



Minotaurs and other Magic (Mytho Collapse #1)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Come for the minotaur and stay for the magic.

When a hiking trip in the human world goes wrong, Nate Lee finds himself in another world, stealing to survive. His crimes land him at the hooves of Prince Rohan: minotaur, musician, and massive

While his brother rules the city, Rohan de Calla concerns himself with smaller matters, like cute human thieves who dont belong there. Rohan pays off Nate's debt, now Nate owes him.

And Nate soon realizes the size of his predicament...

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CHAPTER 1

While Nate wouldn't have called it a run, it was pretty bloody close. He ducked his head, hoping to hide in the shadows of the stolen cloak he was wearing. Behind him, he was shouted at by who he assumed were the cops—not that he understood a word they were saying.

Two men, or men-like things, stepped out of the bar. Their eyes flashed yellow, and one of them laughed, revealing teeth that were far too pointy. He'd seen a few of them around, along with other people-like beings and other creatures that he only knew from myths.

Nate caught the heavy door before it closed and slid into the warmth of the bar. He eased along the wall, searching for the deepest shadow. There were plenty of them as the bar was only lit by lanterns. And while the myth-people talked, it was with low voices so the music could still be heard.

He sunk to the floor in a corner, pulled the hand-sized loaf of bread out of his shirt, and ripped off a chunk, stuffing it into his mouth to stop his belly from growling and giving him away. Except while it looked like bread, it didn't taste like any bread he'd ever eaten. It was layered with herbs and cheese and meat. He ate fast, tearing off pieces and shoving them into his mouth as fast as he chewed and swallowed them.

If he kept busy, he didn't have time to break.

That was a lie. Every night when he rolled up in the cloak, in what he hoped was a safe place, he broke a little. He had no idea where he was, only that he wasn't dead.

Or maybe he was, and this was hell or something. He'd never been much of a believer, so maybe there was no heaven or hell for him, only a place where he understood nothing and was cold and hungry and alone.

He squeezed his eyes closed, refusing to lose his shit while enjoying dinner and music. He was learning how to survive. The clothes he'd stolen helped him blend in walking around town. That he'd found a town was amazing because after his supplies had run out, he hadn't known what was safe to eat in the forest.

The hike was supposed to be a day trip with a couple of friends.

The last thing he remembered was a rumble of thunder and a rockslide. When he'd woken up, it had been almost dark. There was a savage gash on his shin, scrapes on his arms, and a cut on his head. Maybe the myth-people spoke English and language had been knocked out of him.

But he didn't think so.

This place was filled with beings best suited to fantasy books. Unlike the heroes of those books, he was not up for any kind of questing. All he wanted was to go home. He'd spent the first two days trying to do just that. Then when his supplies ran out, he realized he was fucked and that he needed a new plan.

The door to the bar slammed open, and a man shouted.

The music stopped.

Fuck.

It had to be the cops, and they were there for him. If there was a back door to this place, he might be able to sneak out. He stuffed the remains of the bread into his

mouth and crouched, ready to scuttle around the edges.

Someone stepped in front of him.

Nate lifted his gaze. The cop wore all black except for the red flower emblem on his sleeves. When he spoke to Nate, two long fangs glinted in the light.

Nate swallowed. Was the man a vampire?

The vampire said something else, and even though Nate wanted to slink away, his body disobeyed, and he stood.

What the hell?

The vampire gave another order, and this time, Nate's feet walked him out of the shadows and into the center of the bar where the other black-dressed cop was waiting.

"Please, I don't know what you're saying," Nate begged. He was sure they were accusing him of stealing the bread. It had been a risk to take it, but he hadn't eaten in a day.

The vampire cops didn't seem to care. They asked more questions he couldn't answer. People around him in the bar were staring and pointing and talking.

The vampire removed Nate's stolen cloak, and he was unable to struggle. Then the cop removed the stolen tunic. Without them, he was going to freeze, and it was now rather obvious he didn't belong. His clothes were odd compared to the homespun tunics and pants everyone else wore. Stealing the clothes hadn't been easy. Now he'd have to start over.

Assuming they let him go.

Both men were armed with swords and knives.

They wouldn't kill him in the bar, would they?

While he couldn't lift a hand to defend himself?

He opened his mouth to beg again, even though they couldn't understand him, but someone else spoke.

Everyone turned to the deep voice. That was when Nate discovered his head still turned. His eyes widened. Sitting at the harp was...was a minotaur. He didn't know how else to describe the creature. It was a man with the head of a bull. Had he been playing that music?

The minotaur wasn't playing the harp now; he was pointing at Nate. Around the minotaur's wrist was a thick gold cuff.

That wasn't a good sign. The minotaur was someone important.

The vampire holding the stolen clothes bowed and responded.

Definitely not a good sign, but the distraction might be enough for him to run if he made his feet move.

Which he couldn't. No matter how hard he tried to will them to move, he was stuck.

The minotaur and the vampire had a brief discussion that involved the shaking of the stolen clothes and more pointing of fingers. The people waiting growled and hissed.

He was going to be killed or eaten, or both.

The panic he'd been holding in bubbled in his throat and prickled in his eyes.

"I don't know what's going on. I can't understand you. I shouldn't be here." He drew in a breath. The vampire stared at him and muttered a few words. Even though Nate wanted to speak, no sound came out.

He couldn't do anything but stand there. And that was so much worse.

A tear escaped and raced down his cheek.

Keep it together.

Why was he bothering when it would be much easier to give up?

The minotaur gave what sounded like orders, and the vampires obeyed. One collected coins from the minotaur while the other looped rope around Nate's neck and wrists, tying his hands as if he were praying.

The vampire tying him spoke, and Nate's muscles eased. He wriggled his toes, relieved to be able to move again. His elation ended the next second as the vampire led him to the minotaur and tied the other end of the rope to the ring that attached the leather carrying strap to the harp, giving Nate no choice but to sit at the feet...hooves...of the minotaur.

