually, a human did as asked and put his ass in the air, ready to be fucked. As if they wanted the monster dick without looking at the monster.

Rox wasn't like that, and Lynck wanted to drown in his blue eyes as his tongue traced a wet line along the underside of his shaft. The smudged eyeliner and messy hair did nothing to change that opinion. From the moment Rox had opened the door, Lynck had wanted to touch him and kiss him. The draw had been instant.

Dangerous.

He shouldn't have asked him to keep the top on, but there was something about the way it looked on him that appealed. Maybe it was the way it pretended to cover his skin while drawing attention to it.

“So, ah...um...are there any monster safe sex things I should know about?” Rox's breath swept over the head of his cock.

Lynck pushed him back onto the bed. “No.”

He leaned over him to take another kiss, loving the way his mouth opened so readily. Another time, he'd let him explore further with his tongue. He shouldn't be thinking of next times.

Guys got their fill of monster dick and moved on.

“Not unless you have concerns about tentacles or barbs or?—”

Rox flinched. “What?”

“I don’t have them, but some monsters do. You should check before you get this far.” Unless Rox planned to find the weirdest dick. “Though if you are into that?—”

“No. I’m not. Fuck. Barbs would hurt.”

“Some people like that.” And it wasn’t his place to judge. He rolled his hips, letting the head of his cock drag over Rox’s belly. Over the dark line of hair that ran from his navel to cock until he was frotting against him.

“I like that.” He pushed up onto his elbow to take another kiss, his tongue thrusting into Lynck’s mouth in counterpoint to Lynck’s movements.

Was that a keep going because he’d changed his mind?

With a groan, Rox pulled away, but he didn’t lie back. His gaze was fixed between their hips. Lynck glanced down, watching his gray cock slide against Rox’s ruddy length. A bead of pre-cum slid out of Rox’s slit, and Lynck dragged his cock through it, smearing it over them both, which caused another pearl to slide free. A shiver traced along his spine and the pretty sight.

Unable to resist, he drew back, dropping to his knees on the floor, and lifted Rox’s legs so he had access to his ass.

“Ah...” Rox wriggled. “Lube.” A bottle landed on the edge of the bed.

Their eyes met. “I wanted to taste you first.”

Both of Rox's eyebrows lifted.

Lynck waited a heartbeat for him to say something, then leaned in and swiped his tongue over his hole and his balls.

"Fuck." Rox flopped back onto the bed.

"You don't like it?"

"Yes. I do. But I don't expe—" The word dissolved into a groan as Lynck gave him another lick.

It was far too easy to make him squirm, his dark blue fingernails digging into the white sheets with every sweep of his tongue. Lynck wanted to feel those nails digging into his skin. His cock throbbed for attention. Would Rox buck and writhe as he was fucked?

He wanted to know what it would be like to do more than fuck him. To learn his body until he could play him to climax with exactly the right touches. He rocked back and grabbed the lube, slicking his cock.

Rox panted, but his grip on the bed eased.

Lynck traced the now soft ring of muscle and fucked him with one finger, sliding over that spot that humans had.

"I'm going to come if you keep going." His belly was already smeared with pre-cum.

Lynck smiled. "That's the point."

Rox pushed up onto his elbows, his eyes dark with desire, looking debauched and

disheveled and delicious. “Yeah, but I’d rather you be in me.”

“You want me to use the condom?”

Rox’s cheeks reddened. “If we don’t need to, then I’d rather not.”

Lynck rolled to his hooves, leaning in to lick Rox’s belly and the tip of his dick, unable to resist taking a taste.

“Really, I’ll come if you keep touching me like that,” he pleaded.

More pre-cum spilled out. As tempting as it was to keep going, Lynck agreed it would be better to be buried in Rox when he came. He ran his hand up his shaft and around the flared head as Rox tracked every movement.

Rox grabbed his thighs, holding himself open.

Lynck didn’t need the invitation to be spoken. He pressed his cock against Rox’s hole and waited for the lube and pressure to work their magic. Rox bit his lower lip and groaned as Lynck slid in.

He knew his cock wasn’t the easiest thing for humans. It was too blunt for there to be anything gradual. So he paused, not wanting to rush. Though he had before.

He wasn’t used to men wanting to face him and kiss him and ask what he wanted.

And he liked it.

Rox gave a small nod. “Slow.”

“Yeah.” He rolled his hips, almost pulling out before sinking a little deeper.

Rox made a noise, and his back arched. His dick jerked, and cum spilled over his stomach, catching in the mesh of the shirt. His ass tightened as each thrust forced another trickle of cum out. He wasn't watching anymore. His eyes were closed, lips parted in desire.

Lynck leaned over and kissed him as he thrust in, completely embraced by the heat of Rox's body. Rox's legs wrapped around Lynck's hips, and his fingers gripped his biceps, nails pressing into his skin the way he wanted. The bed squeaked with each thrust, and Rox made little noises of pleasure. His balls drew up, and he let go, fucking as he filled him, loving the slick slide and not wanting it to be over.

The grip on his arms gentled, his fingers smoothing over the hair.

"That was...um..." Rox groaned again as if words were too hard to find.

"Good?" Lynck rubbed his nose against Rox's. He wanted it to have been good. He wanted more.

"Uh-huh."

His dick was softening, and he wanted to clean up before it retracted. He pulled away with a last kiss. "I'll grab a washcloth."

"I'm...oh." His tone changed as he realized that a condom might have been the tidier option.

"You'll need it." Lynck glanced over his shoulder. Humans never expected to be so flooded.

Rox twisted his head around to look at him, eyebrows pulled together. "How much cum?"

Lynck shrugged. It was more than what humans made, but he wasn't human.

The bathroom was tiny, but he washed his dick and took a wet cloth out for Rox. Half the time, he didn't bother because it was clear they didn't want anything more than a fuck. Rox lifted his hand, but Lynck didn't hand over the cloth. No, he wanted to see his cum leaking out of Rox's ass. He wasn't disappointed. He gently wiped his hole, then his belly, but there was nothing he could do about the mess on the shirt.

He didn't regret asking him to keep it on, either. "You're going to have to wash your shirt."

Rox ran his hand over the shirt. "Yeah. I'm more worried about my legs working."

Lynck took the cloth back to the bathroom and returned. Rox still hadn't moved. "Did I break you?"

He hadn't meant to hurt him.

Rox smiled and beckoned him closer. "Only in the best ways."

Lynck leaned in, and Rox sat up and threaded his fingers through his mane before kissing him.

Rox gasped. "Uh..."

Lynck smirked. "You might need to clean up in the shower."

"Yeah." Rox got up, concentration etched on his face. Before he closed the bathroom door, he turned, looking like some kind of dirty fantasy Lynck hadn't realized he craved. "I had fun."

“So did I.” But he wanted more than fun. He wanted to run on the sand and play music by moonlight. He was tired of being on his own.

“I’ll message you.”

Sure you will.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:32 am*

six

The auto shop was in the light industrial part of town, away from the center. On one side was a tire shop, and on the other, what appeared to be a boxing gym—which wasn't Rox's kind of thing.

Not that he'd never had a gym membership as it wasn't something he'd been able to afford growing up, however, getting hit in the head wasn't going to do anything for his motivation to go to a gym. He was more of a go for a run and maybe do some chin ups at the park kind of person.

Since the door was open, he had best go in and introduce himself. He wiped his hands on his pants and slung his bag over his shoulder—not that it held much. A few snacks, as he didn't know if there was a lunch bar nearby, and a water bottle.

The door chimed as he walked in, and a mountain of a man glanced up from behind the desk. He looked like Santa's ex-con, slightly younger brother. The man ran his hand over his white beard as he gave Rox a cool once over as though he wasn't too impressed.

“You must be Gideon.”

Rox suppressed the wince. “Everyone calls me Rox.”

“Are you as dumb as rocks?”

Rox blinked. If he wasn't down to his last couple of hundred, he'd have told the man,

who must be his new boss, to go and fuck himself. “No. I took care of Mom, finished school, got a qualification, an?—”

“I was joking, kid.”

Well, it wasn’t fucking funny. “You must be Mr. Hall.”

“I am.” Arn Hall stood. Correction, Santa’s ripped, ex-con, younger brother.

With both Hall and Lynck towering over him, Rox wondered if he’d arrived in a town of giants where only people over six feet lived. They’d kick him out for being too short in no time.

Arn held out his hand. “Glad you made it. The first guy flaked and said he couldn’t be bothered relocating, and the second guy only lasted a week. He wasn’t too keen on monsters.”

Rox’s cheeks burned. Turned out he was pretty keen on monsters...or at least one. Lynck had been the last person he’d thought of before going to sleep, mostly because he’d still been leaking cum, and the first person on his mind when he woke up. For the same reason. Not that he minded, but a little heads-up would’ve been appreciated.

“Have you run into any yet?”

Just one, and he ran into me multiple times. “Yeah, I saw some when I went to the bar for dinner last night.”

“Good folk they are.” Arn kept silently judging him, and Rox wondered if he had toothpaste on his face or something.

This job was going to suck, or more correctly, working with Arn would suck. Fixing

cars was the good part, and he hadn't done that in six months. Arn knew that, as they'd discussed the gap in his work history on the call. And he knew why Rox had been traveling.

That potential employers were questioning his lack of history and fixed address had become a problem. He needed to make this work for more than a couple of months.

His mother must have said much the same after his father walked out. Just get through the next couple of months, then the next year, and bang, ten years had passed, and she was still working the same job with all her old dreams turned to dust.

Not that he had any dreams to disintegrate, that would imply he had some kind of life plan. If he didn't start getting his shit together, he'd blink and be thirty with a patchy work history, moving towns every couple of months because he couldn't make anything stick.

Somewhere, there was a line between toughing things out and bouncing at the first sign of trouble. He'd spent ten years doing the former and was six months into the latter—which was a lot less acceptable to most people.

Rox nodded. "Yeah, I like the town so far."

What else was he supposed to say? He'd been there less than twenty-four hours, and he'd managed to hook-up in that time—a personal best.

Arn hooked his thumbs into his belt loops. "I'll show you around, then you can do the paperwork. You got an address yet?"

"I'm staying at the motel until I sort out a rental." That and he didn't have the money for a rental deposit, and it was going to be harder to save up while staying at the motel even though he had the weekly rate. It was much easier to be on the road

because then he didn't have to consider things like rent, but there were other problems like being unable to cook anything for himself and needing to find a laundromat.

"Okay. When will you have that sorted?"

"I'll be speaking to a real estate agent or looking for a room to rent on the weekend." Let me find out which way is up in this town before you start harassing me.

Arn grunted. "Okay then. I'll show you where you can put your bag. We're booked up for the rest of the week, so you'd better not run out on me."

"No, sir." Busy was good, much better than cleaning and killing time. If he was busy, he couldn't think about things to do with Lynck.

He made it until lunch time before messaging. Which wasn't exactly being chill. But he had thirty minutes and no desire to wander around looking for lunch when he could eat the muesli bar he'd tossed in his bag.

He sat out the back on a tire, soaking up the sun with a cup of coffee, contemplating what to write that didn't sound too salacious or too much like he was looking for a new best friend. He knew those gray areas existed, but he wasn't very good at finding them.

Hey, I had fun last night.

No, that was too much like he wanted a repeat. Which he did, but he didn't want Lynck to think that was all he wanted because he'd also been enjoying their chat.

Did you want to grab coffee sometime? I enjoyed meeting you yesterday.

That wasn't it either. He deleted it and scrolled through their conversation. He should ask something smart about Lynck.

I'm thinking about checking out the lake after work. I can swing past the cafe if you want to grab a coffee and come with?

Yeah, that was better. Or did that sound like he was asking for a date? He was so out of practice; he was pretty sure he'd be getting it wrong with anyone. At this point, he needed to send something.

He hit send and finished his rather shitty lunch. He needed to buy some stuff to put in the mini-fridge so he could make sandwiches for lunch. While he was at the shops, he should grab a couple of frozen dinners; they were cheaper than eating out every night. Two should fit in the freezer section of the mini fridge in the motel room. He made a tiny shopping list on his phone that suited both his fridge and his budget until he got paid on Monday. If he went after work, he'd have dinner for tonight and be sorted for tomorrow.

By the time his break was over, he hadn't gotten a response from Lynck. His heart sank, even though it shouldn't matter. He'd thought there was a vibe between them, something worth following up on—even in daylight. By the time he got in his truck at the end of the day, there were still no messages.

Wow...he'd really misread the situation. He sucked with people and monsters.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:32 am*

seven

With the lunch rush over and a small breathing space before the afternoon crowd came in, Lynck wiped down all the tables and swept the floor. Keeping busy didn't stop Rox's message from rolling around his head.

I'm thinking about checking out the lake after work. I can swing past the cafe if you want to grab a coffee and come with?

What kind of message was that?

"What's bitten you beneath the tail?" Thursten asked as he refreshed the cake cabinet.

"I'm just doing my job." And trying to figure out how to reply.

"Yes, like you hate it."

Lynck leaned on the broom and glared at his friend. "I'm thinking."

"Human problem?"

There was no point in denying it. It might've been easier to write Rox off if he hadn't messaged. Instead, he'd followed up as promised. He said as much to Thursten.

"So you're miffed because he wants to see you again?"

"Because he only wants sex." He couldn't remember the last time a human wanted

more than one night with him.

Thursten shrugged. “Humans are weird. Some of them like to start with sex and then see if things work out.”

“I know that.” He’d been around humans for long enough to understand that their dating rituals were as varied as they were and often made no sense.

“What did he say?” Thursten pressed.

“That he wants to get coffee and check out the lake.” But that wasn’t what was implied.

“Clearly, he wants to be banged in the middle of the cafe or on the beach in front of everyone,” Thursten quipped.

It was far too easy to imagine Rox spread out on a table with his legs in the air. The lust that had been on a low simmer all day was more than ready to make that happen. “He’s trying to be polite.”

“If you wanted a date, why did you go around and pound him into the bed?”

“I did not.” Lynck huffed.

Thursten laughed. “Oh, really?”

Lynck flicked his ears. “Maybe a little. He liked it.”

“Liked it so much that he wants coffee.”

“And sex.” That is what they’d selected on their profiles. If Rox wanted more, he’d

have selected romance...then they wouldn't have matched.

"I'm still not seeing the problem. He wants you; you want him." Thursten shrugged.

"Is this a kelpie thing?"

"Maybe?" He'd been without a herd since he was a teenager. He'd never gotten branded as an adult member of the herd. But running and swimming and other physical feats were used to prove your worth as a mate, as well as the crafting of a song to celebrate the union. Is that what he craved? Someone to run at his side?

A herd?

He closed his eyes. That was impossible.

"Why don't you change your profile to romance if hooking up bothers you?"

Because if he did that, he'd have to lie to his partner, and he couldn't do that either. He thought he was fine on his own, but was he free if he couldn't really live?

"That's unrealistic."

"There's plenty of monster-human couples."

But none of those monsters were hiding from a frost giant. None of them had been captured and bridled. The chain around his neck grew heavier with the weight of his past. He should ignore Rox's message. He resumed sweeping, pushing thoughts of taking Rox to the lake away. "It's just sex. That's all he wants."

The lie was a sour note.

"He wants coffee and a walk by the lake."

Lynck sighed. “He’s new in town, and I’m the only person he knows.”

“So be a friend and take him out. I bet the only things he knows about kelpies are from human myths.”

And human myths were full of tales about the dangers of kelpies. They weren’t wrong. But they weren’t entirely true either. He swept up the crumbs with the dustpan. “If he knows the myths, I doubt he’d want to go to the lake with me.”

If he learned the truth, Rox wouldn’t want to be alone with him.

No one would.

“You’re scared,” Thursten said. He pulled the cups out of the dishwasher and started stacking them up, ready for the afternoon customers.

“No, I’m not.” He clomped over to the cleaning cupboard and put the broom and dustpan away.

“Yes, you are. You’re scared you might like him.”

Lynck rolled his eyes. That’s not what worried him, but it was easier than telling Thursten the truth. “And what if he only wants to fuck?”

“Did you like it?”

“Yes.” He didn’t need to lie about that.

“Have you got a better offer?”

“No.”

“So, grab some takeout coffees and go for a walk by the lake and see what happens.”

He knew what happened. The novelty wore off and Rox moved on, or they grew closer and the chain around his neck came between them. He didn't want to experience either option.

It was much better to keep his distance.

Keep things cool.

One time only.

Even though he hated it. He'd run from the monster world needing to be free, and instead he'd built himself a new cage made up of his own rules and the only person he was killing was himself.

Kelpies were never alone.

He needed a herd. But he wouldn't have that if he went through the portal either, only more blood on his hands.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:32 am*

eight

Rox got ready for bed, shoved the chair against the door as an early warning if someone attempted to break in with a little more force than needed, and set his alarm. It was much harder to hide from the annoyance and the hurt caused by Lynck's lack of response, with nothing to do but lie in bed and stare at the ceiling.

The banter before they'd hooked up had been good. Somehow, it had gone wrong. Clearly, he was shit in bed, and Lynck wasn't interested in anything more.

Way to roll into town and fall on the first offered dick.

Twenty minutes later, he was still awake and contemplating every choice that had led him to Elder Ridge. He could've stayed in the apartment that he'd shared with his mother and kept his old job. There'd been no need to sell everything and leave, but there'd been too many memories.

His uncles and aunts had done nothing to help the first time his mother got sick when he was fifteen. Ten years later, all they'd done was turn up for the funeral. Which was still more than his father had managed.

Now, he'd traveled half the country, and he didn't fit into the space he'd left. He needed to carve himself a new niche, and while he enjoyed traveling and picking up odd jobs, it had worn as thin as his bank account. It would be nice to have his own pillows and a place to put his boots at the end of the day. Fuck, it would be nice to have a kitchen. He wasn't sure he remembered how to cook even though he'd lugged his mother's recipe book around for the last six months.

His phone lit up with a message, and his heart jumped far too hopefully.

For several seconds, he refused to look. Lynck had ignored him all day. He could fucking wait until tomorrow.

But he couldn't wait. Was it a brush-off?

Or an excuse?

"Fucking pathetic." He reached out and grabbed his phone, desperate to read Lynck's message.

Sorry for the late reply. I was working then teaching, but I'm free tomorrow if you want to get coffee and have a walk by the lake.

If he met up with a monster by the lake, was he going to end up in one of the true crime documentaries his mother loved? Maybe, but the same risks applied when meeting anyone in an isolated location. Besides, he'd suggested it, in part because it was free, but he did also want to check out the lake. There might be some nice trails to run, assuming there were no monsters in the woods waiting to eat him.

Before he came up with a reply, Lynck messaged again.

We can meet at Beastly and then walk down to the beach?

Which is what he'd wanted to do today, but it was probably a good thing Lynck hadn't replied as instead Rox had gotten his food sorted, and started checking out room and rental listings.

For a second, he considered being petty and leaving replying until morning, but he wasn't good at playing those kinds of games.

Sure.

He hit send, not wanting to sound too keen after being ignored all day. But he did need to confirm a time. He finished work at five, and he'd want a shower before meeting up.

Does six work?

Lynck sent him a heart.

Rox smiled. Maybe now, he'd be able to go to sleep.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:32 am*

nine

L ynck arrived a few minutes early and sat at an empty table. He would've gone into wait, but he didn't want Rox to be standing outside looking for him. As if the thought of the human summoned him, Rox walked around the corner wearing a pair of faded and ripped blue jeans, a black undershirt, and a red checked shirt over the top. His hair was loose, and his hands were shoved in his pockets. He glanced up and looked around, scanning the shop fronts.

Lynck stood, the movement catching Rox's attention.

The intense look of concentration faded and was replaced with a smile as he walked over. "Hey."

His hands were still in his pockets, and Lynck wasn't sure if he should give him a hug or a nod. It was not appropriate to rub their cheeks together or nuzzle at his neck. They weren't human-style greetings. "How's the new job going?"

Rox nodded and gave a one-shouldered shrug. "Job-like."

That could mean anything. "He didn't hate you?"

He laughed. "No. Or at least not enough to tell me to fuck off. Is it closed?"

"Almost. Want to go in and order?"

Rox licked his lower lip, and Lynck wanted to lean in and kiss him. "I'm fine."

No, he wasn't. Rox had come to town for work and was staying in the cheap motel. Lynck guessed he didn't have much money to spare.

"I'll buy. Staff discount."