The minotaur had seemed big from across the room, but now he seemed massive. His hand would be able to squeeze a watermelon or a skull and crush it. And his hooves seemed like dinner plates.

He had dainty ankles that turned into bulging calves and then thick thighs. Nate's gaze drifted higher, only to find that the minotaur wasn't wearing anything beneath his tunic. His balls and cock hung heavily between his thighs and were equally large.

Nate lifted his gaze to find the minotaur staring at him, not with the hard eyes of the vampires who'd chased him but with curiosity and kindness.

The minotaur patted him on the head and murmured something only meant for his ears before speaking loud enough for everyone to hear.

People clapped.

Nate scanned the bar, but the vampires who'd chased him were gone. They'd taken the clothes...and coins.

Had the minotaur just bought him?

CHAPTER 2

The Strega had warned Rohan to be on the lookout for anything strange. While thieves weren't strange, a human who spoke another language and who wore very odd shoes was definitely something strange.

He had no idea why she'd made the request, but bringing her the human man was worth the cost of buying his punishment. It was certainly better than telling her about the man tomorrow and then having to go to the city guard and deal with the Knight and the aggrieved victims.

As his fingers moved over the heartstrings, Rohan tried to find himself in the music the way he usually did. And while there was nothing wrong with his playing or his singing, the magic was off-kilter.

Perhaps it was due to the interruption.

Or maybe it was because of the man tied to his harp.

He risked a glance down, his fingers moving without him looking, never breaking the flow of music. The man sat at his feet, staring at the floor. He didn't sing; he didn't seem affected by the music at all.

Nor did he struggle. He could have tried to undo the knots—though that would not have worked out well for him. Was he praying to a god?

It was a little late for that, and he doubted they'd intervene. If they did, the price

would be high.

Rohan played one more song, an upbeat tune that had everyone's feet stamping. Some got up to dance. And it got the man's attention.

He wasn't the only human in the tavern.

But he was the only thief.

If he's stolen from the ogres, he would've lost a finger or two. He was lucky the city guard had caught him. Luckier that the Strega had an interest in things that didn't belong.

Rohan accepted the praise and cheers of the audience. He didn't play for an audience very often. This was the first time since his father's death. His father had said it was inappropriate for a prince to play at the tavern, to mix with the people of the city.

But Rohan considered it the best way to get to know the people of the city. To hear what concerned them. While his brother ruled—that meant dealing with other city leaders, taxes and levies and trade deals—it was Rohan's job to be among the people, to sit when the Knight passed judgment on disputes and more serious crimes.

The tavern owner handed him a tankard of ale, which he gratefully accepted. It was the only payment he wanted because he didn't need the money. What he enjoyed was the audience and the shared experience.

He took a couple of greedy swallows to soothe his throat, made tired from singing, then held the tankard out to his human.

The man stared at him with wide red-rimmed eyes. He might be considered handsome if not for the obvious terror on his face and the scent clinging to his skin.

“Drink. We will unravel this mess.” He offered the ale again.

This time, the man reached up with his bound hands and took the tankard.

As he drank, Rohan studied him. He had short black hair, and his jaw was coated in dark stubble. The clothes he wore, a shirt and pants, were recognizable yet very different in style from what was worn in Calla. But his boots were the strangest. They laced up the way pants did, though his pants had no laces that Rohan could see, and they appeared to be made of something other than leather or cloth.

Unable to resist, he reached out and rubbed the fabric of the shirt between his fingers. The fabric wasn't anything he was familiar with. It felt fine, though it wasn't silk. Nor was it delicately spun wool. The man flinched and offered the tankard back to him.

Rohan took it and drained it before setting it on the floor. “We will go now.”

He lifted the harp slowly, giving the man time to stand. When he was on his feet, Rohan slung the harp over his shoulder. Its familiar weight settled until the man moved and pulled it askew.

That would not do. He reached around and undid the knot, then created a loop to put around his own wrist. The man watched, his gaze jumping from Rohan's hands to his face and back again as if he couldn't believe what was right in front of him.

After another round of goodbyes, Rohan led the man out of the tavern. And the man followed. Rohan had expected more of a fight, but given the vampires had accused him of stealing food tonight, perhaps he had run out of energy.

It was hard to fight on an empty belly in an unfamiliar place.

Rohan couldn't imagine what it must be like to not speak the language. Which begged the question... Where, by Ishtar and Pan, was the man from?

CHAPTER 3

Once out of the bar, Nate considered fleeing for a nanosecond. Gone were the crowds from earlier in the day. Now, the only noise came from other bars. People laughed and howled, and music spilled into the night.

If he ran now, he might be able to disappear into the night.

And then what?

He only had what was in his pockets. He had no cloak, no shelter, and no food. He knew enough about survival that running would be stupid. When he set out for the hike, he thought himself over-prepared for a day trip. And he had been because there'd been enough supplies in his day pack to buy himself two days before desperation led him to the town.

Running now meant never coming back, as they'd be searching for him. He'd need to find another town...and eventually, he'd be caught stealing there, too. No. This was it. He didn't know where he was, or what had happened, or where his friends were.

He didn't even speak the bloody language. He kicked a rock, making it bounce over the cobbles.

The minotaur spoke softly to him. He didn't sound like a monster at all. Didn't the minotaur of mythology eat people? Was he being led to the maze to be hunted and eaten?

Nate's feet slowed.

The minotaur stopped and scooped him up as if he weighed nothing and carried him in his arms. He acted as if the harp on his back weighed nothing. And Nate couldn't do anything to resist because as soon as he started moving his hands, the rope around his throat began to choke him. So he closed his eyes and let himself be carried to where he would be killed.

The minotaur kept talking in that same soft voice as if explaining things to a confused child. Nate opened his eyes. He recognized the tone because he used it when there was a child in his classroom who was struggling.

"What the fuck is going on?" Nate stared up at him.

The minotaur smiled and continued with his incomprehensible chatter until they reached a wall broken by two decorative metal gates, each one emblazoned with the red flower that had been on the vampires' uniforms. But around the top of the wall was a different emblem, a fancy knotwork that appeared almost Celtic in design.

The two guards on the gate bowed and opened the gates. This was a palace. Nate had been to enough of them in Europe to recognize one, even if it wasn't quite the same.

The minotaur walked up the path and took a left at a large tree before continuing along another path. He stopped outside another door and set Nate on his feet before pushing the door open.

Like the gates and the wall, these heavy doors were also highly decorated with knotwork and the flower. The floor seemed to be made of marble, and a staircase swept upwards. Everything was carved and decorated. And there was glass or something in the roof, allowing the moonlight to bounce off mirrors and illuminate the foyer.

As if sensing the minotaur's arrival, two people rushed in. They stopped and stared at Nate. And even though he didn't understand the words, it was clear the conversation was about him.

The minotaur set his harp down to one side, then moved his arm, indicating for Nate to follow. Given that he had no choice as they were tied together, he did.

This was a bad dream that was getting worse with each passing hour.

At first, he thought he might die from infection, then from dirty water, then lack of food or exposure. He had not put death by rich minotaur on his list...but who did, right? That wasn't exactly something one planned for.

Because minotaurs didn't exist.

Yet he was following one into a rather lovely sitting room that was decorated with several large sofas in varying shades of deep pink. There was a massive desk in one corner and several bookcases along one wall. His gaze skimmed the spines, hoping that he would see one written in English, but he didn't recognize any of the letters.

A woman's voice drew his attention. He hadn't noticed her when he'd walked in, and he should've because she was striking...and just a little terrifying. There was something about the way she looked at him that made him want to hide behind the minotaur.

She and the minotaur had a conversation that ended with both of them looking at his feet. What was wrong with his feet? Was it because he had feet instead of hooves?

No, the vampires who chased him had worn boots, which meant they had feet.

The minotaur knelt at Nate's feet and tapped his hiking boot as he spoke.

“If you want my shoes, you can have them.” Is that what this was about? Was it his shoes that the minotaur wanted?

The minotaur undid the laces and encouraged Nate to remove his foot from the boot, handing it over to the woman who inspected it. A frown formed between her eyebrows, which did nothing to ease Nate’s disquiet.

With a subtle tap and nudge, he removed his foot from his other boot. The minotaur plucked at his sock, then touched the fabric of his pants, noting the pockets, before rubbing the fabric of Nate’s shirt between his fingers again.

On his knees, the tips of his horns were the same height as Nate’s eyes. He wanted to reach out and touch the horn and his hair. Dark auburn locks curled over his forehead, parting for his horns and ears—one of which was adorned with three gold rings—before curling on his shoulders. The tunic did a poor job of concealing the muscles of his arms and chest.

The tunic did a poor job of concealing everything, to be honest because, for the duration of the concert, he’d been aware of how close he sat to the minotaur’s oversized junk. He was now super aware of how close the minotaur was to him. The way his warm breath swept over Nate’s stomach and his massive hands touched so gently.

The woman put the hiking boot on the floor and then touched the fabric of his clothes in the same way the minotaur had. When she’d finished her examination, she addressed him directly.

Nate shook his head. “I’m sorry, I don’t understand. I don’t know where I am, and I don’t know what’s going on, and I just want to go home. I’m sorry I stole, okay? I was hungry and cold.”

The excuses fell from his tongue even though they wouldn't understand a word, no matter what he said. He sighed and lowered his gaze.

The minotaur remained on his knees. He patted Nate's outer thigh as if everything was going to be fine. Nate suspected nothing was going to be fine again.

The woman gripped Nate's chin and forced him to look at her. She asked him a couple of questions he couldn't answer before trying again in another language. It was definitely a different language. He knew that in the same way he could tell Welsh from English and spoke both. He didn't claim to speak French, but he understood enough to recognize it when spoken.

She wasn't using any of them.

She used a third language, but she wasn't asking questions anymore. And her words made his head thump and the room spin. And she kept staring at him. He stumbled, and the minotaur caught him as everything turned black.

CHAPTER 4

The murmuring of voices caught in Nate's subconscious, trying to lure him to wakefulness. He hovered at the edge of sleep, his head already pounding. Had he gone out and gotten drunk?

His mouth was dry. He should get up and drink something.

The voices became louder.

"I don't think 'Bramhede's Musings on Magic' would wake anyone up. It's putting me to sleep," a deep voice said.

"Keep going. He needs to hear the language to absorb it," a woman said, as though not expecting any argument.

"You broke him. You've drunk a pot of tea, spoken to your sisters, and the moon is past its zenith, and he hasn't woken." The man didn't seem to care about her authority.

"He's not broken. But it seems he's never encountered magic before, and his mind needs extra time to process."

Process what? Why were they talking about magic as if it was real?

The man started talking again, and it was clear he was reading the book on magic.

Where was he? Nate groaned and tried to sit up, only to find his hands bound. Panic flared bright and sharp in his chest as Rohan pushed him back down.

“Take it easy,” the man murmured.

Nate blinked a couple of times before his eyes focused on the...the...fuck. Everything flooded back and hit him hard enough to steal his breath.

The minotaur smiled. “You’re awake. I guess you were sick of Bramhede, too.” He placed the book on the floor.

Nate stared at him. Up close, he had impossibly long dark eyelashes. He shouldn’t be thinking about eyelashes when he was staring at a mythological monster...who had been nothing but kind to him. It wasn’t English the man was speaking, or Welsh, or even French—and he only spoke enough to get around and order food—yet he understood what they were saying. “How is...”

“I think he can understand us.” The minotaur seemed excited. His ears twitched, and he glanced at the woman who was leaning against the large desk.

“Can you, human?”

Nate nodded. “How?” he asked in English.

“Try again in Tarikian,” the woman said as if he should be able to magically speak another language... Oh. Magic.