He winced. "Really?—"

"You can check out the piano in the corner while I order." Lynck put his hand on Rox's lower back and ushered him inside. There were two older women sitting at one table. They had cake and coffee and a deck of cards laid out on their table. They came in for the last hour every Thursday. Otherwise, the cafe was empty.

Thursten had started the cleanup process based on the looks of things. His gaze flicked between Lynck and Rox.

Lynck tilted his head and gave him a look that hopefully conveyed, 'Don't say a thing'. Thursten didn't know Lynck's past and how well he made people disappear. The troll smiled. "What can I get you?"

"Same as always. A regular mocha," Lynck said. He glanced at Rox, who was studying the menu on the wall behind Thursten.

"Is that the specialty?" Rox asked.

Thursten put his hand over his heart. "No, that is an abomination that he insists we keep making."

Rox's gaze settled on the troll, who was about the same height as Lynck. "Then what do you recommend?"

"For you, the midnight blend. Full of flavor and mystery, and perfect for staying up

all night.” Thursten added a wink at the end.

Lynck rolled his eyes and flicked his ears, which only made Thursten’s smile bigger.

Rox glanced at them both as if realizing there was something going on. “Have you got something that won’t keep me up all night?” He leaned on the counter and tilted his head at Lynck. “That’s his job.”

Thursten roared with laughter. “I like him.”

That was all he was good for, right? Keeping a human up all night. He regretted offering to buy the coffees. He needed to delete the app and forget about humans. While there weren’t other kelpies for him to date, there were other monsters. But even monsters had heard one too many stories about kelpies. Lynck forced a smile.

“What about the afternoon delight? Rich berry notes with a hint of sweetness?”

Rox lifted his eyebrows. “It’s not actually called that?”

“It is,” Lynck confirmed. “There’s also lazy morning, sinful sighs, and Sunday brunch. Sunday brunch has vanilla notes, so you may not like it.”

“Okay, then...afternoon delight sounds great.”

“Good choice. They won’t be long.” Thursten turned away to make the drinks.

“There’s all kinds of stuff in here...” Rox pointed to a gramophone up in a corner.

“I think it’s meant to have a human antique feel.” There was also a lute, some pan pipes, and other bits around the room—all out of reach from curious fingers.

“Yeah, I can see that.” He looked at the piano in the corner that had several signs on top, reminding people no food or drinks at the piano and that children must be supervised, or they’d be served to the cook out the back. Which was a joke. Monsters weren’t allowed to eat humans.

“You can play it.”

He scuffed his shoe. “I don’t think I can. Mom played, and she taught me, but...”

Lynck leaned in and whispered in his ear. “Trust me, we have all heard worse than whatever you do.”

Last night Rox had seemed confident, now he acted as though he didn’t belong and was scared of doing the wrong thing. Lynck gave him a little nudge toward the piano.

Rox took one step toward the old upright. Then another. His shoulders eased as he crossed the floor and pulled out the stool. He sat and stared at the keys for several heartbeats, then lifted his hands and placed his fingers on the keys.

He closed his eyes but didn’t play anything.

“Is he okay?” Thursten whispered as he put the takeout cups on the counter.

“I’m not sure... He said he played. I thought it would be a good idea.” He was missing something because Rox hadn’t moved.

Rox let his hands drop, playing all ten notes at once. His eyes remained closed as he lowered his head. He sniffed and stood. “I can’t.”

Lynck picked up the cups, suspecting this get-together was over before it began. “Another time?”

Rox shrugged and accepted the cup. “Thank you. I’ll buy next time...once I get paid.”

So money was a problem, and not the only one Rox had. Lynck itched to ask what was going on, but he kept his mouth closed. If he asked too many questions, Rox would do the same, and that was dangerous ground he didn’t want to cross. He held the door, and they stepped out onto the street. “Do you want to check out the lake?”

Even though he was no longer smiling, Rox nodded. “Yeah. I’m sorry about back there.”

“You weren’t in the mood to play, I understand.” Music had to come from the heart.

They walked in silence, with Lynck leading the way to the lake.

“I haven’t played since Mom’s funeral. And when I sat there, that was the only song I remembered, and I don’t want to play it ever again.” He took a sip of the coffee. “I sold everything when I left...I regret selling her piano. But I couldn’t... Ah fuck, you don’t want to listen to my sad story.”

“I’m sorry you lost your mom.” But he didn’t understand why Rox had needed to sell everything. “Was your dad not around?”

“Nah, he’s a piece of shit. Left before I turned two, made himself a new family, and never paid a cent of child support. I found him when I was sixteen, a year after she had cancer the first time. I thought he might help me. I needed help...” He gave a hollow laugh. “She got better until it came back three years ago.”

Then she’d died, and Rox had sold everything. “Is that why you moved here? To start over?”

“Not really. I’ve been on the road for six months, doing odd jobs. I was running out of money, and I figured I should do the job I’m qualified for and stay in one place for a bit. It’s easy to run, but without a direction, I felt like I was going in circles. Same shit in a new town, hooking up with the same type of guys.”

“So that’s why you joined Monster Match?” Why was he still asking questions?

“I saw it on a coaster in the bar and was curious. I hadn’t planned on hooking up, and then we got talking, and one thing led to another...” He took a drink, his cheeks pink as if remembering. “What about you? Why the human world and the app and the coffee shop?”

There was only one reason, but he didn’t share it.

“I thought living here would be an adventure.” And it couldn’t have been any worse than his life in the monster realm. “I’d heard talk about how different the human world was, and I wanted to see for myself.” He’d needed to find out if the whispers that some magics didn’t work was true.

They were.

And Bothvar no longer had the power to compel him. If Bothvar came through the portal, Lynck wasn’t sure what would happen, but in the human world, Bothvar was a no one and he controlled nothing and Lynck doubted the humans would let him do whatever he wanted.

“The coffee shop was the easiest place to find work because they only hire monsters, but I eventually began teaching violin. I think the music is one of the reasons we matched,” Lynck said.

Rox nodded. “I’m glad we did. Um...I don’t usually make a habit of staying in touch

with...um..."

"Past hook-ups?"

"Yeah. It can be weird, but I liked the chat beforehand." He drew in a breath and concentrated on his coffee. "Anyway, I can find my way round the human apps. But this is all new. I don't know much about monsters and less about kelpies. I hope that doesn't sound too rude."

"Not rude, honest. Which is better than assuming you know everything and getting it all wrong. I like the app, but some humans only want to say they fucked a monster. They don't want more. It can be hard to tell."

"I'm human, and it can be hard to tell what some men want. Sometimes, it's just easier to not hope for more. That way, you can't be disappointed." Rox glanced at him. "Or maybe it's just me."

There were undercurrents that Lynck couldn't decipher. That twisted and turned and made the water treacherous, even for a kelpie. "But low expectations mean never allowing yourself the chance to look for more."

Never taking a chance.

Which didn't explain why he was taking Rox to the lake. He should've ignored him and moved on, but Rox was stuck in his brain. In his dreams. He was not taking him to the lake to run in some kind of sham kelpie dating ritual.

He was being friendly, that's all. Which didn't explain why he'd woken up with a handful of notes to a new song rolling through his mind this morning.

"You must like the human world since you haven't gone back."

Lynck finished his mocha. He didn't want to lie to Rox and have that thorn between them. "I do like it. It's interesting. But I do miss my herd."

"Is that your family?"

"Yes." He stopped. "And this is the lake." In the evening light, the surface rippled dark gray, with edges of sunlight catching on the peaks. "It winds through the forest for a bit, and in stormy weather, it can be deadly. I enjoy swimming in it, but unless you are a strong swimmer, I do not recommend going far from the shore."

"Are there monsters in the water?"

"Aside from me?" Lynck grinned.

Rox's eyes widened.

"Yes, there are others who use the lake. No, they won't harm you. But there are currents and very large fish and eels. Do you want to walk along the shore?"

"Yeah. I'd like that. Maybe on the weekend, I'll come down for a run. No swimming." Rox tossed his cup into the trash can at the edge of the path that led to the beach.

Lynck stared at his back for a moment. Why was Rox, a human, talking about running on the beach? "What do you mean, run?"

He dropped his cup in the trash and caught up in a couple of quick strides.

"Exercise. Running is free. So is swimming, but the weather is too cold, and you've kind of scared me."

Lynck put his arm around Rox's shoulder. "If you want to swim, I will protect you."

And he'd have someone to swim with. Which was both exciting and disturbing as the only people he'd swam with since being taken from his herd ended up dead.

Rox leaned into him. "Can you tell me a little about your people so I'm not accidentally rude?"

"If it is accidental, it is forgivable." He didn't expect humans to know or understand anything about monsters. There were some monsters he didn't know anything about. "I can tell you about my herd."

ten

L ynck's arm around his shoulders was an unfamiliar but comforting weight, but Rox didn't want to push him away and walk on his own. Leaning into him felt nice. His body was warm, and Lynck wouldn't let him stumble on the soft sand. Nor would Lynck trip him for a laugh.

Soft waves lapped against the shore as they walked. The silence stretched, tempting Rox to ask a direct question, even though sometimes it was better to wait. While Lynck had agreed to tell him about his herd, it didn't seem to be an easy topic.

Perhaps it was too much for whatever they were.

"A herd is a family, but what humans call extended family and centered around the women. My grandmother and her sisters were the leaders."

"What happens to the men?"

"They join their wife's herd."

Rox glanced up at him. "And if they don't have a wife?"

Lynck smiled. "Then they either join a herd of like-minded men, or they seek permission for their mate to join. It depends on the herd and the numbers."

"Did they kick you out of home?"

Lynck was silent for a moment. “No.”

That wasn’t the entire truth, but Rox didn’t press as it was obviously a sore subject. “Can I ask if you spent more time on two feet or four?”

Lynck laughed. “It’s very hard to build a village with hooves instead of hands.” He lifted his hand. His palm was the same soft gray as his lips, and on the back of his hand, his hair was white and dappled gray like his back. “It depended on what we were doing. Fishing and farming are easier on two feet. Defending our home was on two and four—I’ve ridden another kelpie, armed with a bow and spear.” He exhaled as though the memory hurt. “It wasn’t a conscious thing, but a question of which form served the purpose.”

“That sounds cool. Like sometimes a motorbike is better than a car.”

“I will trust you on that because I have driven neither.”

“But you’ve been in a car?”

“Yes. Of course I have.”

“How am I supposed to know?”

Lynck flipped the question on him. “Have you ridden a horse?”

“No. And until a couple of months ago, I’d never seen a horse in real life because I grew up in the city.”

“A kelpie isn’t a horse, though we appear similar in the same way donkeys and zebras seem like horses but aren’t.”

“Oh.” To Rox, they all looked like horses. But to some people, all engines were the same, and they couldn’t tell a boxer engine from a V8. “Aside from the ability to shift, what makes a kelpie different from a horse?”

Lynck stopped walking and dropped his arm, leaving Rox alone. Rox realized they’d walked well away from the main area of town. They’d walked closer to the forest, and the shadows had deepened as the sun slipped lower. He faced him and lifted one of Rox’s hands. “I am not a horse or a human. I am a kelpie, a monster. Though it is easier to say I am a horse shifter, as humans can grasp that idea.”

“I’m trying to understand what that means. And who you are.”

Lynck tilted his head. “But you do not need to understand those things if?—”

“If we’re just fucking,” Rox finished. He knew that. “Is that all you want?”

For the first time, he wondered if they were on the same page. What if only he wanted more and Lynck was being polite?

Lynck studied him, face fixed in concentration as if Rox was a puzzle he couldn’t solve. Then he lifted his hand, cupped Rox’s cheek, and placed a soft kiss on his lips for an answer. “No...though it should be all I want.”

Rox rocked forward onto his toes, needing more. “What do you want?”

“To walk along the beach and kiss you goodnight. To invite you around for dinner and bore you with my violin.”

“I don’t think that would be boring.” He’d grown up listening to his mother play the piano and teach others on the side before she’d started teaching him. At fourteen, he’d quit for a year to assert his independence, but he’d begun playing again when

she'd been too sick. Now, music was a connection to her. As well as her recipe book, he'd also kept her music books.

Lynck's eyes were dark. "Is that what you want?"

That had been his problem for the last decade. What did he want?

Not what did he need to survive? Or what did his mother need him to do so they survived? He'd quit school and gotten the apprenticeship to bring in extra money. Sure, he enjoyed pulling things apart, and he was good at it, but he'd wanted to do mechanical engineering. She'd wanted him to go further than he had, to follow his dreams.

What were they?

He'd existed in a nightmare of finding rent and paying for meds and getting her to doctors' appointments. And he didn't begrudge that time and effort, but it had been a lot. And his father hadn't given a fuck—Rox hadn't expected his father to care about Mom, but he should've cared about his son.

Instead, he was a fucking useless man who only cared about himself and the way things reflected on him. Helping his teenage son, who wasn't going to a private school or living in the right area, meant admitting that not everything was peachy. Maybe if he'd put his hand in his pocket and paid even the bare minimum of child support...

Rox exhaled.

What did he want?

He wanted more than scraping by and someone needing something from him, but he

also didn't want to be on his own the way he'd been for the last six months. He wanted more than hooking up and moving on and piecing together a plan on the fly. He wanted a partner and love, and all the things he knew were possible, even though he'd never seen his mother have any of them. She claimed to like her space too much to share it with anyone when Rox had asked.

After numerous boyfriends and flings and one-night stands, Rox had reached the conclusion that it was him. He wasn't good with people.

But maybe it was the men he'd been with.

The ones who expected him to be something else or for him to fit into their life or fantasies. And when he resisted, they labelled him as difficult, obtuse, prickly...

He stared up at Lynck. Who wasn't human at all.

A monster—that many hated even existed—was asking what he wanted out of this, like he had an equal say, and his thoughts mattered, so he needed to say something.

“I want to keep seeing you. You're interesting... No, that came out wrong. I don't want to see you because you're a monster. Shit.” He ran his fingers through his hair. He was going to fuck this up before there was anything to fuck up. “I like you, and I want to get to know you, and if that involves walking on the beach and listening to you play, that's cool.” His cheeks heated, and he shoved his hands into his pockets, trying not to feel awkward.

“They are things I like...partly because running and other athletic feats are part of the kelpie mating process. What do you want?” Lynck asked again, as if Rox's first answer wasn't good enough.

He glanced down, his teeth worrying at his lower lip. “I should have that all worked

out. But I don't. I spent so long getting by and caring for Mom, and then I didn't find myself while traveling either." Did he even exist? If he vanished tomorrow, would anyone notice?

"You found yourself here."

"Yeah."

"So there must be something here that called to you?"

Rox shrugged. "I like the idea of living somewhere different. Of living in a town instead of a city, something with a bit more soul." Where people didn't slip into the shadows and disappear. "I didn't want to take any mechanic job; it needed to be in a place where I could see myself building a life."

"So, why did you select sex on the app?"

Rox laughed and scuffed the toe of his runner in the sand. "Because that's easy. If I hadn't, I wouldn't have met you. If you want more, why didn't you change what you wanted?" He flipped the question back at Lynck.

"I've thought about it, but most humans don't want more from me. I thought it was because I'm a monster, but I wonder if it's because..." Lynck shut his mouth.

Rox tilted his head. "What?"

What was Lynck hiding?

Lynck glanced away, his gaze on the water. "I can't go home."

"Oh. Can I ask why?"

“You just did.” Lynck smiled.

“Is it because you’re gay?”

“No. There was a battle, and I hesitated when I should’ve fought. The kelpie I was riding was killed, and I was captured.”

“But you got free because you’re here.”

“I did. But going home, not only to my herd but through the portal, is too dangerous.”

“Because you escaped?”

“Yes.”

Rox guessed that wasn’t the full answer, but he didn’t need to learn everything now. “I’m sorry you had to fight and that you were caught.” Even though he didn’t fully understand what that meant, it was a terrible thing for anyone to go through.

Lynck’s ears twitched in acknowledgment. “It is the past. I have made a new life here. But perhaps other humans sensed that I was holding back.”

“Or they were dicks.”

Lynck laughed. “Some of them definitely were.”

Rox lifted his eyebrows. “So a kelpie first date is going for a run?”

“It is.”

“You have long legs?—”

“I hate running on two legs, and you run more than me. But it is not a race.”

“What is it for?” What was the point of racing if not to win?

“To see how well we run together.” Lynck considered him for a couple of heartbeats.

“Do you want to run?”

As first dates went, assuming that is what this had become, it wasn't the strangest one he'd ever been on. “Why not?”

Lynck stared at him as if he'd sprouted ears. “You want to run with me?”

Rox smiled. “I've got my runners on.”

This had not been part of his plans for tonight, but it was a detour he wanted to take.

“Then run.”

His heart kicked over. “Are you going to chase me?”

“Are you going to run away from me?”

“That depends on how fast you run.” Rox took off at a jog. He glanced back to see Lynck stamp his hoof once before following him.

Rox ran a little faster, planning on slowing in a bit to let Lynck catch up. In his next breath, Lynck swept him off the ground, and Rox yelped, not expecting the kelpie to catch up so fast. They tumbled to the sand, Rox landing on top of Lynck, staring into his dark eyes. “You caught me.”

“I did. Did you not want me to?”

Rox kissed him. "I thought you were going to chase me for longer."

Lynck's hands slid to Rox's ass, keeping him close and grinding against him. The way Lynck moved against him, his cock and his tongue teasing his body and ramping up his pulse. His dick throbbed, trapped in his jeans.

If they weren't on a public beach where anyone could walk past, he wouldn't want to stop. Rox pressed his hand into the sand and pushed himself up, which only pressed their hips closer together. "We probably shouldn't do this here."

"We aren't doing anything."

"Yet." Rox rolled his hips, not wanting Lynck to stop.

Lynck leaned up and kissed him. "I should walk you home."

"You should because then I can invite you in. We're both too gritty for this to be fun."

"I'm not using your tiny shower."

"Oh, you've got something better, do you?" His dick throbbed, wanting to feel Lynck naked against him again.

"I do, and you can see it when you come around for dinner." Lynck didn't let up, rocking Rox's hips. The way his fingertips kneaded his ass cheeks...

Rox bit his lip. "I don't want to wait that long. We can date and fuck...or is that too much of a human thing? Do you have sex or just run?"

Pain flickered across Lynck's face. "I was taken before I became an adult. Teens only

ran and played. We worked on our skills to become good mates.”

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have asked.” There he was, being all horny, while Lynck had trauma from being captured and never knowing if his herd even survived the attack.

“You wanted to know... I wanted to tell you. To understand. If you don’t ask, how will you learn about monsters and kelpies?” Lynck kissed him again, but with less heat. “We both had our teen years cut short and were adults before we needed to be.”

“Yeah.” Not that Rox had ever put it in so many words.

“We don’t need to rush this.”

The hard length of Lynch’s cock pressed against his, with far too many layers of clothing between them. But it wasn’t a polite, disinterested brush-off. It was Lynck putting the brakes on and wanting to slow down and take a breath. Which was probably the smart thing to do, to see if they had something more than the chemistry of lust. But Rox liked the burn of lust. “How can you say that while grinding against me?”

“I like the way you feel and the way you look at me like you’re waiting for me to flip you over and fuck you.”

Rox smiled. “I mean, I’d be happy with just getting our pants undone. Sand and penetration don’t go well together.”

Lynck somehow kept hold of him while pushing up so they were sitting, Rox’s thighs draped over Lynck’s legs. If it wasn’t for one of Lynck’s calves hooking behind his back, he’d have fallen over.

“Is this better?” Lynck ran his hand over the fly of Rox’s jeans.

“That depends on what you do next.”

Lynck flicked the button open and undid the zipper. Rox glanced along the beach, but they were alone in the dusk. No one would notice his dick was out unless they were right up close. Lynck’s warm fingers wrapped around Rox’s shaft and stroked.

Rox smothered a groan at the tight grip and the way his thumb worked over the crown. Despite the distraction, he got Lynck’s pants open and pulled his cock free of his underwear.

He scanned the beach again because if someone came past, it wasn’t going to look good, and he didn’t need some kind of public indecency charge when he’d only just arrived in town.

“I suspect my hearing is better than your eyesight, given the growing darkness,” Lynck said as if reading his mind.

Rox stroked Lynck’s length, still not sure how that broad, flat head had managed to press inside him. A shiver raced up his spine at the idea of riding his kelpie.

At the idea of tasting him.

Of sucking his dick until he came, flooding his mouth. Would he even be able to swallow that amount of cum?

He fucked Lynck’s hand with a sudden desperation, each thrust becoming slicker. Lynck captured his lips, and his hand cradled the back of Rox’s head, holding him in place. Between his tongue and his hand, Rox didn’t stand a chance.