Finding the right word wasn’t that hard. No more difficult than finding it in Welsh, easier than finding it in French. “How did I learn while I was asleep?”

He spoke slowly, the sounds and inflections feeling strange on his lips and tongue

even though he made them as though he'd been speaking the language all of his life.

"I sped up the process with magic," the woman said, as though that should answer his question instead of raising ten others.

"I don't understand."

She walked over. "When learning a language, one listens for the intent and feels the magic. I opened those pathways in your mind, and Rohan read to you so you would hear the words."

Rohan. That was the minotaur's name.

Nate wasn't sure if he should be grateful or concerned that he could understand and speak the language. She spoke of magic as if it were real. Five days ago, he hadn't thought vampires or any of the other beings were real, either. Why not magic?

"What is your name, human?" Rohan asked.

"Nate Lee." Not that it mattered. It wasn't as though they were going to stamp his passport. "Where am I?"

The woman peered at him. "We want to know where you're from and how you got here."

Rohan lifted his hand. The thick gold cuff on his wrist, engraved with the now familiar knotwork, glinted in the light. It was the same knotwork that decorated the neckline of his tunic. "We will answer some of your questions to put your mind at ease before you answer ours." He glanced at the woman. "Perhaps some more tea and food to ground him after the magic?"

Her lips pressed tight together, but she walked towards the door as if obeying an order.

“You are in my library, in the palace, in the city of Calla, on a world we call Tariko,” Rohan said, answering every possible variation of Nate’s question.

If he was in a palace and this was Rohan’s library... “Are you a prince?”

“I am. My brother rules the city.”

Nate glanced at the rope around his wrists. At least it was no longer around his neck. “Why am I here?”

“We would like to know that too,” the woman said as she sat on the arm of the sofa Nate lay on.

Rohan gave her a look before answering Nate’s question. “The city guard caught you stealing. Instead of letting them arrest you and sentence you to a year and a day of labor, I paid out your debt.”

“Why?”

“Because I saw your shoes and realized you weren’t from here. The Strega,” he nodded at the woman. “Asked that I keep watch for things that don’t belong.”

They already knew he didn’t belong here. That was a good thing. Maybe they’d help him leave. “So I can go home?”

“Where is home?” The woman, the Strega, asked. She wore black, and her dark hair was done up in a bun, which was held in place with two elaborate silver clasps.

Nate considered her for a moment, then answered the same way Rohan had answered him. “A country called Wales on a world we call Earth.”

“And how did you get here?”

“I don’t know. I went hiking with two friends, and there was some thunder and a rockslide. I woke up here. Alone.” Injured but wearing his daypack, which held a first aid kit and food that had bought him a couple of days. He’d searched for his friends but hadn’t found them. He hoped that meant they were on Earth. Which was a weird sentence to even contemplate.

He wasn’t on Earth.

He was on Tariko. And while he understood the word, he had no concept of the place. Was it another planet?

The woman considered him for several seconds. “It appears you found a doorway to our world...or one opened.”

Rohan gave her a troubled glance.

“What does that mean?” Nate asked. Should he be worried?

It was Rohan who answered. “It means that in the past, travel between our two worlds was easier and more common. Then, when we stopped going to your world, it became harder for humans to travel here.”

“Elves and vampires aren’t creatures of myth. They came from here?” He was having this conversation with a minotaur; the answer was right in front of him. Of course, they weren’t mythological. “Why did you come to my world?”

“Trade, adventure... To scare unsuspecting humans.” Rohan grinned.

Nate was sure that might have been funny if he hadn’t magically learned a language while passed out in a strange palace. “Then how do I get home?”

There was a knock on the door, then a woman with pointed ears and a pronounced nose and jaw, like a short muzzle, bustled in carrying a tray of food. Nate’s stomach grumbled. He hadn’t eaten a proper meal in too many days.

The woman gave him a wary glance, her yellow eyes seeming to absorb everything she needed to learn about him—which was nothing good—in a few seconds. She placed the tray on the desk, nodded at Rohan and the Strega, and left.

“Since you were caught stealing food, I am assuming you are hungry.” Rohan stood in one graceful movement that shouldn’t have been possible for a beast...man his size. He gently pulled Nate up so he was sitting on the sofa, his feet not touching the floor, and then walked over to the desk. Which gave Nate a chance to observe him.

Rohan looked like a man, except for his head and his hooves. A very tall man who liked bodybuilding. Nate considered himself average height for a human man. Rohan towered over him. He must be seven feet plus horns. Nate had always liked taller guys. Something twitched beneath Rohan’s tunic, and it took Nate a full two seconds to realize it was a tail.

And another two seconds to realize he was far more curious than revolted.

Rohan returned with the plate of food and a cup of tea. “Let me hold it. Magic can make you shaky if you aren’t used to it.”

His voice was so soft and deep that if Nate closed his eyes, it would be very easy to imagine him whispering all kinds of naughty things. He swallowed. What was wrong

with him?

Rohan held out the cup, and Nate took a cautious drink, expecting the tea to burn his tongue, but it was the perfect temperature as if Rohan had added cold water to the cup.

“Thank you.” He’d be able to hold the cup if his hands weren’t tied. He picked up one of the...he didn’t know if it was a pasty or a folded pizza...and as he did, his hands trembled the way his grandfather’s had before his death. He almost dropped the palm-sized pastry thing.

It was only as he chewed that he realized neither of them had answered his question. “I can go home, right?”

His gaze flicked between the Rohan and the Strega. He didn’t even know what a Strega was.

“That depends on the magic that brought you here.”

“And there is the matter of the theft,” Rohan said.

“I stole to survive. I didn’t understand what the people were saying. And some of them...” He bit off the words. A minotaur prince had rescued him. Saying he wasn’t a person was the wrong thing. Rohan was a person. He read books and played the harp and held the teacup so Nate could drink. He was already nicer than his last ex, though that was a very low bar, and given that they’d only dated for three months, even calling him an ex was a little over the top.

“Weren’t human?” the Strega finished for him.

Nate’s cheeks burned, so he concentrated on stuffing the rest of the pastry thing into

his mouth. It tasted amazing, full of mince and soft cheese and herbs.

“There are humans here, Nate. Their families came from your world a long time ago, so they will be as strange to you as I am. The Strega was human once.” Rohan held up the cup.

Nate took another drink. “What do you mean, once?”

“After I was chosen and passed the trials, I gave up my name and everything else to be one with the magic and my sisters. We are all Strega.” She stood. “Tomorrow, you will take us to where you arrived, and I will see if I can determine your fate lines. At the moment, they are too tangled to read, which is my fault for giving you language.” She paused. “Remember, Nate Lee, you are an untrusted guest of Prince Rohan.”

His mouth dropped open, not sure if she’d just threatened him.

“The palace guards and staff will not allow you to roam. You are either with me or the guard I assign to you.”

Nate nodded, not sure what else he could do. “I am a prisoner.”

“You are not familiar with our ways.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that if you did, you would not have stolen from the family of a city guard vampire. They wanted your blood to pay for your crimes. You cost me a lot of coin.”

“Then why buy me?”

“I didn’t buy you. I bought your crimes, so you repay me, not them. Unless you

would rather service a vampire in all ways. After a year and a day of giving blood, there may not be much of you left.”

“So, I can’t go home until I repay you. How do I do that?” He had nothing.

Rohan sat back on his hooves. “We will see what the Strega says tomorrow.”

CHAPTER 5

While Rohan had warned Nate about walking through the palace unattended, he had no intention of untying him and trusting him yet. He could understand the human's fear and confusion that had resulted in the thefts, but Nate had shown no remorse. Perhaps in the human world, they didn't care about making reparation.

Or perhaps stealing for survival was allowable.

He was tempted to ask more questions, but Nate was exhausted, and the magic and food and tea were making him sleepy. Given the lateness of the hour, all Rohan wanted to do was claim his bed and whisper to his pillow.

But first, he had to solve the problem of where Nate was going to sleep. There was a holding cell on the palace grounds, though it was mostly used for people who had revealed too much and were a danger to themselves, and he didn't think locking Nate away on his own for the night would do him any good.

He could assign him a guest room and guards, but he wasn't ready for the gossip that would cause either. No, he had paid Nate's debt, which made Nate his responsibility. Not only that, but if something happened tonight before the Strega could finish her questions, she would be furious with Rohan. And annoying the Strega was never on his to-do list. He did not want her knotting up his fate lines or turning him into an animal to track Nate all across Tariko.

That left only one option: take Nate to his chambers.

Nate said nothing as he used the privy, and he copied Rohan as he scrubbed his teeth, taking far longer than Rohan had and then running his tongue over his small teeth as if appreciating how smooth they were. It was only when Rohan slipped the knot off his wrist and stripped off his tunic that Nate flinched and found the wall very interesting.

Rohan kept the end of the rope beneath his hoof as he ran the water and rubbed a wet cloth over his skin. It was too late to bathe properly, and they would ride out early tomorrow. He would bathe when they returned.

Already, that promise to himself seemed too far away because he knew how many interruptions he would get between now and then. He didn't rule the city, but he had his own list of responsibilities, and he willingly added Nate to that list. He had no doubt the city's Knight would see him regarding Nate.

To Rohan's mind, the city guard had set a fair price, but if the victims of the crimes went to the Knight to demand more, it would be Rohan who needed to settle the debt, assuming they agreed to accept coin. Offer enough of it, and most people were. However, some preferred vengeance to justice...in the case of some stolen clothes and food, Rohan didn't imagine that would be the case.

He finished washing, emptied the water, and refilled the bowl so that Nate could do the same. He needed to bathe. "Do your people not wash?"

Nate glanced at him, his eyes darting from Rohan's face to his chest, to his prick, and then back up. His cheeks turned red as if looking was something to be ashamed of. Nate's mouth opened, but it was a couple of heartbeats before a word came out. "Yes. But not usually with other people."

"Where is the fun in that?" Rohan teased while also speaking the truth.

Nate's gaze dropped to Rohan's cock, which was responding to the interest Nate was showing. Nate's eyes widened, and he took a step back but was pulled up short by the rope.

"Wash human, you smell worse than the abattoir in the middle of summer."

Nate's tongue darted over his lip. "I can't remove my clothes with my hands bound."

Rohan considered the clothes. If it were up to him, he'd burn them. However, he was sure that the Strega would want to inspect them more closely. He picked up the rope from beneath his hoof and tied it around Nate's neck before freeing his hands and keeping hold of that end.

"You don't need to keep me tied."

"We will see. For the moment, I think it is best I do."

Nate pressed his lips together and glared at him. He liked the spark in the human's blue eyes.

After several heartbeats, Nate gave a small nod and began unbuttoning his shirt. He dropped it on the floor, but he hesitated when it came to undoing his pants.

"I can assure you, you have nothing I haven't seen before," Rohan said.

Nate muttered something in his own language, then popped open the button. The next fastening, he undid with something Rohan had never seen before.

"What is that?"

"A zipper." Nate dragged it up and down twice.

Rohan bent to study the tiny teeth as they knitted and separated. “Fascinating.”

“Why don’t I take my pants off, and you can play with the zipper all you want?” Nate shoved his pants over his hips and kicked them off. He wore undergarments beneath his pants the way women did during their cycle. Though Nate was clearly male as the undergarment cradled his cock and balls.

Rohan picked up the pants and fiddled with the fastening while Nate began to wash, leaving his socks and undergarment on. After a few moments, it was clear that Nate had no intention of taking off the rest of his clothes.

“If you do not finish undressing, I will do it for you. You will not be getting into my bed with an unwashed ass and smelly feet.”

“My feet don’t smell and...and at least I have feet!” Nate clutched the cloth to his chest, droplets of water tracing over his stomach. “I’m sorry, that was rude. Minotaurs are meant to have hooves.”