He came, his groan muffled by Lynck’s mouth. Lynck’s hand cupped the head of his cock, catching his spill, and for a heartbeat, Rox expected Lynck to lick his fingers.

Instead, he wiped his hand in the sand, erasing the evidence.

Rox hadn't even considered how best to deal with the mess. That was a problem for after...though he wouldn't be able to catch Lynck's cum as neatly. He glanced down, the shadows thick between them.

"I'm half tempted to make you wear it," Lynck murmured as he wrapped his non-sandy hand over the top of Rox's hand so they both jerked him off.

And Rox was half-tempted to agree. "I want to lick you."

"You want to fall back on the sand so I can fuck your mouth?"

"Yes." Right now, he'd agree to anything.

"That might be a little obvious."

Fuck obvious—he didn't care. He just needed.

Lynck swept his thumb over the blunt head of his cock, then lifted it to Rox's mouth. Rox sucked the bitter cum off Lynck's thumb.

Lynck uncrossed his leg, and Rox fell backwards, catching himself on his elbows and expecting Lynck to follow and fuck his mouth as promised. But Lynck stroked his own dick, pulling twice before spilling onto the sand in several thick pulses, producing far more cum than Rox had ever seen a human spill, and that included in porn.

"I like the way you watch me."

Rox snapped his gaze up from Lynck's dick. "I like what I see."

Lynck leaned forward, offering his slick fingers. Rox sat up and opened his mouth, letting Lynck fuck him with cum-coated fingers until he'd licked them clean. Which did nothing to calm the lust flowing through his veins.

Lynck's ear twitched. "Someone is walking their dog this way. We should pretend to be enjoying the view, not each other."

With their clothes done up, they lay on the sand side-by-side, fingers threaded together, watching as the stars bloomed in the sky.

eleven

I had fun last night.

L ynck smiled at the early morning message.

So did I.

He wasn't sure if it was because they had spent so long down by the lake, or the run, or the sex, or almost being caught by Mr. Gregson and his German Shepherd. As it was, the dog stopped to sniff their spilled seed, barely covered with sand, before being called away.

Rox had dissolved in laughter, and Lynck hadn't been able to stop himself from joining in. Especially when the old man told them off for lying on the beach like a couple of corpses and nearly giving him a heart attack. If he'd seen them five minutes before, he might've had one. He'd muttered something about damn monsters when he thought he was out of earshot before continuing his walk.

Are you doing anything on Saturday night?

Thursten had said Lynck could have the kitchen and some privacy, which meant that he and Aski needed to find somewhere else to be for a couple of hours, either a hook-up or a movie. Or both.

And what do you like to eat?

Considering I hardly know anyone in town, of course I'm free. And I will eat almost anything. I haven't eaten a home-cooked meal in forever. Possibly because I don't have a kitchen.

Living out of his truck and motels couldn't have been easy, but Rox made it sound like an adventure. And after taking care of his mother and watching her die, it sounded as if he needed the escape.

What were the odds that they'd both fled their lives and ended up here?

He wasn't sure he believed in soulmates the way some monsters did. For kelpies, being mates was about compatibility and being an equal match—not equal in all things but able to fill each other's weaknesses when it mattered.

While Rox wasn't the first person he'd run with, though the rest were all as a teen before the attack. And none of them had been so...

Fulfilling?

Exhilarating?

Everything?

The others had been games, flirtations that led nowhere, in part because the other boys were more interested in female kelpies. That didn't stop them from running with him, nipping and nosing and rubbing up against him as if things might go further.

No, running with Rox felt like something he could do forever. That he wanted to do forever. And if part of that game meant catching Rox and rolling around until there was sand in his tail and ears and everywhere else, then it was perfect.

Maybe next time, he'd be able to tempt Rox into the lake.

Do you want to help me cook dinner?

Do you mean that? Some people don't like having help in the kitchen.

I wouldn't have asked if I didn't mean it.

He liked the idea of creating something and enjoying it together. That was possibly his kelpie blood. Next thing, he'd be turning those couple of measures of music that ran through his heart when he thought of Rox into a full song.

He didn't even know his first name, only his nickname and surname.

Then I'd love to help. Do you need me to bring anything?

No. Do you want to give me your first name so I can put you in my phone properly?

Ugh...I knew you'd ask at some point. Gideon.

That's a lovely name.

My father named me after himself and he's a useless sack of shit.

I hate that name.

Rox sent him a crying, laughing emoji.

It's not the worst name I've heard. I once knew someone called Bothvar Bothvarsson. His surname literally means son of Bothvar...you'll never guess what his father was called.

Lynck stared at his screen. Why the hell had he mentioned that name? Aside from the fact it was so narcissistic, it was almost unbelievable. The frost giant called it tradition. However, not all traditions were worthy of keeping. Too many were kept because people were too lazy to think for themselves.

But now Rox knew the name of the man who'd placed the chain around his neck. What if Rox told someone else? And then word somehow got back to the monster realm that he was in Elder Ridge?

Was he also Bothvar Bothvarsson?

It took several heartbeats before he replied because the chat was no longer light-hearted fun and had morphed into a source of tension and fear, and he couldn't explain it without telling Rox far too much. He'd already shared too much last night. But secrets created distance, and he wanted Rox to understand him.

Love him.

He wanted the things Bothvar had denied him.

And if Rox felt even half of what he did, it was enough.

When he looked at Rox with his ripped jeans and black shirts, his messy hair, and painted nails, he wanted to protect him from a world that judged him as too different, too much, and yet somehow not enough. He saw the shadowed depths in his blue eyes, the way his gaze flicked to the ground as he scuffed his worn-out sneaker.

He'd felt the same way when he first moved to the human world. It hadn't mattered that other monsters lived there, only that he didn't belong because he wasn't human. He'd been certain someone would see all the blood on his hands, that they'd hear rumors of an escaped kelpie and realize it was him, or that he'd be deemed too weird

to live among humans.

Compared to other monsters, he was boring. He wasn't able to shift—whether that was due to the bridle or his own magic, he didn't know—and he had no other abilities, magic, or tentacles, or any skills beyond fishing, playing the violin, and murder and the latter didn't belong in human society. The soldiers were very clear about that. Monsters were not allowed to kill humans for any reason, including food.

He exhaled. Rox was waiting for a response, and he knew nothing about frost giants and bridles.

Correct. He was also Bothvar, as were his grandfather and great grandfather.

Do you like your surname, or do you wish you'd chosen it?

Rox moved on, not knowing the significance of the name.

Whitehorse is a fine surname. It is what I resemble when I shift.

You never told me what kelpies look like when shifted, and how they differ from horses.

You will have to wait until Saturday.

You're so mean. I need to go to work. xx

twelve

“So what are we making?” Rox placed a bottle of white wine on the kitchen table. He’d asked Lynck what to bring and had gone to the bottle shop to grab it. The wine was one he remembered his mother drinking between cancer battles...one he’d helped her drink on more than one occasion, even though he’d been underage.

“Fish pasta. I discovered I love pasta. And back home, we ate mostly fish and vegetables and flatbreads, so this is similar to a fish dish from home.”

“You didn’t have pasta?”

“Not where I lived. Maybe in other areas, there was something similar. It’s a lot less effort to tip pasta into boiling water than to make flatbreads.”

“I will have to take your word for that because I have never made flatbread. But I can boil water and make pasta.” He might be able to throw together a fish sauce to go serve with the pasta if he had a recipe to follow, but Lynck did not have a recipe book out.

Unlike him, Lynck had dressed up for the date. He wore a pale gray shirt and darker gray pants. But the pants were not in a style that was human, and they were decorated along the outer seam and around the cuff with silver and green stitching as if they had been made to match his white and gray dappled hair and the green streaks through his tail and mane. A waistcoat in several shades of green completed the outfit, and the effect was arresting.

Meanwhile, he'd put on the now clean mesh shirt—because Lynck liked it—and a short-sleeved black shirt over the top, along with his usual black jeans. He'd added a cuff bracelet that had been his mother's and a black leather one that he'd picked up at a craft fair. It had been her first outing after completing treatment the first time. One of those stupid fall festivals with pumpkins and cider and too many children. But she'd wanted to go, and he'd wanted to spend time with her away from the fucking hospital.

“I really need to level up my wardrobe.” Rox ran his fingers over the front of the waistcoat.

“I like what you're wearing. You chose something that represents you, and I did the same. Aski makes traditional monster clothing...or as close as they can. I thought it appropriate for a more traditional date.”

“I feel like I should've worn a suit, not that I own one.”

“Why would you choose to wear something that doesn't represent you on a date where you want the other person to get to know you?”

Rox ran his fingers through his hair, which he had left out. Where did he start? “Some people don't like the way I dress. Too much black, too much nail polish, and my hair is too long. Most humans put on a front for the first few dates, so the person doesn't walk away immediately.”

Lynck frowned. “Wouldn't it be better if they did instead of lying about who they are and wasting time?”

“Yeah, you'd think so, but that's not how it works. That's why sometimes it's better to hook-up first... You can't hide much when you're both naked. And how someone treats a random stranger is very telling.”

Lynck landed in and kissed him. “So you like the way I treat you?”

Rox’s cheeks heated. “I wouldn’t have wanted more if I didn’t. You listened to me...like when I said I wanted to face you.”

Lynck stared at him. “Why wouldn’t I listen to someone I’m sharing a bed with, even if it is only for a night? Is it not more fun for everyone?”

“Yeah...but often that’s not how it goes.” And now he’d said it out loud, he realized how bad that sounded. “It wasn’t only that. You’re gorgeous, and I enjoy spending time with you. Despite getting sand everywhere.”

Lynck laughed and swished his tail, which was loose tonight. “You didn’t have to brush it out of your tail.”

“I’d be worried if I suddenly had a tail.”

Lynck gave his ass a squeeze and dropped another kiss on his lips. “I like your ass the way it is. Do you want to pour the wine while I start?”

Rox found the glasses and poured while Lynck got out the ingredients. He followed Lynck’s instructions, liking the way they either accidentally or deliberately bumped into each other. The touch that brushed across his hip, the kiss on his temple. The much slower kiss that left him hungry for more as they waited for the salmon and pasta to cook.

He noticed Lynck’s ears were more expressive than his face. The direction they faced and the angle gave clues Rox had been ignoring because he wasn’t used to looking for them. Then there was his tail. It wasn’t decorative, but it also revealed how Lynck was feeling.

He needed to learn a whole other language to learn how to read Lynck. No, that wasn't quite right. He needed to learn new words. He wanted to learn, and he didn't want to be the reason Lynck decided humans weren't worth the hassle.

But at the same time, he couldn't imagine Lynck staying with him.

No one stayed.

Starting with his father.

He needed to make the effort to be different. But his mother had always said that he should be himself, not change for anyone, because that was her mistake.

Lynck cupped Rox's cheek. "A cloud crossed your face."

"Huh?"

"Your smile vanished, like a cloud crossing the sun and turning the day cold."

His lips curved as Lynck explained the phrase. "I was just thinking. Cooking with you made me remember..."

It wasn't the entire truth, but it was enough. He hadn't done this with anyone except Mom. "I have put time and distance between...but it's like every memory I create links to something in the past, and the past still casts a shadow. I thought I'd moved on."

"And maybe you had while you traveled, but now you are trying to settle in a new town, and everything is a reminder of the last time you had a home."

Rox nodded. "What about you? When did you move past what happened?"

He needed to know that it was possible. That there'd be a time when he didn't connect and compare the present to the past.

Lynck shook his head. "I'm not sure I have. Some things cast a long shadow, and while the intensity lessens so the sun can break through, there is still darkness. I'll never forget, and I'm not sure I want to, but the memories don't hurt the way they did, and the anger no longer exists."

The first time Mom had cancer, he'd been angry. Angry that he had to deal with it, angry at her and the world. The second time, there'd only been exhaustion. "It's an ache that catches me off guard when it shouldn't."

"You like cooking, and you did it with her. It's natural that you join the two together. I put this together because the flavors remind me of something my father cooked, though I'm not sure what he'd make of the pasta." Lynck's nose bumped against his, then he pulled away. "It must be almost done."

"Why do you do that?"

"What?" Lynck plucked out a spiral and bit into it, testing if the pasta was cooked. He nodded to himself and picked up the pot.

"The nose rub thing."

"You don't like it?"

"I didn't say that. It's different." It was weirdly intimate without anything that could be called intimate happening.

Lynck drained the pasta, keeping a little of the water and adding to the ingredients that were to form the sauce. "Humans like to kiss, but among kelpies, the nuzzle is

more common in both forms. I can stop?—”

“No. I don’t want you to change.”

“I don’t want to make you uncomfortable.”

“I’m not. It was curiosity, and I don’t want to misconstrue and read things wrong. Like with your ears... They move around a lot, and the way they sit means something.”

Lynck raised one eyebrow, and the same ear turned. “Yes, but like your facial expressions, my ear movement isn’t conscious unless I’m pulling a face.” He scowled, flattening his ears and narrowing his eyes.

Rox’s heart kicked over for the wrong reason as there was a ferocity in Lynck’s glare that settled in the pit of his stomach, as though some kind of primal fear had woken.

“Is that your battle face?” His voice sounded steady, even as his pulse became erratic.

Lynck smiled, and the harshness evaporated like a puddle in the middle of summer. “It was. Also my, ‘we’re about to close, and you and your friends want to sit down for coffee? Oh, hell no, you get takeout cups’ face. It’s very effective.”

“Yeah. I can see that.” He doubted he’d even get his order out. He wanted to ask about the battle that had resulted in Lynck’s capture and what happened after, but he guessed that whoever had caught him had wanted a fancy kelpie horse. Maybe they didn’t have actual horses in the monster realm, so the only option was to catch a kelpie.

Lynck dished up into two large bowls. “It’s not exactly like home, mostly because I can’t find the same herbs and such, but it’s passable.”

“Fusion cuisine. A monster vibe with human ingredients.”

“Exactly.” Lynck smiled.

“It smells amazing and better than anything I could cook in the monster realm. I wouldn’t even know what’s safe to eat.” That didn’t stop him from being curious about what it was like over there.

“Or what will eat you.”

Rox glanced at him, not sure if he was joking or not. From the look on Lynck’s face, Rox was one hundred percent sure that he wasn’t. “Which monsters eat people?”

“Some monsters eat anything that isn’t their own kind.” He paused, head tilted. “That’s a lie. Some will also eat their own kind. The monsters here are the ones who are most human-like, who want similar experiences. The military will not allow carnivorous predators through.”

“Yay.” He didn’t need those nightmares. The possibility of hungry monsters coming through for tasty human snacks hadn’t occurred to him, and there he was, living on the portal’s doorstep.

“I didn’t mean to scare you.” Lynck picked up the bowls and carried them to the table, and Rox followed with the glasses.

“I’m not scared. But I hadn’t considered what might be on the other side.”

“Did you think there was a town with a shopping mall?”

“No. Some kind of village?” He wasn’t sure what the monster world was like. Were there cities and malls?

“Please, eat,” Lynck said.

Rox looked at the food and then at Lynck. “Thank you for inviting me over and going to all this trouble.”

Lynck smiled as if that was the best thing Rox could’ve said. “I am glad you appreciate my efforts and that you wanted to be here with me. Please, you are the guest.”

“There is no one else I want to be having dinner with.” He picked up his fork, broke off some salmon, and ate it. It was sweet and salty and not at all what he was expecting.

He chewed, and Lynck watched as if waiting for a reaction.

“It’s different but really tasty.” He stabbed some of the green sauce-drenched pasta and popped it in his mouth. That had some unexpected heat, and the combination of seasonings was different from anything he’d ever eaten. Because he’d never eaten monster-fusion food. “Do you cook like this often?”

Lynck shook his head. “Thursten doesn’t really like it—too spicy for him. Sometimes, I’ll make up a batch of sauce and cook fresh fish each day.”

Rox grinned. “Is this the one thing you can cook?”

“No. Just my favorite and the one you were most likely to eat. Jellied fish and salted flatbreads don’t seem to feature on human menus.”

“Uh, no. Do you only eat fish?”

“I have tried chicken. But I try to eat similar foods to what I had at home because I

don't know if eating a more human diet will make me ill from the lack of nutrients. Thursten says I have my food saltier than him, and I assume most humans. I used less today, as I can add more to my food."

Rox's eyebrows pulled together. "I hadn't considered nutrition."

"Neither did I when I first arrived." Lynck started eating.

Rox smiled. He was having dinner...that he'd helped cook...with someone. Something he wouldn't have believed possible even a few months ago. That it was a monster sitting opposite him didn't bother him at all. Lynck was possibly the nicest man he'd ever met, and he wasn't putting on an act or trying to prove himself.

It all felt too easy, too right.

Which meant he expected the other shoe to drop and for something to go wrong. The thought cast a shadow over his delight, as though he wasn't allowed to be happy. Maybe he ruined everything. After all, he was the common element.

Lynck talked a bit about farming and cooking with his herd. And even though he'd been snatched away during a battle, he looked back fondly as though he didn't blame his herd for not coming to rescue him. Had they tried and failed? How would Lynck know if they had?

"Do you want to tell me about some of your childhood, or are the memories too raw?"

Rox frowned and finished his glass of wine. "I can talk about it. I don't think about it much because everything else took over. While you had fields and rivers to play in, I had asphalt basketball courts—I was never good at it, as I was always one of the shortest in my class."

He talked a bit more about primary school, telling funny stories and explaining bits to Lynck that he didn't quite understand. And in exchange, Lynck shared stories of growing up with his herd.

It was only as they cleared the table that Rox wondered if Lynck wanted him to stay the night.

thirteen

L ynck put the plates in the dishwasher, listening as Rox told him about the school camp when he realized he was gay. The wine was finished, and there was no reason for the evening to continue. He dried his hands, not sure how to ask if Rox wanted to stay over. It might be too much for him to wake up in the morning and face Thursten and Aski.

Rox glanced at him, a curve on his lips. “This is where you ask me if I want to stay for coffee.”

“Do you actually want coffee?” Humans often used coffee as an excuse.

“I wouldn’t mind one... Unless you want to kick me out?”

Lynck hooked a finger through a belt loop and pulled him close. “I do not want to kick you out. I want you to stay.”

He kissed Rox before he could answer, hoping to convey that his plan included much more than coffee. He wasn’t ready for the evening to be over. He wanted to find out what it was like to wake up with someone.

Rox slid his hand around the back of Lynck’s neck, his fingers brushing over the nape. “Then I will stay. I don’t have to be anywhere tomorrow. Do you?”

“Not until lunchtime.” And he couldn’t drop the shift at the cafe.

“Perfect. Why don’t you make some coffee, and we can pick a movie?”

“Movie?”

“Yeah, so we can make out on the sofa before going to bed. Like a proper human date, since we ran by the lake last time.” Rox grinned.

Lynck hoped that there was much the same ending involved, though with less sand, but he couldn’t surprise Rox with more monsters over breakfast. “My housemates won’t be out all night, and they will definitely be here when you get up in the morning.”

Rox nodded. “I figured as much. I’m okay with sneaking out and doing the walk of shame.”

“Why would you be sneaking and shameful?”

Rox opened his mouth and shut it. It was another couple of seconds before he spoke. “It’s a human phrase. I guess because some people are embarrassed about hooking up. Can’t say I’ve ever felt that way. And this isn’t a hook-up,” he said in case Lynck got the wrong idea. “If you want to feed me breakfast, I’m happy to stay.”

Lynck decided that he wanted to give Rox every meal. He shouldn’t be staying in the old motel, living on microwaved food. But he couldn’t move his boyfriend in without approval from his other housemates, and he’d need to find out if Rox wanted to move in, as everything he understood about human culture suggested moving in was a big deal.

Not that Rox was his boyfriend, as they’d only gone on two dates, plus one hook-up.

But he felt as though he knew Rox from everything they’d shared. While he didn’t

understand things like school camps, being the short kid in class, or having a deadbeat dad, he understood being the odd one out, being forced to do things you didn't want to, and the need to keep secrets.

The chain around his neck was heavy, and while he'd told Rox more than anyone else on this side of the portal, Rox didn't know everything, and Lynck wasn't sure how to tell him. Where did he start? And what did he leave out? He didn't want Rox to look at him with fear or hate.

He liked the hot gleam in Rox's eyes and the way he pressed against him...although that may have something to do with the way his hand cradled one of his perfect ass cheeks. It was the perfect handful for him, and he was very much hoping to see Rox naked again.