A laugh erupted from Rohan’s throat. “Yes, we are. And humans are supposed to have feet. You have come to a world populated by more than humans, and while I can appreciate this is shocking for you, do not think that rudeness is acceptable or will be tolerated. There are many beings who will take offence and not accept a simple apology.”

“I just want to go home.”

“And I just want to go to bed, so hurry up and finish washing. I promise you will be given clean clothes in the morning.”

Nate nodded. He eased his underwear down and stepped out of it before crouching to pull off his socks. There were old bruises on his arms and legs and a few minor

scrapes. A bandage of some kind covered a bigger injury on his leg.

“Does your wound need to be checked tonight?”

“No, I changed the bandage this morning. There are some...” He took a moment to find the word. “Healing supplies in my pants.” He held the cloth in front of his dick.

“Do you have other injuries that need to be tended?” Nate was his responsibility, and that included his welfare.

“They are healing.” He lifted one hand and touched his head as if checking.

Rohan batted his hand away, felt for the injury himself.

Nate flinched away. “Do you need to stand so close?”

“I will not place my hands on you in any manner other than to check your wound. A head injury can kill.”

“I know. At first, I thought I was dead or in some kind of hell.” He let Rohan continue his examination.

There was a cut in Nate’s hair, though it didn’t seem serious. “You know of Hel. If you would like to leave her an offering, I can take you to her temple.”

Nate stared up at him. “What are you talking about?”

“The goddess Hel. She has a small temple, but I cannot recall the last time she came this way. Ishtar is our closest goddess, though Pan often visits.”

Nate blinked, and Rohan wondered if the human understood him. “You talk of them

as if they are real people.”

“They are, and you would be wise to choose your words if blessing or cursing the gods.” He plucked the cloth out of Nate’s hand and walked behind the human. There were smears of dirt on his back that Rohan took care of.

But when the cloth drifted lower, Nate stepped away. “I can finish.”

“Tomorrow, you will have a proper bath, and I will have the healer check you over.” He could’ve stepped back or turned away, but instead, he watched as Nate finished washing.

The human’s cheeks turned pink, but he didn’t complain about the attention as Rohan continued to enjoy the view. Nate appeared to be fit, with plenty of lean muscle. Rohan doubted he’d be good at any kind of manual labor. He was also taller than most of the humans in Calla, though not enough to stand out. His fingernails were rough and broken, probably from surviving on his own for five days.

He tracked the movement of the cloth to Nate’s groin, and for a moment, he wished that Nate would let him finish the job, although that may have stalled them going to bed.

His own dick was still half interested in the human. It would not take much to become fully erect. Without a doubt, Nate would not be flattered.

It did not help when Nate squatted to wash his feet or when he glanced up as if aware Rohan watched a little too intently. Rohan clamped his teeth together to prevent any words from escaping. Though there was nothing he could do about his cock, as it seemed to think Nate was on his knees for one reason and only.

Nate licked his lower lip as he stared up, as if doing a little appreciation of his own,

which did not help at all. Rohan's cock jutted towards the human, becoming harder with each passing heartbeat. His foreskin eased back, revealing the dark ruddy head. It would take only a couple of strokes for beads of pre-cum to slip free.

Would Nate lick them up?

He needed to stop thinking about those things. He drew in a breath and held it for a heartbeat, sure his nose was lying to him. That was not his own scent of lust that he smelled. It was Nate's.

"You like to lie with men."

Nate glanced away, his cheeks sunset red. He stood and dropped the cloth in the basin. With nothing to hide behind, Nate's arousal was clear. His cock was in proportion to his human body, almost dainty compared to Rohan and rising out of dark curls.

Rohan gathered the rope in his fist, drawing Nate closer. Nate didn't meet his gaze. The head of Rohan's cock tapped Nate on the stomach.

"Why are you afraid of admitting that?"

"Because I don't know your customs, and I don't want to break more laws."

Rohan cupped Nate's chin, forcing his head up. "Does your world have those rules?"

"Not where I live."

"Those rules do not exist here. Consenting adults may lie with who they please. They may wed who they please. If you want to admit how much you like my cock, that is not a problem."

“Your cock is big enough to kill someone. That is why I was looking.”

Rohan laughed and released Nate’s chin. “You are amusing, human. I can assure you, no one has died on my cock yet.” He winked. “And if they did, it was only for a few heartbeats.”

CHAPTER 6

Nate had expected it to take him a long time to go to sleep, given that his hands were bound and the other end of the rope was tied to the bed. That Rohan was in the same bed should've given him enough of a reason to stay awake.

It was clear the minotaur was interested in him. Without even touching Rohan's cock, Nate was one hundred percent sure he wouldn't be able to get his mouth around it or his hand. It was the kind of thing that got talked about after a few drinks amongst his friends. The biggest cock I ever rode... the weirdest hookup I ever made...

Everyone had those stories.

If he hooked up with a minotaur, no one would ever be able to top that.

Not that he was considering it.

While it felt as though he'd gone to sleep as soon as his head hit the pillow—he'd missed pillows and blankets and soft mattresses while sleeping rough—he'd woken up as soon as daylight filtered into the room. But he didn't want to get up yet. He wanted to go back to sleep; his eyes were still gritty, and his body was sore as if he'd slept on the cold ground.

He rolled over, hoping to go back to sleep. As he did, his eyelids flicked open to assess where Rohan was in the bed. He didn't want to end up spooning the minotaur. Rohan lay on his back, the blankets around his thighs, and his hand working over that thick length of cock.

Nate closed his eyes and pretended to be asleep. He couldn't roll back over again without it being obvious. Shit. He was going to have to lie there and pretend that nothing was going on.

Rohan made a little noise of pleasure, which made Nate crack his eyes open. He'd always enjoyed watching a guy get off, and this was no different, especially if he didn't look at the horned head on the pillow. In the early morning light, Rohan's skin was a little redder...like the color of autumn leaves.

No, you idiot. He was cow...bull...colored. Russet.

His cock was darker, the head almost purple, with pre-come leaking from the slit and rolling over his skin. With each stroke, Rohan swept up more and slid it down his shaft. It was a very human-looking cock and balls. A trail of dark auburn hair ran from his bellybutton to his groin. The same auburn hair dusted over Rohan's chest.

Another one of those little noises.

Did Rohan suspect he was awake? Were the sounds deliberate?

The scent of lust and pre-cum had him hooked. His morning wood was now less a waking reflex and something more demanding. If his hands were free, he might've tried to surreptitiously...

Rohan's hips lifted as he thrust into his fist before coming with a groan. Cum shot out of his cock in thick white strands that splattered on Rohan's muscular stomach. Nate's cock twitched. He wanted to roll onto his stomach and grind against the bed for some friction.

"Did you like what you saw?"

Nate's face burst into flames. He considered lying, but he didn't want to make things worse for himself.

"Yes." He forced the word out and then realized he said it in English. He repeated it in Tarikian.

Rohan rolled onto his side. He rested on one elbow, propping up his head. "What a pity you can't touch your own cock."

"Untie me, and I'll be able to."

Rohan flicked back the blanket, exposing Nate to his gaze. Nate shut his eyes. Until that moment, he'd never worried about the size of his cock. No one had ever complained either. Not that he wanted to fuck Rohan.

No, he wanted to attempt dying on that cock.

Which wasn't like him at all. Size had never been his thing, though he had friends who swore bigger was better when being fucked. He thought it more about the quality of the fucking, less about the size—when he wanted to be fucked.

"I could take care of it for you."

"Uh..." What was the safe answer? Was there one? "Why would you do that?"

"It's not polite to leave you on edge."

He was in a coma. That had to be the answer. And somehow, his panic and fear had turned into a sex dream. If he was lying in a hospital bed somewhere, unconscious, did that mean he had a hard-on?

His gaze skimmed over Rohan's cum splattered abs to his slightly less firm cock. This was what he got for reading some monster romances...erotic monster romances.

Who didn't like the idea of being swept up by a big, strong monster?

After breaking up with his ex, it had been the kind of escapist, unrealistic fiction he'd needed. Especially after teaching literature to kids who'd rather talk about what their favorite celebrity just posted.

If he went with the theory that he was unconscious and this was just a dream, what did it matter what he did? He might as well make the most of it before he woke up and had to deal with the reality of his injuries.

He nodded.

Rohan moved a little closer, reached out, and ran his fingers over Nate's side and to his hip. Nate's breath caught as he waited for him to fulfill his promise. Rohan didn't seem to be in a rush. His thumb smoothed over Nate's hip as if contemplating his next move.

Nate rocked his hips forward and used his feet to inch closer.

Rohan smiled. "What do you want, little human?"

Nate swallowed, wanting to be touched more than he wanted to keep any semblance of pride. He'd stolen and been arrested and tied to a bed and was now being asked to beg. He had friends who'd pay for this experience.

Roll with it.

"Touch me."

“I am.”

Nate closed his eyes. “Please don’t leave me hanging. I want to come...and I hate being teased and begging.”

Rohan’s fingers grazed along the length of Nate’s shaft. “That’s a pity because you look so pretty, all desperate and needy.”

Nate would’ve answered, but Rohan’s fingers wrapped around his cock and gave him a slow stroke, and all that came out of his mouth was a low moan. His hips jerked even though he wanted to remain still.

Rohan’s tongue swept along the underside of Nate’s jaw as he continued to stroke. He tipped his head back, giving Rohan more access. His breath was hot on Nate’s skin, and Nate was at his mercy.

That thought was all it took to push him over the edge. His back arched as he came, the bindings around his wrists pulled tight, and Nate wasn’t sure he was even breathing. He didn’t care.

He opened his eyes as Rohan licked the cum off his fingers. “I wouldn’t mind waking up like that every morning.”

Same.

But Nate didn’t want to admit that in any language.

CHAPTER 7

Rohan kept one hand on Nate's lower back as the horse-drawn chariot took them out of town. His excuse was to steady the human, as he was unfamiliar with chariots and horses.

He had balked like a skittish pony when he saw the chariot, and Rohan had picked him up and placed him in the chariot without giving him a chance to escape. Not that he could go far because the other end of the rope was attached to Rohan's wrist. There were four guards accompanying them. He could've handed Nate over to one of them, but that didn't seem like the right thing to do after this morning.

Not that he was convinced this morning had been the right thing to do, either.

It had been a while since he'd woken up with anyone in his bed, and watching Nate sleep and remembering the way he'd kneeled on the floor while washing had heated his blood. He hadn't expected Nate to wake up and watch.

He hadn't even pretended to not be watching.

Nor had he expected Nate to become so interested. That had been a pleasant surprise, with an even better ending. The way he'd been torn between wanting release and staying silent...

The way his cheeks had turned red.

The way his body had moved as he thrust into Rohan's hand.

They were memories he'd enjoy for a very long time.

With one hand on the leather reins and the other on Nate, it was a little too easy to imagine the human bound in leather instead of rope.

Rohan blew out a breath.

He should not be thinking of Nate that way. For a start, the human didn't belong there. And if there was a doorway to the human world, Rohan was sure the Strega would make Nate return.

Which, logically, was a good solution for everyone.

Though he wanted Nate to spend a year in a day repaying him...and by the end, Nate might have grown fond of him. He resisted the temptation to nuzzle into the back of Nate's head. There would be time for that later, hopefully.

The Strega rode her horse next to the chariot. Today, she was far too quiet, which set Rohan's teeth on edge. It meant she was planning something, or she was intently observing everything, and both meant trouble was on the way.

"It's just up ahead," Nate said. "The forked tree."

Rohan slowed the horses and stopped at the tree. "Two guards will stay here with the horses."

Rohan slung the bag of supplies over one shoulder and led Nate out of the chariot. He jumped down to the ground and drew in a breath as if relieved that part was over.