Which wouldn't happen if he learned the full truth, though finding out later would do more damage. He leaned in and kissed him, pushing aside all those thoughts, wanting to blame the talk of the past for bringing the bridle to the front of his mind. But while Rox was being truthful with him, he was a liar, and he didn't like that. He had enough crimes to his name without adding more.

"If you keep going, we can forget about coffee." Rox rolled his hips as if trying to rise onto his toes.

Lynck picked him up and sat him on the kitchen counter. He pulled the respectable shirt off, leaving Rox in the mesh shirt, and thumbed nipples so they formed hard peaks against the netting. "Coffee can wait."

He glanced at Rox to be sure that he wasn't going to say no.

"What do you have in mind?" Rox lifted his eyebrows.

What he'd wanted to do at the beach. He undid Rox's belt and then his jeans. "I want to taste you."

He liberated Rox's hardening cock and stroked until it jutted toward him. Human dicks fascinated him with their smooth head and the way the skin moved. Unable to resist, he leaned in and licked around the head, pressing the tip of his tongue to the slit before opening his mouth and letting it slide in.

Rox leaned back. "Fuck...you aren't worried your housemates are going to turn up early?"

Lynck didn't answer with words. He took Rox deeper and sucked his way to the tip, and then repeated. He listened to every half-smothered groan, the quickening beat of Rox's heart, and the way his hips lifted.

Then Rox caressed the edge of his ear, sweeping up before resting at the base, his fingers tangling in his mane. He wanted Rox to do that again. He flicked an ear, hoping he caught the hint.

"You like that? I wasn't sure if I should," Rox murmured.

Lynck flick his ear again, refusing to pull off Rox's cock as it was leaking so deliciously into his mouth, coating his tongue with the taste of pre-cum.

Rox's fingertips trailed over his ear.

It was too easy to imagine them brushing over his cock. He groaned around the dick in his mouth.

Rox sucked in a shaky breath. "If you don't want to swallow..."

Lynck had no intention of stopping. It was far too much fun making Rox writhe and pant. The noises he made in the back of his throat were music no one else could recreate.

Rox's fingers threaded into his hair and pressed against his scalp as if to keep him there. His hips lifted, and his head tipped back as he came. His dick pulsed against Lynck's tongue, and cum flooded his mouth. It was salty but barely a single swallow.

He drew back and released him. Rox's dick hit his belly with a wet slap, his eyes closed and his chest lifting with each rapid breath. "I need a moment. That was so good, I think you killed me."

No dead body had ever thanked him.

"Your heart is beating too fast for you to be dead."

Rox opened one eye. "It's a human saying, the little death? *La petite mort*? That's the only French I speak, by the way."

"It's more than me. Kelpies say the day held its breath because everything stops for that moment."

Rox opened his other eye but made no effort to sit up. He lounged on the kitchen counter with his dick out in that mesh shirt like he was sex personified, and all Lynck wanted to do was drag him off, flip him over, and fuck him. He should've thought this through a little better.

"That's a nicer way of saying it." Rox smiled as if he'd heard what Lynck was thinking. "Do you want to skip the movie and fuck me?"

He wanted both, but he did not want to be caught fucking Rox on the sofa. That

would be mortifying for both of them.

“Or do you want me to suck you and see how much I can swallow?” His grin turned wicked, and his foot brushed against Lynck’s inner thigh.

“I want you to ride me.” The words slipped out of his mouth before his brain had even processed them.

He sucked in a breath, unsure how to take the words back. A kelpie didn’t allow just anyone to ride them. There had to be a level of trust, so it was usually only family or lovers. And because he’d been a teen, he’d never been ridden. Not that he could shift into a horse and be ridden the way it was meant within a herd.

Rox tilted his head. “That means something else doesn’t?”

“Yes and no.” They were talking about sex, and he’d never laid back and let a human ride his dick. He always mounted them. Probably because of the trust implications.

Rox cupped his cheek. “You can change your mind if it’s too much.”

Lynck kissed the human’s palm. “It’s not too much. I haven’t let anyone...and I’m mixing two different things when I shouldn’t be. It’s not the same because I’m not shifted.”

“FYI, if you shift, I’m not having sex with you. That’s, um...too much for me.” His eyebrows pulled together. “I hope that’s not offensive. Maybe I’m too human for that.”

“It’s not offensive. And among most kelpies, there would be no sex between forms.”

“Most, but not all?”

Lynck shrugged. “Every species has kinks.”

Rox nodded. “And yours happens to be mesh shirts and goth humans.”

“It does.” He lifted Rox down from the counter, setting him on the floor. “I’ll give you the grand tour.”

Rox laughed. “I only need to know where the bathroom and your bedroom are.”

fourteen

Rox lay on his side, one leg thrown over Lynck's thigh. Sunlight slanted through a gap in the curtains, and they were both awake, just unwilling to get up. The more time they spent together, the more the song in his heart grew, and he didn't want to stop it, even though it was dangerous to indulge.

Thursten was in the kitchen trying to be quiet as he made breakfast, but the troll didn't really know the meaning of the word. Lynck liked the way Rox curled up close to be held while half asleep, and he'd been content to hold him, not expecting more.

Last night, watching Rox straddle him and ease onto his cock had been a glorious sight. The way his body moved, lithe and graceful, as if they had all night. Lynck had let him set the pace, too busy touching and caressing every part of him within reach. When Rox's dick hardened, he'd rolled his hips fucking Lynck's hand and riding his cock, until the need to come had been too pressing to do anything but rush for the finish.

Rox's fingers trailed over Lynck's chest. Smoothing the hair with one sweep and ruffling it with another. His hand crept higher, touching the silver necklace. Rox lifted the disk and examined the marking, and Lynck knew the question that was coming.

But there was no lie ready on his tongue.

"What does it mean?" Rox asked, his voice rough with sleep.

Lynck closed his eyes. It meant never going home unless he wanted to lose all freedom. Again.

“It is the mark of the man who captured me.” That was the truth.

Rox tilted his head and stared at him. “Then why do you wear it?”

Lynck licked his lip. He wanted to pull away and put some distance between them. Kick Rox out of his bed. The bridle was the reason he didn’t let people close. He didn’t want to lie to his lover. And if it was only one night, the truth didn’t matter, but that’s not what this was anymore, and he wanted Rox the way he’d never wanted anyone. He wanted to write his mating song.

How could he promise a life when his life wasn’t free to give?

“You don’t have to tell me.” And while Rox didn’t pull away Lynck felt the fissure form.

“I do. It’s been a secret and a source of shame for so long that talking about it isn’t easy.” He pressed a kiss to Rox’s forehead. “Do you remember how I said I can’t shift in the human world?”

“Yeah. Because of the necklace?”

“It’s not a necklace. It’s a bridle.”

“Isn’t that what horses have?”

“Yes.”

“I’m no expert, but it doesn’t look like?—”

“Because it has magic. When I shift, it shifts with me and will become reins and wrap over my muzzle.”

“It stops you from shifting?”

“I’m not sure. I may not be able to shift in your world, regardless.”

Rox held the disk. “Why not take it off?”

“I can’t. The magic prevents me from removing it.” He swallowed, knowing he needed to force the next part out. “In the monster realm, the magic also allows him to find me.”

His human lifted his gaze. “He can’t track you through the portal?”

“So far, he hasn’t.” But if he ever came across, no matter the town or the distance, Bothvar would be able to find him.

Rox propped himself up on one elbow and studied the chain. “Were you his horse?”

“No. An obedient servant until I took my chance and fled through the portal.” He hadn’t even been sure being in the human world would protect him, but there’d been so few options, he’d been willing to risk the punishment that would follow if found.

“They attack your herd to take servants?” He raked his thumbnail over the fine chain as if seeking a break in the delicate loops of silver.

“Yes. Along with salted fish and gold.”

“Gold?” He turned the chain, and it dragged against the back of Lynck’s neck.

Lynck didn't care. Now he was talking, he needed Rox to understand the hopelessness of the situation.

"In the rivers. As well as farming and fishing, we dived for gold that washed down from the mountains. As children, we sifted through the slit on the shore. The gold was then made into simple rings and used to buy leather and cloth and other things that we didn't make."

"I'm guessing he didn't want to trade, only take."

"Correct."

"Bothvar Bothvarsson?" Rox looked up from the chain, one eyebrow raised. His eyeliner smudged around his eyes, and his dark blond hair mussed.

Lynck wanted to press him into the mattress and silence him with a kiss. He knew too much...he didn't know enough.

It was too dangerous for his human to learn more, but what if there was something in the human world that could free him?

"He seems like the kind of dick who'd do something like that. No doubt his son has been cursed with the same name." Rox rolled his eyes. "Family tradition and all."

"Gideon Roxburgh the second?—"

Rox held up four fingers.

"The fourth?" Lynck laughed.

"Jokes on him since I'm breaking the chain." His eyebrows drew together. "Unless he

also named one of his other sons Gideon... Fuck, that's a horrendous thought."

"Why did he leave?"

"I wasn't even two. He walked out and never came back, is what Mom said. She also said his family didn't like her because she didn't have the right parents—he came from a wealthy family, and she didn't."

"That's even shittier."

Rox shrugged. "Shitty people do shitty things."

That was true even for monsters. "It was Bothvar."

"The grandfather, father or son? Family dinners must be confusing."

"The son was a child the last time I saw him. The father killed his own father to take over the family business."

"Which is terrorizing kelpies, kidnapping, and stealing?"

"Not just kelpies. His family has controlled the trade route through the mountains for generations. It's how they make their money."

"Extortion? Making people pay to use the pass, or making them pay for protection?"

"All of that. It's been a couple of generations since the last uprising, and that didn't end well for anyone except the Bothvarssons. They made the kelpies fight their own." Lynck sighed. "We remember battle in songs as a warning not to revolt."

"But you fought him when you were captured?"

“That is different. If we do not resist when he raids, the punishment is worse.”

“What? That is so messed up.”

“After the failed revolt, some villages went for the peaceful option, hoping to be forgiven for their part. They were all slaughtered. Bothvar wants to give his fighters practice. He wants to kill a few and take a few. The first act of a captured kelpie is to kill one of their own. I expected to die. I did not expect to be the one bridled and forced to kill.” Lynck swallowed, knowing he’d said too much.

Rox stared at him, mouth open. “He made you kill one of your herd?”

“To ensure they never took me back. To make me a criminal and an outsider.” Not that he could go back, anyway. Because of the bridle, Bothvar could track him into any corner of the monster realm. He’d be dragged back and whipped within an inch of his life and then compelled to fight until he died. He’d been forced to watch another suffer the same punishment.

“How did you listen to me whine about my mother’s death while you’re carrying all of that? I am so sorry...you didn’t lose your herd. You lost everything, including your freedom.”

“But I have found it here. And I have found you. I am rebuilding, and while this is not the life I expected to have growing up, it is one that I am enjoying. I have seen things I could not have imagined had I stayed in the monster realm. So please don’t look at me with pity.”

“It’s not pity. It’s amazement that you came through all of that and seem so normal.” He laid the necklace on Lynck’s chest. “I’m going to find a way to break the chain that.”

“It can’t be removed. I’ve tried.”

Rox pressed his lips together. “Have you asked anyone for help?”

“No, because they might ask what it is. And some of the other monsters here might’ve heard of Bothvar.”

“You trusted me with this knowledge.”

“Because you have the right to know what kind of man you are...dating? I think we’re dating.”

Rox smiled. “We are definitely dating.”

“You need to understand. I was compelled to do things?—”

“Whatever he commanded you to do, it is not your fault. What would happen if you resisted?”

“The bridle becomes hotter, until it burns, searing the skin. It is incredibly painful.”

“You tried to resist?”

“Of course I did. I didn’t want to kill one of my herd, my family. I hoped he’d kill me. But he didn’t. The scar faded with multiple shifts, but the memory didn’t.” He moved over Rox, their legs tangling. “I do not want to talk about that period of my life. And you cannot tell anyone.”

Rox gave him a wicked grin. “Or you’ll have to silence me? Sorry, that was a bad joke.”

“I’d never hurt you.” He’d rather let the bridle burn through his body. For a moment, he was sure he smelled his own burning hair and flesh.

“Will removing the bridle hurt you? Will it kill you?”

“No. The magic doesn’t work in the human world.” He wasn’t sure what Rox was planning, but there was a look in his eyes that was sharp and bright, like a sword.

“I have access to all kinds of tools. If I can’t cut through the chain with bolt cutters, I have an angle grinder and an oxy torch. If I can cut through fucking car bodies, I can cut through that tiny chain. We will defeat Bothvar.”

He spoke with such confidence that Lynck almost believed him...but could monster magic be defeated by human power tools?

With Rox looking at him like that, it was hard to believe he’d fail.

He thought he was free, but sharing his secret meant acknowledging he still lived in fear of Bothvar finding him and returning him to the monster world. Until the bridle was destroyed, he would never be free, and that was a hard truth to admit. He kissed Rox, pushing away memories and truths and losing himself in desire.

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:32 am*

fifteen

If Rox didn't hurry the fuck up, Beastly Brewhouse was going to be closed before he got there. He hadn't wanted to go around in his sweaty, oil-stained clothes, so he'd stopped by the motel to shower and change first, which had added twenty minutes to his turnaround time.

He did not want to abuse the privilege of being able to stare at the piano by turning up at closing and expecting to be let in, no it was better to turn up in a timely manner before closing and play, or attempt to, while Lynck cleaned up.

Lynck had texted yesterday to say that it was fine for him to play while he closed and that he was looking forward to seeing him again. Rox hadn't been willing to wait another day, so even though he expected to play like shit, at least there'd only be an audience of one, and Lynck wouldn't make fun of him.

He walked through the open door, and his cheeks burned at the sight of Thursten behind the counter, and he wanted to turn around and walk out. They hadn't exactly been quiet yesterday morning, and they'd both needed a shower after grinding together until Lynck spilled over his belly and chest. It looked as though six guys had come on him—and that was after Lynck had scooped up some cum and fed it to him.

Thursten smiled. "Greetings, noisy human."

Yesterday, as Rox walked through the kitchen yesterday when leaving, Thursten had raised his oversized mug of coffee and said much the same thing.

He wasn't that noisy.

"Hey." He wanted to die. "I thought Lynck was going to be here." He wasn't playing for a stranger.

"He's doing dishes out the back, but I'm sure he knows you're here." Thursten nodded at the piano. "It's all yours, but I can't promise that it's in tune."

"Thanks." Rox walked over and put his bag on the floor. He'd brought a folder of music with him, even though it was pretty pointless. If the piano was out of tune, even more so.

He sat and, for several seconds, did nothing more than stare at the keys. Even though Lynck was working, Rox hoped that he'd come out and say hello. Perhaps not being distracted by him was part of the agreement, and if Rox's playing stopped him from doing his job, then piano privileges would be over.

His eyes prickled, and he blinked a few times.

No, he wasn't upset because Lynck was doing dishes. He hadn't played since the funeral, and all those emotions that he thought he'd outrun had found a crack and were flooding in and filling him up. Again.

He pressed his palms to his eyes. This was ridiculous. He was past this. It had been over six months.

Longer since he'd heard her play.

A warm hand touched his shoulder, and he jumped.

Lynck crouched next to him. "Are you okay?"

“Yeah, fine.” Clearly, he wasn’t.

“I thought you wanted?—”

“I do.” Which explained the tears. He sniffed and drew in a breath. “I want to play...” he couldn’t even explain how he felt.

“If the music isn’t ready to come out, you can’t force it. Sit until you feel the music again.”

“What is the point of that?”

Lynck considered him for several seconds. “You cannot hold back a tide, correct?”

“Yeah.” Rox frowned, not understanding where Lynck was going.

“So, why do you try to hold back your emotions?”

Rox shook his head. “Because...because I’m supposed to move on, and her death shouldn’t be hurting.”

“Did you sit with the grief and let the pain wash over you the first time, or did you push it away?”

Rox gave a bitter laugh. “I went on a road trip. I ran.”

At the time, he’d been so numb, so tired, that running away had been the only option.

“So now you must sit until it passes.”

That isn’t what humans did. “Is that what you did?”

Lynck gave a small nod. “You let it wash over you, or you let it consume you, fighting it with every waking breath. I fought the anger for far longer than six months when I was captured. Let me save you that pain.”

And Lynck had lost so much more. He’d lost everyone he’d ever known. He pressed a kiss to Rox’s temple as he stood. “I need to close up and clean up.”

“It’s okay if I sit?” If he wasn’t playing, he was in the way.

“You sit until you are ready to play. Maybe tomorrow, maybe next week, maybe longer.” He stepped back, his hoof tapping on the wooden floor.

Rox turned. “Did you stop playing the violin?”

“For many years, I didn’t play any music because I no longer heard it in my heart. I bought a violin when I moved here. But even then, it took me a while before I strung the bow and played.”

“You never played for me last night.”

“I guess that means you’ll have to come around for dinner again.”

“Maybe I can cook you one of my favorite recipes?”

“I’d like that.” Lynck smiled.

“And I want to go home,” Thursten called from behind the counter. “So lock the front door.”

“The boss has spoken.” Lynck walked away, tail neatly braided, the way it always was when he was at work.

Rox spun around and faced the piano. It was very similar to the one he'd grown up with, that he'd sold along with everything else. Which in hindsight had been a grief response and it might have been smarter to put some of the things into storage, but at the time all he'd wanted to do was put it behind him and move on.

Except he hadn't.

And neither had Lynck. He'd come to the world to escape, but he was still bound by the past. What had Lynck said about shadows having a long reach?

Rox was sure that if he'd stayed in the apartment surrounded by the past and walked the same streets, he would've been consumed. He'd needed the time and space and thought he'd moved on, but perhaps that was impossible. Maybe when he pulled out her book and made his favorite meal, all the grief would rush back...his throat thickened at the idea.

Perhaps there'd always be something waiting to rise and remind him, and that was okay because he didn't want to forget, but he didn't want to feel so raw.

Mom wouldn't want him to do anything but live.

She'd be happy that he had a proper job and a boyfriend, even if he was a monster. No doubt she would have loved talking to Lynck about music.

He placed his fingers on the keys the way he had so many times growing up. He didn't remember the first time, but there were photos of him sitting in her lap when he was about six months old while she played. He must've been mashing the keys even back then.

He didn't even remember when she started teaching him to play, but he remembered doing homework while she practiced, and then he'd play while she made dinner.

He let the weight drop onto middle C. That didn't sound too bad. He should check if the piano was even in tune so that, if needed, it could be re-tuned. After so many months of not playing, he wasn't sure how good his ear was anymore.

Maybe, if he couldn't tell, it was good enough.

Slowly, he worked his way through C Major, listening to each key. The E in the top octave was off, he played it again. And then a different E.

"I think that one's off." He glanced over his shoulder to see Lynck wiping the tables and stacking the chairs.

"It is," Lynck agreed.

"And the others?"

"They sounded fine to me, but I have learned that human ears prefer a slightly different tone to what I was used to, so I am not the best person to ask."

"Huh...does that mean your violin is tuned differently?"

"It was at first. But I have adjusted it since. Though with the violin, it does not take much to adjust. I am about to start mopping, so you need to remain where you are until I am done because if you slip and fall, I will never hear the end of it from Thursten."

"I'll stay here." He needed to check the black keys, anyway.

Just as slowly, he checked each one. Once again, it was the keys in the upper octave that were off. Perhaps the piano had sustained a little damage from living in the cafe, or when being moved.

Lynck was still mopping. As he moved around, his hooves tapped, making their own rhythm. It was easy to forget he had them. And because he was so much taller, they never touched him in bed. Rox had been more worried about rolling onto Lynck's tail or sleeping on his mane. There was a reason he kept his hair around shoulder length, and part of that was practicality. Long hair was a pain in the ass—though he'd tried for a bit, and he didn't particularly like it when guys slept on it. If it was much longer, they thought it was an invitation to grab a handful.

Since he couldn't escape because of the wet floor, he should play some scales to get a feel for the piano. Once his fingers remembered how to dance over the keys, the other scales came flooding back. He didn't realize when Lynck finished working, only that when Rox stopped and looked around, Lynck was sitting and listening.

Lynck gave him a round of applause as though he'd finished playing a masterpiece.

Rox shook his head. "That was scales, not music."

"It was music." Lynck stood, stretched, and walked over.

"You should've told me you were done."

"But you weren't, and I am happy to wait. I have nowhere to rush off to, and this is important to you. Plus, I enjoyed it."

"You enjoyed me playing scales?"

"It's been a long time since I listened to someone else create music. If all you want to do is play scales, then I will gladly play with you."

"Are your scales the same?"

“No, but I have learned yours.”

Rox lifted his eyebrows. “By listening?”

“Yes, but not by listening to you. Humans feel the need to learn scales, so I needed to learn to teach them. Though it was not how I learned to play as a child... Music is not written in a herd; it is felt in the heart.”

Rox gave him a small smile. Even though sitting at the piano hurt, the act of playing was soothing. His heart ached less. “Does that mean you will bring your violin next time?”

“I can do that. Would you like to go for a walk, or do you have chores to do?”

“I did all my laundry and food shopping yesterday afternoon, so I have time for a walk. Do you need to get anything done? We can do it together.” Going food shopping with Lynck might be fun.

He wanted to ask if he thought any more about coming round to the repair shop and cutting the necklace off, but Lynck knew the offer was there. And while Rox had been confident while lying in bed—anything was possible in bed and naked with his lover—the reality was neither of them knew if the bridle could be broken with power tools.

“I have some time off tomorrow, which is when I’ll run errands. I’d much rather go to the lake with you.” Lynck offered his hand.

Rox accepted and let himself be pulled to his feet. “Are you doing some kelpie flirting?”

“You know I am...though we don’t need to do any running or swimming.”

“When the weather warms up, I might swim.” He hadn’t swum in what felt like forever, but it was probably only three years. Now that he lived by a lake, there was no excuse not to make use of it. It wasn’t as though he needed to pay to use a pool.

Lynck laughed. “Come on, Thursten told me to take the leftover sandwiches.”

His heart gave a jump. “A walk and a picnic?”

“Unless you have other dinner plans?”

Sitting in the motel room with a microwave dinner couldn’t compete. “I’m not going to turn down free food and a lakeside walk.”

It was more than that, though. It was the way Lynck looked at him and the way he could be himself. He was enough in a way he’d never expected to find.

If he’d known his ideal boyfriend was a monster, he wouldn’t have wasted six months driving around aimlessly. Except he’d needed that time to find himself because the man he’d been six months ago hadn’t known who he was or what he wanted.

He rolled up onto his toes and kissed Lynck, then brushed his nose against his for good measure.

“What was that for?” Lynck gazed at him.

“For being you.” For letting him be him.

sixteen

L ynck tightened the bow, readying to play. Rox had come in every night he was closing and sat at the piano. Sometimes, he'd start a song and then stop as if continuing was too much. After, they'd go for a walk by the lake and eat the leftovers that couldn't be sold the next day. While he wanted to run and swim and do other kelpie things with his human boyfriend, what they had worked for them.

But he was nervous about playing for Rox.

He definitely hadn't been constructing their mating song, creating new measures with each passing day. And he was not playing that song today.

Because it didn't exist.

The more times he said it, the faster the lie was going to wear through.

Today Rox had done his usual thing of playing a few scales and then thumbing through a music book, selecting a song and then stopping before repeating.

"Have you considered buying some new music?" Lynck asked as he pulled over a chair and sat near Rox.

Rox nodded. "I have...I've even looked at a few online. I'm not quite there yet." He smiled and glanced at the violin. "I'm excited to hear you play."

"I re-tuned it to kelpie style, so the notes will sound a little odd, but I thought you'd

like something more traditional.” And he was not going to play the tune forming in his heart, growing every time he saw Rox, even though he was sure Rox would join in and add to the melody.

He wasn’t ready to share. Before he did that, he needed the damn bridle removed.

It had to be possible. Since telling Rox about it, he’d tried again, pulling at the chain and then trying to cut through it with scissors. He’d thought about asking Thursten to use his ax, but that meant explaining what the chain was, and that meant revealing too many secrets. It had been hard enough to tell Rox.

Rox leaned forward, eyes bright. “I’d love to hear some kelpie music.”

Lynck smiled. He’d practiced at home because he hadn’t played some of them for so long. He hadn’t been sure what to play at first. A jaunty party tune? A funeral lament? While both were pretty, they weren’t what he wanted to share. “It’s a work song, something that was sung while farming or weaving or making a meal.”

“So shared with others?”

“Yes, while there are some lyrics, new verses are made up on the spot, poking fun at the job or recounting recent gossip.”

“Music was a big part of your life.”

It wasn’t only the music he missed; it was the community, the way others joined the song. “It is a big part of herd life.” He drew in a breath, understanding how hard it was to play the songs that held so much meaning beyond their notes. But if he didn’t share them, he’d never hear them again. “I won’t be singing.”

He lifted the violin and ran the bow over the strings to make sure he was happy with

the sound. Then he launched into the song. It wasn't complex and could go on forever, but every player added their own embellishments. It was the first song a child learned as they sat at the hooves of their parents.

Rox tilted his head, no doubt because the notes sounded off to him, the same way human music had to him at first. Not out of tune, but enough that his ears had tried to find the real notes. He saw the same puzzlement on Rox's face.

In his mind, he heard the voice of his family singing as they worked, laughing and encouraging as people tried to make a verse—not everyone excelled at coming up with something in the moment.

He played the chorus a final time and added a flourish to signify the end.

Rox clapped. “That did sound weird at first, but once I stopped trying to figure out why, I got it. It's kind of fun.”

“It is meant to take the tedium out of some tasks.”

“I'll be humming that while I do laundry.”

Lynck laughed. “Yes. Though you aren't hand scrubbing by the river.”

“Your herd sounds lovely, and then you say something like that, and I feel blessed to have access to washing machines.”

“And grocery stores.” Because farming and fishing, while he missed the freshness and the activity, were also tiresome. And if no fish were caught, then dinner was a little slimmer.

“True. I wouldn't know how to find dinner if my life depended on it.”

“When you grow up hunting your own dinner, you don’t think anything of it. It is just a part of life, and you don’t know any different.” He’d only been beyond his village a few times—to visit other herds and also to a town for trade once—before being captured. But those glimpses had revealed a much bigger world that he’d wanted to explore.

At first, he’d thought that wanderlust was to blame for his capture, that somehow it had marked him out.

“What is your world like?” Rox asked.

“Parts of it are beautiful, and others are stark. Much like your world. But unlike your world, where there are only humans, there were many kinds of monsters. Some lived with only their kind, the way kelpies tend to, and others lived in towns teeming with all kinds.”

“Monster towns.”

“And castles, and aquatic monsters, and those who live in forests away from everyone, and some who lived high in the mountains.”

“It sounds amazing.”

“If I could take you, I would. I’d bring you home to meet my family.”

Rox’s eyebrows drew together, and Lynck saw the words forming on his tongue. He was going to ask about the bridle.

“Is it dangerous for a human to go through the portal?”

Lynck blinked, not expecting that question, and he didn’t have an answer ready. “It’s

my understanding that humans can go through, though I do not advise going alone, as it may be dangerous.”

Rox lifted an eyebrow.

The only thing stopping Lynck from taking Rox home to meet the family was the bridle.

“Would you want to stay there if it was possible?” Rox pressed.

Lynck was silent for a heartbeat. Going home was a dream, not a reality. “No. Even with the bridle removed, he might learn I have returned and hunt me down. He may take his revenge on my tribe. No one defies Bothvar and lives.” He lowered his gaze to Rox’s beat-up runners. “I talk of going home, but it’s never going to happen.”

He shouldn’t make promises that he couldn’t keep.

“It’s okay. I don’t want to go through the portal without you.” He put his hand on Lynck’s knee. “And it’s not like I can take you to meet Mom.”

Lynck snorted and glanced up. “I can only live in monster-approved towns.”

If Rox decided he wanted to travel again, Lynck couldn’t follow.

“I know. I did some reading. I’m not going anywhere. We can be stuck here together.” Rox grinned as though that was the solution.

While there was no one else he wanted to be stuck with, it wasn’t the same as being free to offer his heart. He swallowed as nerves got the better of him. “Can you try to remove the bridle?”

“I’ll do more than try.”

seventeen

O n Saturday mornings, Rox worked alone as Arn took the weekends off—he also had the next week off for a family wedding, which was another reason he'd been so desperate to hire someone. Rox didn't mind working on his own, and Arn had run through everything that needed done. Though he was a little anxious, as he hadn't been in the job that long.

He finished up the car and got it ready for the owner to collect, hoping they'd be on time as Lynck was coming by before closing. He'd break the chain, then drop him off at work before meeting up tonight for dinner—and it was his turn to cook.

The bell chimed, and Rox went through the service with the man, ran the payment, and handed over the keys. For a few moments, he imagined it was his business and that he'd built a life in Elder Ridge. Did it matter that Lynck couldn't freely travel?

He couldn't do it now, but in a few more years, perhaps the humans would relax the rules. It had been a joke about being stuck together, but something had changed between them, and Rox figured he'd messed up even though Lynck hadn't said anything.

Lynck hadn't canceled dinner plans, though.

And if he didn't show up today?

Rox figured he'd text to see if he was running late and if dinner was still on. He wanted it to be on. He wasn't ready for this thing to be over—he couldn't imagine not

seeing Lynck when they clicked in so many ways.

While he waited, he cleaned up out the back, getting ready to close for the day. With ten minutes to go, the bell rang out the front, and Lynck stood there waiting for him.

“Hey...” Rox smiled as relief washed through him.

Lynck nodded his greeting, his ears at an odd angle.

Rox licked his lip. “Do you want to come out the back?”

He shook his head and sighed. “No, but I need to.”

Rox frowned. “Need to?”

“I want to move on, not literally?—”

“I didn’t mean that I felt stuck with you. I like you.” He wasn’t ready to say it was more, even though his heart was lighter around Lynck. People he loved left...the people who claimed to love him left. Either way, he ended up alone. There was a small fear that Lynck would go back home once free, even though he claimed he didn’t want that. Who wouldn’t want to go home if given the chance? “I want to spend more time with you.”

“So do I, but I want you to see the reality. My life here is limited by what the human laws allow. If you want to take off in your truck and travel, I can’t join you even though I want to.”

“I’m tired of traveling. I took the job because I wanted to stop flitting from town to town. I want to build a life.” He hadn’t realized that’s what he wanted until he had the sand in his shoes, the grease on his clothes, and the kelpie in his bed.

“That is also what I want, and to do that, I need the bridle off. Until then, I belong to someone else.”

Rox opened the door to the workshop. “Come on.”

Lynck walked over, hooves tapping on the linoleum, looking unconvinced. His ears revealed his discomfort, and his tail swished. Rox put a hand on Lynck’s chest. “I want to help you, but you can tell me to stop. And if something bad is happening because of the magic, say something.”

Lynck put his hand over Rox’s, then leaned down to kiss him. “You have a good heart.”

“So do you.” He put his arms around Lynck and rested his head on his shoulder, letting the heat of his body soak into him. If they weren’t at work, he’d be tempted to slide his hand beneath Lynck’s shirt.

Lynck kissed the top of his head. “You might be finished for the day, but I have the closing shift.”

Rox drew back and grinned. “And I need to grab the groceries for dinner. You’re getting Mom’s carbonara.” His voice didn’t catch when he spoke, and he looked forward to cooking it. “You do eat bacon?”

“Yes.”

They stepped out the back, where he’d already set out bolt cutters. It was a small chain. It shouldn’t be that hard to break. And if there was no magic involved, he’d expect the job to be done in thirty seconds.

After his first attempt, it was clear that bolt cutters were next to useless on the chain.

“Fuck. Let me try something else.”

Lynck nodded, sitting on the stool like a statue.

Rox grabbed the disk with Bothvar’s mark stamped in the center and tried to cut it off the chain. He was going to pop a blood vessel before the magic broke.

“Huh...” The silver was tougher than it seemed. “Do you know anything about the magic?”

“No.”

“Let’s try the angle grinder. You’ll need to braid your hair out of the way as I don’t want to cut it or you. It’s also going to be super awkward.”

Lynck braided his hair. “I can’t imagine it will be worse than living with the bridle.”

“Probably not.” He handed Lynck a pair of goggles and ear protection.

They both looked at the earmuffs.

Rox frowned. He hadn’t thought that through very well. “Sorry. Maybe some earplugs?”

“They might be better,” Lynck agreed.

He followed Rox’s instructions, and Rox made sure the only thing he was cutting was the chain. “It’s going to be loud. Please don’t flinch.”

“I won’t.”

Neither did the chain. Sparks danced and metal squealed, but the blade didn't even scratch the chain.

“What the fuck?” He ripped off the goggles and inspected the chain more closely.

Lynck sighed and pulled the goggles off before pulling out the earplugs. “No luck?”

“None. I don't even know if the oxy torch will work.”

“It won't,” Arn said.

Rox spun to face the door where Arn stood, arms crossed.

Lynck gasped and backed up, ears flattening. “You didn't say your boss was a frost giant.”

Rox glanced at Lynck, then back at Arn who wasn't even supposed to be there. “A what?”

Arn shrugged, but as he did, his skin took on a bluish tone, and ice crystals formed in his white hair. He also grew an extra foot.

Rox's heart quickened. He'd fucked up even though he hadn't wasted work time or supplies, even though nothing was damaged. “I'm sorry for using work tools.”

“I don't care about the tools,” Arn snapped. “That is a bridled kelpie. He belongs to?—”

“Lynck doesn't belong to anyone.” Rox stepped forward. Who was Arn to say anything about a bridle?

Lynck put his hand on Rox's arm and nodded at Arn. "He knows the rules."

"I don't care about monster rules. This is the human world, and you can't own people." He was getting fired for this, he was sure of it, even though Arn needed him to work while he was away.

Arn ignored him. "Who is your master, kelpie?"

"That is none of your concern," Lynck said. His voice was firm, but his ears betrayed him.

"You were trying to remove the bridle." Arn took a step forward.

Lynck's hoof tapped the concrete. "And? I am in the human world. It has no power. No use but to serve as a reminder of the cruelty of the frost giants."

Oh, shit. Bothvar was a frost giant. Not that Rox knew what a frost giant was or how to recognize one without the ice and blue skin.

"You are forbidden to remove a bridle."

"It didn't work, so it doesn't matter." Rox's voice pitched up at the end, and he cursed himself for not being able to act like he was calm.

Arn and Lynck glared at each other.

Finally, Arn nodded and returned to the human-looking man Rox was familiar with. "Fine. Leave. Both of you."

Rox swallowed. Was that a leave forever?

“The kelpie is not to be here again,” Arn growled as he picked up a box from the work bench. “Understood?”

“Yes,” Rox said.

“I will watch the cameras while I am away.”

Rox nodded. He’d seen the cameras on the outside of the building, though had assumed they were to protect the tools not spy on who was coming to the shop.

“I will not set hoof on your property,” Lynck said.

Arn glared at Lynck, then stalked out, the door slamming after him.

eighteen

L ynck shut the truck door, fear and fury pulsing through his blood.

Rox walked around, lips pressed together, and got in.

It took everything Lynck had not to snarl at him. How could Rox betray him like that?

He stared at his human boyfriend. The man who had only been trying to help him. It wasn't Rox's fault. Lynck had never said what kind of monster Bothvar was.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know Arn was a frost giant," Rox said as he put the key in the ignition.

"I know." He pushed the words out through gritted teeth, annoyed with himself for agreeing to remove the bridle. He should've known better. If he'd stayed away, Rox's boss might have never seen him...but their paths would've eventually crossed. He'd have stopped by to see Rox, or they'd have passed in a shop.

He was surprised Rox's boss had never been into Beastly. Unless he was deliberately avoiding other monsters, which meant he had secrets of his own.

"That's what Bothvar is?" Rox stared straight ahead as though driving, even though he hadn't put the truck into gear.

"Yes. Even if I'd told you about frost giants, you wouldn't have known that your boss

was one.”

“He looked human. If I’d known, I’d never have asked you to come around.”

Lynck exhaled, forcing out the anger. It had all been for nothing. He was still bridled, and now a frost giant knew where he lived. Where else could he run to? Even if he moved to another monster town, Bothvar only needed to be in the human world to summon him back to the monster realm.

He’d felt free but hadn’t been.

“I want to be free.” His voice cracked.

Rox turned and put his hand on Lynck’s thigh. “I want that, too. What do we do now?”

“Now? I go to work, and you come to dinner as planned.”

“Are you sure you want to spend the evening with me?”

No, he wasn’t, but he also didn’t want to waste time when his life in the human world could be taken away at any moment. “I was shocked and angry because I thought I was safe. But it doesn’t change how I feel about you.”

Rox nodded. “Arn is away next week. He is going to his brother’s wedding.”

“That means he is going home.” Lynck didn’t trust a frost giant as far as he could kick one. Arn might seek out Bothvar to earn favor. “If Bothvar turns up, you need to stay away from me, or he’ll command me to kill you.”

“Lovely.” Rox started the car. “Is there no way to stop him? Surely the soldiers

guarding the portal won't let him through." He glanced over.

"They won't if he goes through the main one like I did," Lynck agreed, and that gave him a measure of safety. There was a part of him that hoped Bothvar wouldn't come after him because it was too much hassle, but by escaping, Lynck made him look weak. "But there is another portal in the forest near the lake."

"Do soldiers guard that one, too?" Rox stared at him, and Lynck wanted to reassure him.

"I have heard it is less guarded due to its isolation and the wolves in the woods."

"Oh...so monsters can come and go more freely."

"In theory, though, there is a Leshy village near the other side." Would they let Bothvar through, or would Bothvar kill them if they tried to stop them? Perhaps they would kill Bothvar. The thought gave Lynck a little too much satisfaction.

"What's a Leshy?"

"They look human...or they look like they are made of tree and hide and bones." He wanted to say they looked like a nightmare, but plenty of monsters found them charming.

Rox grimaced. "Can we not warn the military that Bothvar might appear and cause trouble?"

"He doesn't need to cause trouble. As soon as he's in the human world, he will be able to summon me, and I will not be able to resist. I will be the one making trouble on his orders. I will be the one banned from the human world."

Rox gripped the steering wheel as he drove. “There must be something we can do.”

“You don’t think I have considered what will happen, what options there are? I don’t want my friends to be hurt. I don’t want to be the one hurting them. And I don’t want to hurt you .” Being ordered to kill Rox would destroy him. He hadn’t been able to protect his herd, but he might be able to protect his boyfriend. “Promise me you won’t fight for me.”

Rox glanced at him. “Do you really want me to make that promise?”

He didn’t, and he knew Rox wouldn’t. He didn’t deserve a human boyfriend like him.

“What else can I do?” He tugged at the chain, willing it to snap. “I cannot fight him; all I can do is obey. I do not want to kill for him or protect him when others try to kill him. I don’t want to run his errands or convince people to take less money. I don’t want to harass them and threaten them for more money either.”

All things he had done in the past because he had no choice. Living in the human world had allowed him to determine his own fate, but how many would trust him if they learned what he had done?

How many would still call him a friend?

Even in the monster world, others feared kelpies because they believed that violence lived in their hearts, seeking only the smallest crack to come out. And while it was true that they were fierce warriors when protecting their herd and worse when bridled, it was telling that their captors only used them for violence. Not for music or fishing or searching for gold or any of the other things they were capable of. No, the only reason people bridled kelpies was because they wanted a loyal assassin who’d never turn the blade on them.

He expected Rox to change his mind about coming around for dinner. Rox deserved better than a monster who had spent a decade with bloody hands. He didn't want to be that monster either. That wasn't who he was, only who he was ordered to be. But so many people believe the lies that the bridle revealed what was otherwise hidden.

Rox pulled up out the front of the cafe. He'd been silent for too long.

"I understand if...you don't want to..." Lynck couldn't finish the sentence. He closed his eyes, but all he saw was the frost giant in the auto repair shop. The cold glare and the reminder that he belonged to someone else.

"Don't want to what? Help you? See you again? None of this is your fault, and I don't hold you responsible for what you were ordered to do."

"I'm pretty sure that in the human world, following orders is no excuse."

"It wasn't just an order. You had no choice but to obey because of the magic?" Rox stared at him as if he needed confirmation that he was understanding everything correctly.

And maybe if he was a better monster, he'd lie and tell Rox that he had a choice, and then Rox might stay away from him and be safe. But the lie didn't form.

"When I am given an order, it is a compulsion. A need that must be fed. At first, I resisted with my mind and body, but when the bridle burned, my body began to obey despite my mind's resistance, which made me clumsy, and I got hurt. So I stopped fighting, and I began completing the order to avoid the pain of the burn and injuries." Lynck studied his hands the way he had so many times, wondering how they betrayed him so easily. "I am not a good monster."

"You are because you don't want to be that person. That person was never you. You

were surviving. And we will find a solution. We will stop Bothvar.”

Lynck laughed, but it was cold and dark like the depths of the lake. “You think no one has tried before? There is a reason he keeps bridled kelpies around him.”

“To kill would-be assassins,” Rox said as if he understood exactly how people like Bothvar operated.

No one could fight and win against kelpies compelled to defend until their last breath. Few assassins were paid well enough to die for the cause. But bridled kelpies had no choice.

“To compel you, he needs to be in the human world. And he can’t bring an army through the portal.”

“Do not tell the military. Please. They will send me through because I am not a monster of good character. My visa will be revoked, and I will not be allowed back through.”

“What if we told the military that some frost giants are planning on making trouble?”

Lynck shook his head. “They will not get involved in monster politics. They do not care that he controls trade.”

“They should care about the way he takes slaves, especially if he’s coming to the human world to collect them.”

“Why would they when many monsters call it culture, and some might say that bridled kelpies are safer because they cannot act on their own worst instincts? Not everyone likes kelpies, Rox. Even the towns we traded with were wary because the lie has been repeated enough times to become truth. Even in your human world, you

have tales of kelpies who do nothing but seduce and drown.”

Rox’s lips curved. “Well, you are very good at the former.”

“I’m also far too good at the latter.”

Rox was silent for what felt like hours but was only seconds. “We can’t sit around and wait for Bothvar to show up and summon you back to the monster world.”

They should because running around and trying to prepare was only wasting what time he had left. “I want to spend my remaining time living and enjoying everything this world offers so I have some memories to hold close.”

Rox shook his head, a few strands of his dark blonde hair slipping out of the elastic. “No. I refuse to quit.”

Lynck exhaled. “You cannot fight against the inevitable. You cannot break the chain even with your human tools. And I cannot resist orders. So what does that leave?”

Rox frowned. “I don’t know.”

“You will not waste your life to protect mine. Mine was surrendered a long time ago. That I have had a few years’ grace has been more than I dared to hope for.” He lifted Rox’s hand and brought his fingers to his lips. “I will see you tonight for dinner?”

“You will.”

But if Rox changed his mind, Lynck wouldn’t hold that against him.

“Why are you acting so okay with this?”

“Because I’ve been afraid for so long, too scared to live in case I drew attention. He will come, and I don’t need to live with that fear. I am angry that it is happening, and I wanted to be angry with you for helping me. But raging against the unfairness will only push you away and eat me from the inside. Anger didn’t help me the first time.”

Rox swallowed. “You sound like my mother when the cancer came back. First time, she was angry, and she fought with everything. The second time...” He glanced away and swiped at his eyes. “She went through the treatments, but she was resigned to the outcome. She said she was at peace either way.”

“I am not at peace.” He wanted to rage and fight. “I need to swim after work. Can you come an hour later?”

“You don’t want me there.”

“I do not need you to wait on the shore for me.” But he wanted Rox there. He wanted to believe that Rox would always be there even when he couldn’t say the same.

When Bothvar dragged him back to the monster realm, the life he wanted to live would be out of reach. But Rox would survive and remember him. He might find another monster to date. He’d have other boyfriends and find the love he deserved.

Lynck leaned over and kissed his cheek, knowing that he needed to treasure these moments. “I will see you for dinner.”

nineteen

Dinner didn't have the same vibe as when Lynck cooked. It didn't seem to matter what they talked about; it seemed superficial to Rox. Like when Mom and he had talked about anything but the cancer, the treatments, and the bills. As if by not acknowledging they existed, they'd disappear. It was a lovely fantasy that he wanted to fall into, but he'd lived it once and couldn't live again.

And if Bothvar didn't show up?

Would they spend the next year, the next five years, the next ten years waiting?

He wasn't sure he could live while holding his breath. But he didn't want to walk away either.

It was the familiar stuck feeling...the reason he'd spent the last six months traveling, escaping. They'd only been dating for a few weeks, but he liked Lynck.

But if he couldn't leave and he couldn't stay, what was left?

He wasn't even watching the movie. The fact they'd put on a movie instead of getting naked in Lynck's room showed how dire things had become between them. He should've known something shit would happen, and this would end. That's what happened to him. As soon as he found something good, it broke. It didn't matter how good he became at fixing things, when it came to people and relationships, he couldn't do shit.

“You are preoccupied,” Lynck said, his hand brushing over Rox’s shin.

His legs were draped over Lynck’s thighs.

And you aren’t?

Why was he the only one taking this seriously?

More words that he’d said before and which hadn’t made a lick of difference back then either. “I don’t know what I’m supposed to do. I can’t carry on as if nothing is happening.”

“Nothing may happen.”

“You don’t believe that.”

Lynck’s ears twitched, confirming the statement. At least he had the balls not to lie. “Other monsters won’t go out of their way to approach a frost giant to report a bridled kelpie in town.” He lifted the silver chain, then let it drop against his collarbones. “But a frost giant...he will make the effort. The question is whether Bothvar will make the journey to take me back. I hope that coming to the human world will be too much for him, especially as he needs to come in person.”

There was less bitterness in Lynck’s voice than there had been in the afternoon.

“Too much effort for too little reward? Is it easier to catch another kelpie?” That made sense. Why travel and risk coming to the human world when there were plenty of kelpies in the monster realm?

“Something like that, but Bothvar is petty and spiteful. I have killed many who disrespected him, even though they had long-standing working relationships. He

enjoys being feared.”

Rox grunted. “He sounds like a tool.”

“He is predictable, as he acts only to enrich himself and enlarge his reputation.”

“And you dissed him by leaving.”

“He didn’t know I left. When his summons failed, he may have believed I’d died on my last job. I hoped that was the case.” Lynck shrugged.

It was clear that while he hoped Bothvar thought him dead, he didn’t really believe that to be the case. “And now Arn will confirm you are alive.”

“Exactly.” Lynck pulled him closer, and Rox let himself be drawn into the embrace. “There is a part of me that wants this to be over because I’m sick of waiting.” Lynck pressed his lips to the back of Rox’s neck.

“But it means you’ll be gone.”

Lynck was silent for several heartbeats. “Maybe I was never here. Perhaps I was gone from the moment the bridle was put on, and this is a dream of who I might’ve been if given a choice.”

“You are real, and I am real, and this is happening, and we need to deal with it.” He couldn’t sit back and do nothing.

“Any plans you make cannot involve me. I will be the enemy.”

Rox struggled with the idea that Lynck would act to hurt him. That the magic was all-consuming. “And you don’t want to fight me.”

“Bothvar makes me kill anyone I am close to, including his own servants. The other bridled kelpies warned me to keep my distance from them and others. I didn’t listen until I had to slit my friend’s throat.”

Rox should be freaking out about sitting in the lap of a murderous monster, but Lynck hadn’t killed willingly.

“If he controls you, why does it matter if you had friends?”

“It’s the one thing he can’t control with the bridle, so he made sure to enforce his will in other ways.” Lynck nuzzled at the back of his neck, which made him squirm because the touch was kind of ticklish and kind of arousing. Or was it the way Lynck held him? The way he felt safe even though they stood on the edge of a cliff, and one wrong step would send them tumbling to the rocks below. “I don’t want to spend the evening talking about my past or something that might happen. I want you.”

His tongue flicked over the curve of Rox’s ear, and his dick hardened against Rox’s ass. “One more question?”

“I will grant you that.” Lynck’s voice was soft in his ear.

“Can only kelpies be bridled?”

“Yes...though I do not know why. Some blame an ancient curse, others the magic that allows us to shift between forms.”

“But you aren’t the only ones who can shift.” There were plenty of other monsters who had multiple forms or who were able to change the way they looked.

“That is a second question, and you already know the answer.” Lynck lifted him and sat him on the sofa as if done with him. “I want to play you something that I’m

working on.”

Rox stared at him, knowing what Lynck wasn’t saying but unable to leave the words unspoken. “You don’t want to wait until it’s done?”

Lynck gave him a look that suggested the song may never be finished. “If I don’t have time to complete the song, you can. It’s in human tones; I thought you’d enjoy it more that way.”

“Can I record you?”

Lynck’s ear twitched as his eyebrows lifted. “That’s not something I’ve ever been asked before, but I do not see why not.”

Lynck retrieved the violin from his room and perched on the arm of the sofa to play. He lifted the bow, then paused. “You are the only person who has heard this song.”

“I’m honored.” He opened the camera on his phone and swiped to record a video. “Does it have a name?”

“Not yet...maybe when it’s complete.” He began to play, and at first, the song sounded as though it was warring with itself, then the pace quickened, and it all came together in a rush before diving into long, lush notes. As one stretched out almost to breaking point, a single higher note broke through, like the sun through the clouds. Lynck lowered the bow. “That is as far as I’ve gotten.”

Rox stopped the recording, and for several seconds, he struggled to find words. A lump filled his throat, and his heart ached; he needed to find out how the song ended. “It’s beautiful.”

Lynck grinned. “Truly?”

“Truly,” Rox agreed. “It sounds almost complete, not that I’m an expert, as I’ve never composed anything.”

“Neither have I. I’m very good at playing the songs I learned as a child, but creating something new... This is a first.” There was something about the way he spoke that made Rox feel as though he was missing something.

He swallowed hard as the realization hit. “Did you write that for me?” He wasn’t sure if he should smile or cry because the song may never be completed. He tried for the former. “Is this some more kelpie flirting?”

Lynck glanced down. If he was blushing, it didn’t show through the white hair on his face. “I’m not sure it’s good enough to be called that.”

Rox stood and tipped Lynck’s chin up so the kelpie had to look him in the eyes. “It was amazing. No one has ever composed a song for me. I wish I could order you to finish it and play it for me every day.”

“And if you find that magic, I will play until my fingers bleed and my ears no longer hear music, and I will enjoy every second of delighting you.”

Rox kissed him, needing the hot touch of his lips and the taste of him on his tongue.

The front door opened, and Thursten called out. “I’m back, so you better not be naked on my sofa.”

Rox stepped back, heat rising to his cheeks. “We both have clothes on.”

“Good.” Thursten stepped into the living room. “No sex on the sofa is the one house rule we have.”

“You said no sex on any furniture,” Lynck countered as if this was a perfectly normal conversation.

Thursten frowned. “Did I miss you playing?”

“It was only for Rox. But I can play something for you if you’d like?”

“If you don’t mind... That trollish jig?” Thursten smiled at Lynck. “Can I rope Rox into dancing?”

“I can’t jig.” He could dance, but it was the kind more suitable for a sweaty nightclub where shirts were optional and there was the promise of sex.

But Thursten was already moving the coffee table out of the way and then the armchair. He offered Rox his hand. “Don’t worry—I’m not trying to lure you away from your kelpie. I just want someone to dance with.”

Rox glanced at Lynck.

Lynck smiled at him and lifted the bow. “I promise to dance with you next.”

Great.

Thursten grabbed Rox’s hands, completely enveloping them. “Just follow along.”

The music started, and Thursten spun him, and then there was nothing else to do but hold on.

twenty

Rox had drunk at least one too many beers and done too many jigs with Thursten and Lynck. Though the ache in his thighs and ass couldn't be entirely blamed on jiggling as he suspected it had more to do with the fucking that had followed after they went to bed.

So when he crawled, not literally, even though that might be easier, to the kitchen in desperate need of coffee and water to stop the pounding in his head, all he wanted was a few minutes alone. However, Thursten sat at the kitchen table with a massive bowl of cereal and an equally large cup of coffee.

"Hey," Rox managed. Even his voice sounded rough.

"The coffee is fresh. You look like you need it," Thursten said in a rather too chirpy greeting. He let Rox pour a cup and sit down before speaking again. "Is everything okay between you two?"

"Yeah...sure...why?" He took several swallows of coffee and wondered if monsters had human painkillers, as his head was thumping as if Thursten was dancing in his skull.

Thursten shrugged, but there was a glint in his eyes that made Rox wary. "He was different at work yesterday."

This was about the bridle, but it wasn't his place to say anything, so he bit his tongue.

Thursten stared at him. “Distracted...”

Rox concentrated on the coffee. Lynck didn’t want him to say anything because he thought the end was inevitable, and there was nothing they could do except die if they intervened if...when...Bothvar showed up.

Thursten grunted. “Did you know kelpies compose a mating song?”

Rox glanced up. “A what?”

“Something for their partner. It’s said they hear the song in their heart, and it grows until they must let the music out. I heard him playing something different this week. A new song, not one of his traditional kelpie tunes.”

Rox raked his teeth over his lower lip. Had Lynck played him their mating song? “And what does that mean?”

Thursten smiled and shrugged. “It means they have found their soulmate...if you believe the rumors.” He took a sip of his coffee, his gaze on Rox.

Rox seized the opening. “What other rumors are there about kelpies?”

Thursten scooped up some cereal and chewed while he considered Rox. Rox cradled his cup of coffee. He’d known the song was special, but he hadn’t realized how special. And Lynck had played their mating song for him before it was ready because he didn’t expect to finish it. His heart squeezed a little too tight, which made breathing hard. Everything hurt. Once again, his world was falling apart.

“That kelpies can always find the fish and gold. They are master goldsmiths and musicians. But if you cross one, do not expect to live as they will kill without blinking.”

Rox forced himself to take a drink of his coffee, willing it to make him feel better. “So what you’re telling me is any breakup will be messy?”

Thursten laughed and shook his head. “No, I’m warning you that whoever holds the kelpie’s reins holds his heart.”

Rox swallowed and licked his lower lip. “I don’t understand.”

Thursten held his gaze and lowered his voice. “I think you do.”

“You know about the...” Rox touched his throat, unable to say the word aloud.

“I’ve seen chain and know what it is, but we have never discussed it or who holds the reins.”

Rox leaned forward. “Do you know how to break it?”

“I do not. But while he wears it, he can never be yours, no matter what his heart craves.”

“You aren’t worried about what might happen?”

“Monsters choose to come to the human world for different reasons. I can guess at his, and I do not blame him for wanting to be free.” Thursten finished his coffee and stood. “And I am not the one he is crafting songs for.”

“So I should be worried?” His mind was moving too slowly to grab hold of the things Thursten wasn’t saying.

“I didn’t say that either. But before this goes further, you need to consider if you can love a man who is controlled by another and who will betray you when ordered?”

“And what if I knew who held the reins?”

“That information is only useful if you are prepared to kill the holder.” Thursten gave him a slow once-over. “You are not a killer.”

“Then what am I supposed to do?” What was the point in telling him about the kelpie song?

“Pray that whoever holds his reins never steps through the portal.”

Rox snorted. So many people had offered to pray for his mother, but few had offered a hand to help. They acted as though a few whispered words on their knees were worth more than cooking a meal or driving her to an appointment or anything that might’ve been actually useful while they struggled. He had no time for people who offered words and wishes with no work to back them up. “Praying is fucking useless, and I won’t waste my breath.”

The coffee soured in his stomach.

“Then make the most of the time you have because if the holder of the reins arrives, he will not be the man you love.”

Did he love Lynck?

It was too soon to be sure. It was too soon for him to put his heart on the railway track, where it was clearly going to be destroyed. Because that’s what was going to happen. If he fell in love with Lynck, Bothvar would show up and take him away.

“I’ve lost everyone I’ve ever loved and who has loved me.” He finished the coffee, set the cup on the table, and drew in a breath. “I’m not going to let it happen again.”

Whether that meant not letting himself fall in love or breaking the bridle, he wasn't sure. As Lynck's song played in his mind, both seemed impossible.

twenty-one

L ynck listened as Rox ran through scales on the piano. He'd only just made it to the shop before closing, and he was still in his navy blue work pants and T-shirt, both of which appeared to have a dark stain on them. He had apologized for being so scruffy, but because his boss had gone away for the week, he had to do everything.

This week his nail polish was the same green as in Lynck's hair, which Lynck didn't think was an accident. Not that he was going to say anything. And while Rox's fingers were lighter on the keys, he was frowning more.

Thursten had told him Rox had come in last night at closing even though Lynck wasn't working in the coffee shop because he was teaching.

Rox stopped playing and pulled his phone out of a pocket in his pants. "I listened to the song you composed a few times this week...can I play you something?"

Lynck swept the last of the crumbs into a pile. "I enjoy listening to whatever you play."

He much preferred live music to recordings for the simple reason the song changed depending on the mood of the performer and with each performance. One day, he wanted to go to a big stadium concert. He could only imagine what it would feel like to stand in a crowd of thousands, all listening to the same music. And while he'd watched recordings of live performances, it wasn't the same. The heart was missing.

Rox fiddled with his phone and set it up on the music stand. "Bear in mind, I haven't

written anything down, and unlike you, I can't remember every note. So if I fuck up, I'm not trying to ruin your song."

Before Lynck said anything, Rox pressed play on his phone. There was a small silence, and then the recording Rox made played.

Rox's foot tapped, keeping count, and then he began to play, adding piano chords to the song as if he understood what Lynck had been trying to achieve. As if he understood the song was meant to be played by two, or at least created by two. He got about halfway before stopping. He stopped the recording and slowly turned to face him.

"That's as far as I got because the next bit quickens and shifts up an octave, and I haven't figured out what goes with that yet. You're very quiet. Do you not like it?"

Lynck was quiet, not because he didn't like it but because it was perfect.

Rox was perfect.

"Lynck?" His eyebrows lifted.

"That sounded amazing. I've never heard kelpie music accompanied by a piano." He walked over and swept Rox into his arms, dropping a light kiss on his lips before swinging him around like he'd done when they'd danced in the lounge room.

Rox wrapped his arms around Lynck's neck. "I'm glad you like it. I will figure out the rest."

"We can figure out the end of the song together." He brushed his nose against Rox's, needing to believe they would finish it and that they'd be able to play it for the rest of their lives.

How long did they have?

He didn't want to spend the rest of his life waiting for Bothvar to show up and ruin everything. Before he met Rox, it had been a fear that had lurked in the shadows, but now he had someone to live for. Now he had a life, and the fear was out in the open. For the first time in a very long time, he had something to lose.

He had someone he feared hurting.

If Bothvar found out about Rox, he'd order his death to punish Lynck for getting close to someone. For daring to think of something other than his next order. It was too much to hope that Bothvar would kill him. That was far too quick.

He set Rox on the ground but held him close.

"I know why you played me the unfinished song and what it means," Rox murmured.

Lynck nodded, unable to deny the truth but not wanting to admit it either. "I didn't want you to think it was too much."

"It's not. No one has ever done something like that for me. You need to tell me how to kill a frost giant."

Lynck released him and stepped back. "It will not be a frost giant you will be fighting. It will be me."

"But if he's dead, he cannot order you?—"

"I will be ordered to defend him and to kill you."

"So I'm supposed to do nothing? I'm supposed to pretend that nothing is happening,

that everything is fine?”

“It might be.”

“Liar. You freaked out when you saw my boss.”

“Because others won’t involve themselves in frost giant business, but another frost giant...” Even if he hated Bothvar, he’d follow the rules that a bridled kelpie belonged to someone and needed to be returned.

“And frost giants are the only ones who catch kelpies.”

Lynck’s voice hardened. “They are the only ones brave enough to try.”

“And no one is brave enough to stand up to the frost giants.”

“I didn’t say that. But when they control the trade route, and they can cut off food and supplies to your town, how much resistance are you going to put up? When they increase the charge for safe travel through the mountains because you spoke up? When they burn your town because you refuse to trade with them because they wanted too much for too little? They are powerful and ruthless, and unfortunately, they have dragged kelpies into their mess, so we are feared.”

“But you have friends here who might help.”

Lynck shook his head. “I will not be responsible for their deaths or yours.” He softened his voice, not wanting to fight. “Can we not enjoy what we have?”

From the look on Rox’s face, the answer was no. His lips were turned down, and his eyes were troubled. “I want to, and I keep trying to, but I am the one who is going to be left to pick up the pieces.” He shook his head. “I don’t know if I can do that

again.”

Oh...

In that moment, Lynck realized he'd only been thinking of himself and what it meant when he was forced to return to the monster realm. He hadn't considered what it meant for Rox to remain in the human world alone. “But you want to finish the song?”

“I do, but at the same time, it's going to end. And while not all relationships last, this will end because of a frost giant and some nasty magic, not because of us, and I'm still working out what that means for me. I'm being torn in so many different directions.” Rox raked his fingers over his hair and tugged out the elastic. “I want to spend every spare moment with you. What if we have ten years? What if we only have ten hours? How am I supposed to want everything and nothing in the same breath?” He slapped his chest. “How can I protect my heart from destruction?”

Lynck cupped his human's face, wanting to kiss away the pain. “You cannot.”

He'd never hated the bridle as much as he did in that moment. He wanted to swear that if Rox trusted him with his heart, it would always be taken care of. That they were mates, and nothing would ever change that.

But he couldn't.

He should never have played Rox the song. He should've kept it to himself, but it had grown too big for his heart and needed to be shared. Selfishly, he wanted Rox to understand how much he loved him instead of walking away. If he had any kind bones in his body, he would have broken up with Rox and saved them both the heartache of what was to come.

He should've broken up with him and gone through the portal himself. Then there'd be no more waiting and wondering for the next order. Living with the threat wasn't freedom, even though it had appeared to be at first.

He rested his forehead against Rox's. "I don't know what to do. I shouldn't want you as much as I do. I never meant to hurt you."

"If it wasn't for the fucking bridle..."

He smoothed his thumbs over Rox's cheeks. "There is nothing we can do about that. We need to decide if we are going to finish the song or leave it incomplete."

"I don't want to walk away, but I don't know how to go on either." Rox closed his eyes. "That's not true. I have done this before. The anger, the denial, the pretending that everything is fine... This is the same; it's just a different flavor."

"What do you humans like to say? That you could be hit by a bus tomorrow?"

Rox gave a half-hearted laugh. "Yeah. It could all be over tomorrow."

There was a part of Lynck that wished that were true. Then, he'd no longer be hurting Rox. When he was gone, how long until the song and his heart faded away, or would it haunt him for the rest of his life?

twenty-two

Rox was terrified. It wasn't the kind of fear that made him freeze but the kind that twisted in his gut, woke him up during the night, and stopped him from going back to sleep. And it had happened every night this week. That he'd spent every night with Lynck probably wasn't helping.

Was he making the most of what they had?

Or clinging too tight because he was afraid of losing him?

What if he walked away only for nothing to happen, and in ten years' time, thoughts of what might have been became a bitter regret?

The more time they spent together, the less he wanted to leave. He was sliding down a gravel slope, hoping he wasn't going to be a bleeding mess when he hit the bottom.

If there was a bottom.

That was the problem. He was tearing himself up with no promise of a happy ending or when any ending would arrive. It was the last year with his mother all over again. The weight of knowing Bothvar might turn up and ruin everything was too much.

If a friend told him about this problem, he'd be telling them to leave because it was going to end in disaster no matter what happened. Instead, he'd been talking to Thursten, behind Lynck's back, about frost giants.

His thoughts churned and circled back on themselves.

He couldn't sleep in Lynck's bed and pretend that everything was fine until it fell apart. Waking up at two in the morning, worrying about what might happen when the frost giant came for his lover wasn't living. But he couldn't abandon Lynck to a sociopathic prick with an over-inflated ego.

He lay still, eyes closed, body tense, trying to go back to sleep. Maybe he was cold, or he just needed to feel Lynck against him. He rolled over, expecting to feel the heat of Lynck's body, but the kelpie wasn't in bed.

Rox sat up, running his hand over the sheets.

Lynck's side of the bed was warm.

Had he gone to the bathroom?

Except the house was silent, and when Lynck moved around, his hooves tapped on the floor, even when he tried to be quiet. The sound had become strangely reassuring.

Rox slid out of bed and pulled on track pants and a hoodie.

Lynck's clothes remained piled on the floor where they'd ended up last night. The wardrobe was closed, and no drawers hung open. He'd have heard if Lynck was dressing.

Shit.

Rox padded through the house.

In the kitchen was a large dark shadow holding an ax.

His heart stopped, and he froze like a rabbit, even though he stood in a patch of moonlight.

“I heard a door open,” Thursten said. “There’s no intruder.”

Rox released a shaky breath. “Lynck’s not in bed.”

Lynck had walked out the door and left.

Left him without saying a word. Or getting dressed...

No, he hadn’t left. He’d been summoned.

“Bothvar is here,” Rox whispered as if saying his name could summon the frost giant.

Thursten grunted. “He won’t come through the main portal guarded by the military. He’ll use the one in the forest, and that’s where Lynck will be going.”

“I need to stop him.” He needed shoes.

“And how are you going to stop a kelpie under the command of a frost giant?”

“I don’t know, but I need to do something. Where is the portal in the forest?”

Thursten shouldered his ax. “Let me get dressed.”

“I’ll start the car.” And if Thursten wasn’t back in two minutes, he’d start driving and hopefully run into Lynck. And then what? Run him over to stop him?

And if Lynck had already reached the portal? Did he follow him through?

“Do not leave without me,” Thursten growled.

Rox wasn't about to admit he'd been considering it, but waiting for a large monster who knew something about portals and frost giants seemed like a good idea. That didn't stop him from being anxious as he shoved on his runners as he walked out the door. He started the car and watched the seconds tick by.

Thursten climbed into the truck. The passenger seat was already pushed back as far as it would go to make room for Lynck's long legs, but Thursten's head almost touched the roof. He rested his ax on the floor between his feet. “Drive to the lake.”

“Not the forest?”

“When you reach the road by the lake, head toward the forest.”

Rox put the truck into gear and rolled along the street, searching for Lynck. “What will we do if we see him on the way?”

“Nothing. We will follow him.”

Rox glanced at the troll. “That isn't a plan.”

“Nor is trying to stop him. He may not even be in the form you are familiar with.”

“He said he can't shift in this world.”

Thursten nodded. “And maybe he can't until commanded. The magic of the bridle superseding everything else.”

“Shit.” If Lynck was a horse, how would they stop him? Horses were big, or was Lynck pony-sized?

Not that it made any difference, as Rox knew nothing about horses or ponies.

The streets were empty, given the early hour. Sensible people were at home asleep.

Sensible people didn't worry that their boyfriend might be compelled to kill them by a frost giant fuck-stick.

"So what happens when we follow him to where he's going?"

"I'm not sure about that either. Since you couldn't cut through the bridle, I assume the only way to break the magic is to kill Bothvar."

"Bothvar will order Lynck to protect him."

"Then you will need to distract him," Thursten said as if that were obvious.

"Lynck said Bothvar ordered him to kill anyone he got close to." Which meant him.

"Bothvar doesn't know you are lovers. All he will see is a troll and a human. You should pretend to be military."

Rox glanced at his aqua nails. He didn't need to look in the rearview mirror to know that his hair was a mess and far too long to be military. "I don't look like a soldier."

Thursten considered him for several seconds. "You are more like one of those undercover special agent people."

Rox lifted his eyebrows. He was not a special anything. He opened his mouth, but the retort died on his tongue at the sight of a white and gray dappled horse at the intersection. A horse with green in its mane and tail. Silver glinted around the horse's muzzle. The bridle.

“Keep pace with him,” Thursten ordered as if that wasn’t what Rox had already planned on doing.

Lynck’s ears didn’t even twitch at the noise of the car. He acted oblivious to everything except for where he was going. Rox stayed a couple of yards back, driving well below the speed limit. If a cop appeared, he had no idea how to explain the fact that he was following a horse who was actually his monster boyfriend, who was acting under compulsion due to frost giant magic.

For a couple of seconds, Rox wondered if he’d had a car accident and was in a coma because his life had become so weird. Like, weirder than he could’ve imagined when deciding to take a job in Elder Ridge.

He’d figured that working in a monster town would be a little strange. But magic and frost giants and shape-shifting boyfriends had not been something he’d planned on.

Rox followed the horse along the lake road for a bit before Lynck left the road and headed into the forest. Rox mounted the curb and parked on the grass, hoping that no one noticed and gave him a ticket.

The two of them piled out of the truck, Thursten with his ax slung over his shoulder, like stalking a horse through the woods in the early hours of morning was a normal thing to do. Perhaps it was in the monster world. He glanced at Thursten, who had a weapon to defend himself. Why didn’t he have a weapon? For a second, Rox considered grabbing a tire iron or a spanner, but if Bothvar was also armed with an ax, it wouldn’t do him any good. Besides, he was the distraction.

Lynck, in his horse form, strode through the woods, looking like liquid moonlight. He never turned his head or changed direction, never doubting where he was going.

Rox’s pulse thumped in his ears, and even though the night air was cool, he was

sweating. His skin was clammy, his stomach tight. He'd never gotten into fights at school, mostly because he was the odd quiet kid everyone ignored. Hell, he was sure even some of his teachers didn't know he existed until they had to write his report card.

Yet, there he was, about to confront the frost giant who was trying to steal his boyfriend. That was a more familiar situation, although, to be fair, the last time a boyfriend—and they'd barely been that—had left him for someone else, all he'd done was shout and make a scene.

Not his finest moment.

“What if we die?” he whispered.

“Then we will be dead.”

Rox glared at the troll. “Not helpful.”

“Your question was terrible.” Thursten glanced at him. “What are you worried about?”

“Everything.” The wolves that lived in the forest, the guard that protected the portal on this side, frost giants, magic, and the portal itself.

Thursten grabbed his arm and pulled him behind a tree. Through the trees, Rox saw three tall men with blue skin and white, glittery hair. Frost giants. And Lynck was strolling toward them.

Thursten whispered in his ear. “Here's the plan...”

twenty-three

It had started as a whisper in a dream. The urge to wake up and walk into the forest. Then, it had intruded on the dream of running in the shallows of the lake on four feet with Rox on his back. In his dream, he ran forever and never tired, and Rox never let go.

Usually, in the dream, he'd shift back and fall to the sand in a pile of tangled limbs and lust. Today, the urge was to leave Rox and run in the other direction and head towards the woods.

Lynck woke up, and for several heartbeats, he wasn't sure where he was. Moonlight streamed through the window, illuminating the bedroom. Rox slept, curled on his side with his back to him. They had shared a bed every night this week.

The need to get up, shift, and walk into the forest persisted.

It was only as the chain around his neck warmed against his skin that he understood what was happening.

Bothvar had arrived.

He reached out to shake Rox awake but drew his hand back just as fast. It was better to let him sleep. He'd realize Lynck was gone in the morning, and by then, the danger would be over. If he woke Rox, Rox would want to help.

Instead, he stared at him a little longer, wanting to commit every line of muscle to

memory to enjoy later. When the heat became too much, Lynck eased out of bed. The need to run on four feet almost made him drop to the ground, ready to shift.

He shouldn't shift in the house. The chain became hotter. With one fingernail, he lifted it off his chest, but it still burned the back of his neck as he crept through the house. The need to obey and stop the pain from consuming his thoughts.

As soon as he stepped out into the cool night air, he crouched and let the shift take over. The burning stopped, and he sighed with relief at being on four feet again. He hadn't thought it possible in this world. It was an itch he hadn't realized needed scratching. He shook from nose to tail and took a moment to re-orientate himself to the changes in his body. For a few moments, he enjoyed being shifted...but he couldn't shift back.

Now, he was stuck in his other form, and the need to head into the woods consumed him. If he lingered much longer, the bridle would burn again.

He hesitated, his gaze on the house where Rox slept. They hadn't finished the song. They hadn't done so many things.

His heart ached with the death of so many dreams at once. His mistake had been daring to dream. To think that someone like him would have the chance to play the song in his heart for his mate and have it returned if only for a fleeting moment. He wanted to take Rox for a ride and swim with him in the lake...

He wanted a life with him.

The dying dream was bitter on his tongue, and his heart was silent.

With a heavy sigh, he turned away and ambled along the road, not wanting to rush as a part of him hoped for a miracle. Leaving Rox to sleep was the right thing to do. He

was safe in bed. Which is where he wanted to be.

As he obeyed, the call to return to Bothvar's side strengthened. He sunk into the spell that bound him because it was easier to drown than resist. To let the magic consume him until there was nothing left. The next time he surfaced, he'd be in the monster realm, far from any portals.

It would be better if he never surfaced at all, then he'd never have to think and remember. His heart weighed him down, slowing each step. But he couldn't stop.

And he couldn't turn around, no matter how much he wanted to run back to the house.

There was only the next step and the one after, all leading to the man who had stolen him once and now again. Only this time, he wasn't fighting because he didn't want to kill the man he loved.

Rox.

The song would remain unfinished, and they would only run together in his dreams. But Rox would live, and that had to be enough.

He imagined he was on his way to meet Rox. Maybe if he pretended Rox was just past the next tree, instead of each step taking him further away, he'd be able to bear the rest of his life.

Through the trees, he sensed the portal, but before he reached it, he saw Bothvar. He wanted to stop and back up, but his feet kept moving, driven by the magic in the cursed bridle.

"You thought you'd escaped, kelpie," Bothvar said, his voice sharp and cold. His lip

curled with a sneer as he assessed Lynck. “Hiding in the human world... Clever, I’ll give you that. You will, of course, be punished for finding a way to avoid me.”

Lynck kept his gaze on Bothvar and let the words break over him, but he imagined he was walking through the moonlight with Rox. Rox had never seen a horse... Would he be scared or want to ride him?

“Lynck! I thought I’d lost you,” Rox’s voice pierced his imagining.

Bothvar looked past him.

That was when Lynck realized Rox was there in the woods, not safe in bed.

“Who are you?” Bothvar barked.

“Gideon Roxburgh the fourth. And this is my kelpie,” Rox said. “Who are you?”

Bothvar laughed. “And why does a human need a kelpie?”

“I have a hoof kink. Much like a foot fetish but with hooves. He likes his hooves licked...but I’m sure you know that. That’s why you’re trying to rustle my horse shifter.”

Lynck’s ears twitched. Rox had never licked his hooves—and he didn’t like having his hooves licked! What was he talking about? And why was he in the woods when he should have been at home? Lynck wanted to turn around to look at him or shift and ask, but he couldn’t as he was bound by order to attend to Bothvar, and until he was given a new order, he needed to wait.

“What are you talking about, human?”

“Kink. Sex. You know, naked stuff. People pay good money for kelpie smut. Not only do I have fun, but I make a tidy profit too.”

It sounded like Rox’s voice, but Lynck had never heard such words from his mouth. He did not want to be part of any kelpie kink thing. Why was he giving Bothvar ideas?

“I want my kelpie back,” Rox said.

“You stupid human, he is mine. He wears my bridle, the bridle that you tried to remove.”

“Uh...you know about that.” The bravado faded from Rox’s voice.

“Arn told me everything. For his loyalty, I allowed him to die at home instead of remaining in banishment.”

Bothvar had been so happy to receive word about his missing kelpie that he’d killed the bearer of good news. Lynck was not surprised that Rox’s boss was dead. Nothing made Bothvar happier than blood on the floor of his great hall.

“I’m sure he was glad about that...he hated the human world.” Rox paused for a heartbeat. “You may not be aware, but here we have the law of finders keepers. Meaning, I found him, so the kelpie is mine.”

Yes, he wanted to belong to Rox. His heart belonged to the human with messy hair and painted nails.

If Rox held his bridle, he’d never be forced to kill again.

His ear twitched, needing to hear Rox’s voice.

Bothvar laughed, and the two frost giants with him joined in. “I don’t care about your stupid laws, human. The kelpie obeys me and me alone. I have magic.”

“I don’t know anything about magic. How does it work?” Rox quipped.

Why was Rox trying to talk to Bothvar? Something wasn’t right, and Lynck wasn’t sure what. He wanted to tell Rox to run, that Bothvar’s patience was little more than a frayed rope ready to snap at the best of times.

“I give an order, and the kelpie obeys. Watch and learn, Roxburgh. Kill the human, kelpie.”

Lynck flinched.

Rox swore.

Bothvar glared at Lynck. “Did you hear me, kelpie? Kill the human who claims ownership but lacks a bridle. Show me you are still useful.”

He wanted to be useful, and he needed to kill. The bridle burned the bridge of his nose. But he couldn’t kill Rox. Anyone but him.

As a horse, he didn’t have the words to beg for his mate’s life. His feet moved, and he slowly turned to face Rox. He stood in the moonlight dressed in black as if he were a shadow or a dream made momentarily real.

His hair burned as he resisted the order, and the acrid scent filled his lungs.

Rox took a step back and hummed the song that had bloomed in Lynck’s heart the first time they’d met. A reminder that there was something Bothvar couldn’t take from him no matter how much he tried. Rox would always be in his heart.

Lynck took another step forward, and Rox stepped back.

“Come and get me.” Rox turned and ran.

twenty-four

Honestly, Rox had expected Bothvar to order his death much sooner. But no, he'd needed to keep talking until Bothvar was sick of listening to him so that Thursten had time to sneak around.

The entire plan being that with Lynck chasing after him, Thursten had a chance to kill Bothvar and break the bridle's magic. Of course, if Bothvar killed Thursten, Rox wasn't going to be far behind—there was only so much stalling he could manage as Lynck was much bigger and acting under compulsion.

And if Rox failed to keep Lynck from killing him, then Lynck would return to protect Bothvar and kill Thursten. The odds of the plan working were low.

As Rox ran through the woods, he realized why Lynck had warned him to let him go. And that this might have been a very large mistake, from which there was no coming back. It was already too late to change his mind.

He risked a glance over his shoulder. Lynck wasn't gaining, even though Rox was sure a horse could outpace a human. He slowed as he reached the edge of the lake to avoid tripping over a fallen tree. Lynck stepped out from beneath the trees, the moonlight making his coat gleam as if he was made of magic and stardust. Across his nose was a line of black hair.

Not rushing was hurting him.

Shit.

“I know you don’t want to do this and that holding back is hurting.” Rox stepped over the fallen tree. Should he climb up a tree to buy more time? “Thursten is going to kill Bothvar. You need to hold out a bit longer...please.”

Lynck stepped over the tree, hooves gleaming and sharp, eyes dark and dangerous.

They were closer now. Rox wanted to back up some more, but running wasn’t going to solve this problem. He needed to dig in and stand his ground, even as the wet sand seeped through his runners and into his socks.

Talking wasn’t going to break the bridle where power tools had failed, but there were things he needed to say. That was a mistake he wasn’t going to make. “You can understand me while in horse form?”

Lynck nodded, a gesture that was far too human for a man who was currently a rather large horse.

Smoke coiled around Lynck’s face where the bridle touched his hair and skin. “Would you like me to put something between you and the bridle so it doesn’t burn? Will that help?”

Lynck tilted his head as if in thought, then gave another single nod.

Rox stripped off his hoodie, wishing he’d thrown a T-shirt on underneath as the night air chilled his skin. He took a couple of steps closer, well aware he was in biting and kicking distance. His heart hammered on his ribs. “This won’t take long.”

At least he hoped it wouldn’t. Using the fabric to protect his fingers, he slid the body of the hoodie beneath the chain that looped around the back of Lynck’s neck, then maneuvered the arm over the bridge of his nose. The skin was red and raw where the chain had already burned him.

“I’m sorry this is hurting you.” He swallowed, then stepped in and put his arms around his kelpie’s neck, hoping he wouldn’t be knocked over and trampled.

Lynck rested his head over Rox’s shoulder. His breath was warm on his bare back.

“I wish you really were my kelpie.” Rox rubbed his cheek against the soft hair. “Is it still hurting to resist?”

Lynck made a noise, which Rox took as confirmation.

“The odds of this plan ending badly are pretty high.”

Lynck snorted and stamped his hoof.

“But I don’t regret moving here and meeting you. With you, I’ve learned how to live again. Love. Something I didn’t think possible. I thought I was too damaged and too raw to risk my heart. I didn’t plan on risking it with you.” This was all so much easier to say while not looking at Lynck. “But I couldn’t help it. The more time I spent with you, the more time I wanted to spend with you, even after you told me about the bridle.”

He sniffed and drew in a breath, willing himself not to cry. This wasn’t how it ended. The little knot of fear in his gut twisted and tightened at the lie. If Bothvar killed Thursten, this was indeed how he ended.

Lynck turned his head away.

“What is it?”

Lynck nuzzled at his cheek and stepped back.

Rox grabbed the bridle, burning his fingers before he managed to push some cloth between his skin and the metal. “Bothvar just ordered your return, didn’t he?”

Lynck whinnied.

“No. You’re staying with me.”

Lynck backed up again, dragging Rox with him.

It didn’t matter how much he dug in his heels; he couldn’t stop Lynck. He’d just be dragged along.

“Why are you able to resist killing me but feel the urge to return immediately?” Why was he asking when Lynck couldn’t answer? “Please, stay here. Give Thursten time to help.”

Lynck tossed his head and turned as if to walk backward into the lake, and it took everything Rox had to keep hold of the bridle.

“I love you, and I’m trying to save you so we can finish the song. That’s what you want, right? You want to run along the beach with me? Swim in the lake? That’s what I want, too. But if you pull away and help Bothvar, you’ll not only kill your friend, but you’ll have to kill me.”

Lynck walked back until Rox was ankle-deep in the water.

He had to keep trying. He was damned now, no matter what happened.

“I know it hurts to resist, but you don’t want to kill anyone. I know you.” He reached up and touched Lynck’s nose. “I love you.”

Lynck froze, but his ears flicked forward.

“Yeah, shit timing, but I may not have another chance. I guess I won’t get to hear you say it, but it was in the music, right? Every note said how much you love me.” He’d kind of understood that, but he hadn’t been ready because he didn’t want to lose someone else.

Yet there he was. Standing on the edge of disaster once again.

Lynck bumped his nose against Rox’s, nearly knocking him over. Rox returned the gesture, barely able to breathe around the lump in his throat.

There wouldn’t be any farewell words or last embraces. This was it.

Lynck whickered, and it sounded almost musical...it took Rox several heartbeats to realize it was the song. He joined in, humming along.

He kissed Lynck’s nose. “Are you telling me that you love me?”

Lynck licked Rox’s cheek.

Shit, he was crying. He lifted his shoulder to dry his face of tears and kelpie spit, and the bridle, wrapped in the hoodie, came away in his hand.

For several seconds, neither of them moved.

Lynck lowered his head and melted as though made of liquid moonlight. When he stood, he was as Rox had always known him—like a man, but with hooves, tail, and ears, and covered in dappled white hair except for the fresh scar running across his nose and cheeks.

Lynck cupped Rox's face and pressed a hard kiss to his lips. Rox lost his balance, and they both stumbled, falling to the wet sand.

"You broke it," Lynck whispered.

"Did I? Or did Thursten kill Bothvar?"

"It was you. The spell trembled when you said you love me." He kissed Rox again.

"You are right; it is in the song. When you joined in?—"

"Then why didn't it break when you played me the song? When I added to it?" But even as he said the words, Rox grasped the answer. Fear had been holding back both their hearts.

"We were too afraid to admit it," Lynck confirmed. "It's why Bothvar had me kill anyone I got close to."

"Because if you fell in love and were loved in return, the bridle would break."

"He can't own my body when my heart belongs to someone else." Lynck placed Rox's hand over his chest.

"Your heart belongs to me?"

"It has from the moment I heard the first notes of our mating song, but I was holding it back, refusing to let it run."

Rox nodded. He'd done the same, thinking that by wrapping his heart up and locking it away, he was protecting himself from ever getting hurt again. "It can run with mine." They would be safe together. "Wait, if I broke the bridle, that means Thursten is still fighting."

“And Bothvar will be expecting me.”

“What does that mean?”

“I need to shift and return.”

“Can you shift?”

Lynck smiled. “Yes. I’d ask you to stay away from the fight, but you won’t, so do you want a ride?”

“On your back?”

Lynck lifted his eyebrows as if that were obvious.

“I’ve never ridden.”

“You’ve ridden me.”

Rox’s cheeks heated. “That is different.”

“Not really. All you have to do is hold on and enjoy.” Lynck put his hands on the ground, and his body expanded. Static filled the air.

Then Rox was sitting between Lynck’s front hooves. He scrambled up, pulling on the hoodie and shoving the broken bridle in his pocket. Lynck walked over to the fallen tree and waited.

Rox understood what he was supposed to do without any words. He stepped onto the tree and, with all the grace of a man who had no idea what he was doing, swung his leg over and overbalanced, almost sliding off the other side. Lynck moved his body to

recenter Rox.

“I told you it was different.”

Lynck made a sound as if he was laughing and took a couple of steps, giving Rox no choice but to hold on tight. He threw his arms around Lynck’s neck, burying his face in his mane, and they walked into the woods.

twenty-five

He was free.

The weight of Rox on his back and the pressure of his arms around his neck were nothing compared to the silent demand of the bridle and the reminder that he wasn't free while wearing the silver chain.

And now it was broken.

And he had Rox.

And Rox had him.

He resisted the urge to prance through the woods in delight, as that might jostle Rox, and he'd fall off. He was far too tense, squeezing with his thighs and arms as though he expected to slide off. Rox needed more practice before they could race along the lake's edge or swim in the lake.

In the clearing where he'd met Bothvar lay the body of a frost giant. His arm cleaved from his body, blood seeping into the ground while his eyes stared up at the sky without seeing.

Lynck didn't need to get close to know it wasn't Bothvar.

He stepped past the body. Ears pricked forward, listening for the telltale signs of battle. Heavy footsteps, metal on metal, harsh breaths and shouts. If they'd gone

through the portal, they'd have to follow to save Thursten. He couldn't let his friend keep fighting when he was free.

Lynck let out a whinny, hoping Bothvar would call for him.

"What is it?" Rox whispered against his neck.

"To me, kelpie," Bothvar shouted.

Lynck quickened his pace. He paused as he approached the grunting fighters, giving Rox a moment to slither off his back. He used his nose to nudge him into the shadow of a tree and hoped Rox stayed there. Rox nodded and brushed his nose against Lynck's.

No words needed to be spoken.

The simple nose touch made Lynck's heart swell with love. His nose tingled, and he bumped Rox again. This time to nudge him closer to the tree so he was well out of sight. Then he turned his attention to the fight. Bothvar and his friend were both fighting Thursten and a leshy, and they were all injured.

Lynck reared back with a whinny, drawing attention to him.

Bothvar ran toward him, not realizing the bridle was gone. "Kill the troll!"

Thursten and the leshy continued to fight the other frost giant, metal clashing.

Lynck walked forward as if to obey, then as he passed Bothvar, he lashed out with his hind legs, kicking him in the chest and sending him tumbling back. Bothvar dropped his sword and clutched at his chest. Lynck kicked again, and Bothvar sprawled on the ground, blood trickling from his lips.

Bothvar stared up at him. “You’re free.”

Lynck stood over him, remembering all the deaths he’d caused while compelled. This was the only one that mattered. He lifted one front leg and stomped on Bothvar’s skull. Bone cracked, and brains splattered like he’d stepped on an overripe melon. Bothvar would never give another kelpie orders. In the monster realm, every kelpie he’d bridled would also be freed.

He shifted. Bothvar’s blood remained on his hand and caught around his fingernails. He considered it for a second, then smeared it over the fresh scar on his nose and cheeks, preparing for battle. He picked up Bothvar’s sword, not caring that he was naked, and stalked toward the frost giant. “Your boss is dead.”

It was enough to make the man falter. Thursten slammed the butt of his ax into the man’s arm. He cried out and dropped his sword, and the leshy kicked it away.

“Kneel,” Thursten ordered.

The frost giant dropped to his knees, swallowing rapidly as if he didn’t know what to say.

Lynck didn’t want to hear him say anything. He leveled the sword at the frost giant’s throat. “Your kind has terrorized mine for too long. Their bridles will be broken, and there was no time to hand over control of the magic to another. They are free, and I hope they slaughter everyone who worked for Bothvar on their way back to their herds. Let the blood of the frost giants flood the lakes and rivers on our day of freedom.

“I have the scent of your blood, and I will patrol these woods, hunting frost giants. I will warn the human soldiers, and all of your kind who attempt to cross will be denied passage. The same way you have denied passage through the mountains,

though I will accept no coin. I do it gladly. Now fuck off and do not return.”

“You heard him.” Thursten dragged the frost giant up as if unbothered by his cold skin and larger size.

The leshy propelled the frost giant toward the portal, shoving him through with no regard for what was on the other side. “Be glad you still live.”

Bothvar and his toadies had been trying to return to the monster realm and would have no doubt returned with an army to slaughter anyone they thought standing in their way.

Thursten turned and stared at him. “Where is Rox?”

“Alive.”

Thursten sighed and dropped his ax. He stepped in and embraced Lynck. “Next time, do not be so stubborn and accept help.”

“I’m glad you didn’t listen.” He gripped Thursten tighter for a heartbeat, not sure how he’d gotten lucky enough to have a friend and a mate willing to fight frost giants for him before releasing him. “And you made another friend.”

He nodded at the leshy. He wasn’t one of the ones who lived in town. “I will help Irina.”

“Who is that?” Lynck asked.

“The leader of my tribe. We came to warn the humans about Bothvar.”

His ears twitched at the sound of Rox approaching, and he turned to his mate. Rox

stopped several feet away. His gaze skimmed over him, landing on the bloody hand and sword before finally lifting to his face. “Um...you have a little blood...”

Thursten laughed. “I do not think your mate has seen a kelpie fight before.”

“I hope you never need to see it again.” He didn’t want to be this person again. Being free meant choosing who he was, and this had never been him. It was who he’d been forced to be by the bridle.

“You needed to finish this.”

“And it is finished. He won’t hurt anyone else.” All he’d wanted was his own freedom until Bothvar had threatened Rox.

Rox glanced at the portal, then back at Lynck. “You’re free to go home.”

Lynck dropped the sword and walked toward him, relieved that Rox didn’t back away from his bloodied body. He took Rox’s hands as Rox stared up at him. The blood was tacky between their palms. “You don’t need to bind me with a bridle or hold my reins to control me. My heart belongs here, with you. I love you.”

“I love you too.” Rox exhaled. “We need to clean up or call the military or cops or something because we can’t leave bodies in the woods. If they are found, it won’t take the cops long to figure out it was you.”

“We can take them through the portal,” Thursten said.

“Is that safe?” Rox squeezed Lynck’s hands as if worried about losing him.

“Leave them here,” a woman said as she walked toward the shimmering portal followed by the other leshy.

Lynck suppressed a shudder, not wanting to be rude even though her skull face was terrifying. Rox pressed a little closer to him, and Lynck tightened his grip. “That does not seem like the smart thing to do.”

He agreed with Rox. Throwing the bodies through the portal or dropping them to the bottom of the lake was the best way to make the fight disappear.

She tilted her head. “They killed the human who should be guarding the portal, and we were too late to stop them. We were coming to warn the humans after they passed our village.”

“Why didn’t you stop them?” Thursten asked.

“Do you think there was only these three? If you had not been here and willing to fight, we would not have stepped in. Now we have, and you were never here. Leshys took care of the frost giants; we prevented the raid that would have allowed them to set up a base of operations. I will speak with Bo and Jason, and they will sort this out.”

Lynck glanced at Thursten to see if he was okay with the plan.

Thursten shrugged. “If we were never here, then we shouldn’t be here.”

“But we were.” Rox said slowly. “And the cover up is where people come unstuck in crime shows. My truck is parked up on the verge. We might have been seen.”

“We went for a night swim,” Lynck said. He’d gone swimming at night many times. “And a swim would wash off the blood.”

Irina clapped her hands. “We are decided. Enjoy your swim.”

“Thank you for your assistance.” Thursten shouldered his ax. “We’ll let you deal with portal security.”

Lynck looked at the bodies, then at Thursten, and finally the two leshys. He didn’t want to argue with them when they were prepared to claim responsibility for stopping the frost giant threat. “Thank you.”

“That’s it?” Rox whispered. “We’re leaving?”

Lynck pulled him away from the portal. “We’re leaving.”

“What if?—”

Lynck kissed him. “It will be taken care of. Now we need to clean up.”

Rox pulled off his hoodie. “Do you want to put something on so you’re not running around naked and bloody, which isn’t suspicious at all?”

Lynck glanced down, realizing he was naked. He hadn’t worried about it while fighting. It was normal for a kelpie as it made shifting between forms easy without needing to strip off a loin cloth and keep track of where it had fallen. “I will wash in the lake first.” He tilted his head at the portal. “Do you want to have a peek?”

Rox licked his lip. “Why don’t we take a week off and have a holiday? That way, you can see your herd?”

Lynck shook his head. “I can’t go back. I killed one of my own. To them, I died the day I was bridled, and in part, that is true even though I was no longer in control. But I am happy to take you on a holiday and spend some time in a monster town.”

“I’d like that.”

Thursten grunted. “And I’d like a bath. So let’s move this along.”

Lynck put his arm around Rox’s shoulders. “Will you swim with me?”

Rox smiled. “Someone needs to make sure you wash all the blood off your face.”

twenty-six

Rox floated, staring up at the starlit sky. Lynck floated next to him, holding his hand. Around him, the world was silent, and within him, there was calm for the first time since learning about the bridle.

He shouldn't be this at ease after seeing his lover kill a man, even though Bothvar deserved to die for what he'd done.

When they'd reached the lake, Lynck had waded in and dived beneath the surface, disappearing into the inky depths for long enough that Rox worried that he'd drowned. He'd resurfaced as a horse and waited for Rox to strip off and climb on. Riding a swimming horse was very different than riding a running one. And while he held on tight, Lynck stayed in the shallows until Rox relaxed—because skinny dipping in the cold lake to wash off blood was the ideal way to relax.

Except once Lynck shifted back to the man-like form Rox was used to seeing, and the blood was gone, the tension melted away. Even the scar over his nose and cheeks was less noticeable. As they stood chest-deep in the lake, Lynck held him close and kissed him under the moonlight as if nothing else mattered.

And for tonight, it didn't.

Thursten had washed, checked his cuts, and taken his ax back to the truck, claiming he was going to take a nap, leaving them alone in the lake where there was nothing but the sky and the lapping of the water on the shore.

Rox tried not to think about the other creatures in the lake, from this world or the monster realm. But the illusion of being alone was just that.

Something brushed his thigh. “Nope.”

He floundered as his body refused to be calm and float.

He splashed and almost went under before Lynck caught him. “Are you okay?”

“Yes. I weirded myself out thinking of the fish and stuff.” He clung onto Lynck, arms around his shoulders, fingers tangling in his wet hair, which looked a little greener when wet.

“I won’t let anyone hurt you.”

Rox nodded as he shivered. Lynck’s body heat was not enough to warm him. He hadn’t felt cold a moment ago as he’d floated amongst the stars.

Lynck rubbed his back. “I think it’s time I take you home.”

“I want to be with you.” He didn’t want to go back to the motel. He hadn’t slept there all week.

“My home is your home. You belong with me.” Lynck strode toward the shore, still holding him.

Rox wasn’t sure if it was because Lynck didn’t want to let him go or out of concern that Rox might freak out about fish again and drown. “Are you sure the others will be okay with me moving into your room?”

“They will not mind. You do not mind sharing a house with monsters?”

“No.” The monsters had been nothing but kind to him. Eventually, they’d find their own place, but for the moment, moving in with Lynck was the right thing to do. It was what he wanted to do. Assuming Thursten and Aski were okay sharing with a human.

Lynck set him down on the shore and wrung out his tail and mane. Rox’s skin pebbled with the cold, and his fingers didn’t want to work as he pulled on his track pants—he was so glad that he hadn’t worn jeans, as they would’ve been impossible to pull on with wet skin. The silver chain fell out of his pocket and landed on the wet sand.

He stared at it, then glanced up at Lynck, who was also looking at the chain.

Rox picked it up. “What do you want to do with this? Is it dangerous? Can it be used to...to catch you again?”

Lynck pulled the disk with Bothvar’s marking off the chain, then tossed it into the lake, where it disappeared without a splash. “I don’t know if the magic is in the chain, the disk, or me, but I have never known another monster who can be bridled.”

“Is it possible to cut the chain into pieces now it’s broken? If I can’t, can we assume there is still magic in the chain, and it needs to be buried at the bottom of the lake.” There didn’t appear to be a clasp on the chain nor a broken link where it had come apart.

Lynck frowned and gave a single nod. He folded Rox’s fingers over the chain. “You removed the bridle, so it is yours. If you want to cut it up and melt it down, you may. If you want me to take it to the bottom of the lake, I will.”

“If it’s dangerous, I don’t want to leave it can be found.”

“Then destroy it.”

“And if I can’t?”

“Let’s do one thing at a time.” He tilted Rox’s chin and kissed him. Lynck’s lips were warm even though he was naked, and his hair was wet.

“Do you want to wear the hoodie?” Or was Lynck not feeling the cold?

“Thank you.” Lynck picked up the hoodie and tied it around his waist, the body of the hoodie over his junk and the arms tied over his tail, leaving the cheeks of his ass bare. That wasn’t how Rox expected him to wear it, but since Lynck deemed it appropriate, that was all that mattered.

Rox tried to imagine living in a village where walking around with his ass out was normal. But he didn’t have a tail, and the tail did conceal a lot.

Lynck offered his hand for the walk back to the truck. “Hopefully Thursten doesn’t think we’ve drowned.”

Rox shoved the chain back into his pocket, vowing to deal with it tomorrow. Tomorrow loomed large as everything rushed back, stealing the peace that had existed when it was only him and Lynck in existence. “Shit.”

“What?”

“My boss is dead. I may not have a job.” He was not leaving Elder Ridge. He’d find another job.

“He left you in charge of the shop?”

Rox frowned. “Yes.”

“So you keep working, and when he doesn’t come back, you tell the humans in charge of the portal, and they will sort it out.”

“They will sell it.”

“Not if he left you in charge and you are meeting the obligations.”

“Yeah, I don’t know what they are.” He was going to have to go through the paperwork. And find bank accounts and lease statements and all kinds of things... He exhaled. One thing at a time. “That might be a problem for another day.”

“I think we’ve done enough for one night, and dawn will be here soon.”

“Ugh.” Rox dragged his feet. “I am so not ready to face a new day.”

Lynck laughed and swept him up. “The world can wait for a couple of hours.”

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 5:32 am*

### ONE WEEK LATER

“ This is everything?” Lynck asked as he carried the last box out of Rox’s truck and set it in the living room with another small box, a suitcase, a duffle bag, and a plastic bag of dirty clothes.

Rox ran his fingers through his hair. “Yeah...I didn’t want to keep too much in my truck in case it got broken into. That box is mostly sentimental stuff I couldn’t bear to get rid of.”

“You lived like this for six months?”

Rox wrinkled his nose. “Longer than that, as I needed to sell things while Mom was sick. I haven’t had a sofa or a dining table in about a year.”

“You need to buy more clothes and shoes...you definitely need shoes as those are falling apart.”

“I know, trust me. I can feel every piece of gravel, but I need a job and money?—”

“You have that. And a home.”

Rox pressed his lips together. “I don’t know how to run a business.”

The military had a record of Arn Hall leaving through the portal to go to his brother’s wedding and an expected return date, which he’d missed. Maybe seeing his family was the truth, and telling Bothvar had been a bonus, or maybe he’d returned to the

monster world for another reason. He'd been pretty keen to employ someone so he could make the trip.

Now, Arn had three months to return and claim his business, and until then, the business was in Rox's care. If it remained unclaimed, Rox could take over or allow it to be sold. This wasn't the first time a monster had abandoned a business to go home, although in this case, they knew Arn wasn't returning. Bothvar had killed him, which wasn't something they were going to share with the military.

"There is a free class," Lynck said.

"That is for monsters. Humans are supposed to pay for that shit."

Lynck smiled. "I am a monster."

"But you don't work in the shop."

"I can answer phones and ring up payments if you need me. No one will care if I do the class. After all, I'm expected to contribute to human society." He took a step closer. "And I want to help you."

Confusion and doubt flickered in Rox's eyes. "I'm not used to getting help."

"So I have realized. Or you'd have moved in three days ago."

Rox had slept there every night but had needed to deal with the missing owner situation and work, pack up, and cancel the room. In the end, Lynck insisted on helping him with the motel and the packing because he clearly had too much on his plate, which hadn't helped things as Rox insisted he'd manage...which had resulted in a small argument and Rox calling the motel to cancel at the end of the week.

Which meant he'd needed to be out today.

It was a good thing he didn't have too much stuff to pack.

Rox flicked him a glare. "I needed to be sure me moving in was really okay with Thursten and Aski."

"They said it was okay." Multiple times.

"They might have been saying that to be polite."

Lyck stepped over the box and put his arms around his human. "They were not saying to be polite." He kissed the top of his head. "Aski has already added you to the cleaning roster stuck to the fridge."

Rox relaxed in his arms. "I don't want it to be weird."

"It might be weird at first. You are the only human, and you are noisy."

Rox pulled away. "Oh my God, I am not. You all have super sensitive ears."

He picked up the duffle bag full of clothes and stalked down the hallway to Lynck's room. Lynck smiled. The house was currently empty...

He grabbed the suitcase and followed, nudging the bedroom door closed after him.

Rox glanced up, eyes wide. He'd already emptied the duffle bag onto the bed to sort through the clothes and put them away.

"Since we are alone, it doesn't matter how much noise you make." Lynck pushed him onto the bed and kissed him. This time, it wasn't one night. They had the rest of their lives.