Dressed in a tunic and long pants, he looked like he belonged. Except for the shoes. It had been quicker and easier to let him wear his boots than to find another suitable

pair. Not only that, but humans, like elves and vampires, didn't like breaking in new boots. As much as his guards appreciated the new issue of clothing, they always grumbled about blisters.

Rohan was glad that he never had to think about shoes.

"Lead the way, Nate," Rohan ordered.

Nate glanced at the guards, the Strega, and then him. He nodded, but he stayed where he was, as if unsure. "What if I remember wrong?"

"Then we will backtrack until you remember right," Rohan said.

Nate frowned and began walking. It became clear he'd followed an animal trail to the road. Given that he enjoyed hiking, Rohan doubted he would become lost, as he knew how to look for landmarks.

One of the guards walked ahead, and the other one took up the rear. Rohan wore a short sword on his belt as well as a dagger, but the most lethal weapon they had with them was the Strega.

"Can I ask why you didn't ride a horse? Is it because you're a prince?"

Rohan laughed. "You ask permission to ask the question, yet ask it anyway?"

"Am I not supposed to?"

There needed to be etiquette lessons in the near future, assuming Nate remained in Calla. "You will learn our ways. I do not ride because it is unfair to the horse. I am large, and my size cannot be hidden."

Nate's cheeks turned pink, as was Rohan's intent.

"It would be cruel on the horse when a chariot serves my purpose. That it is emblazoned with the flower of Calla, and the knotwork is a boon."

"What do the symbols mean?"

"The flower is my family. The knot work identifies the city. Every city-state has different knotwork, and the only people allowed to wear the symbol are those in positions of authority."

"The city guards wear the flower but not the knotwork?"

"Correct. The rulers wear the knotwork. The king, the knight, the Strega, and the head of what you call the city guard, who is actually the leader of the army."

"You wear it."

Rohan smiled. "Because I assist my brother in ruling. Before he became king, I didn't wear it."

They walked in the dappled light, following the trail deeper into the forest. He hadn't walked through the forest and what felt like forever. There was always something else to do. Sometimes, it felt as if he didn't even have time to practice his harp.

Every so often, Nate stopped and checked a tree.

Rohan traced the lines that had been carved into the bark. "What is the mark?"

"It's the letter N in English. How does the magic work? I can speak Tarikian, but I cannot read it."

It was the Strega who responded. “Languages are learned by listening and feeling for the magic. What I did to you speeded up the process.”

Nate snorted and shook his head. “That is not how we learn languages on Earth. It’s my repetition and memorizing the words and grammar.”

That sounded terrible. “If you had kept speaking English to me, I would have learned the basics within a moon.”

Nate stared at him. “You can learn an entire language in a moon...a month?”

“Not all the words and intricacies, but enough to manage. After a few moons, I would be fluent. Learning a written language is harder. How many languages do you speak?”

“Two fluently, one enough to get by... I guess I can add Tarikian to the list. So, three fluent languages. You?”

“Two...I am looking forward to learning your tongue.” He smiled, expecting Nate to give him that look as if he wasn’t sure he was understanding the words correctly.

Nate didn’t disappoint. His eyebrows pinched together as he blushed. And he muttered something in English.

“What is it you do in your world, Nate?” the Strega asked while giving Rohan a look that meant he should stop teasing Nate.

“I’m a teacher.”

“What do you teach?” She continued.

Nate sighed. “Reluctant ten-year-olds.”

Rohan laughed. “What ten-year-old isn’t reluctant to sit in school?”

“You still have schools even though you have magic?” Nate frowned, as he didn’t believe it.

“Of course we do,” the Strega said. “Not everything can be learned with magic.”

“And magic has a cost,” Rohan added.

“What was the cost of me learning Tarikian?” The more Nate used the language, the less he stumbled over words or needed to think to find them. Soon, he would sound as if he belonged there.

“I do not know yet,” the Strega said as if it didn’t matter.

“What does that mean?”

“It means that when she knows the price, she will collect the debt.” Whether it would be him or Nate who owed the favor was up to the Strega to decide.

“How can you not know?” Nate turned to face the Strega, tugging on the rope.

She shrugged. “Because the fate lines are not clear.”

Nate turned to him. “I don’t understand. Am I not understanding the words or the context or...” He exhaled, clearly frustrated.

How could he not understand that some favors were unclear until they were needed?

“Some things cannot be bought with coin. They rely on people keeping their word.

One of us now owes the Strega a favor.”

“But you could not keep your word and disappear?”

“You could... However, breaking your word is a serious matter. Without your word, who are you? Are you an oath breaker, Nate Lee from Wales on Earth?” She put enough magic in those words that Rohan felt it shimmer over his skin.

“No,” Nate said. “But I would rather be told upfront what I am getting myself into.”

“Did you ask that question before you stole the clothing and food?” Rohan gave the rope a little tug.

“It was that or die.”

“So to keep the oath to yourself to live, you took a chance knowing that there would be a debt to pay later, even though you didn’t know the size of the debt,” the Strega said.

“I guess, when you put it like that.” Nate didn’t sound convinced.

“What would’ve happened in your world? How do your rulers deal with thieves?” How different were their worlds? Knowing that would help him understand Nate.

“The...police,” he said, an English word. “The city guard arrests thieves and charges them. Then, they face trial and are found either innocent or guilty. If they’re guilty, they’re locked in a cell for a time.” He frowned as if that wasn’t quite the entire explanation.

It was enough that Rohan understood, though. “And how did they make reparation to the victims?”

“They don’t, not directly. When their time is served, they are free.”

The Strega made a noise as if she thought that was a stupid idea. “And how does locking the thief up help with the victims or the thief?”

“The thief doesn’t want to be punished again, so they don’t steal?” Not even Nate sounded sure.

“Would you prefer to sit in a cell for a year and a day or be useful and perhaps learn something?” The Strega glanced at Nate.

Nate shrugged. “I’d be bored sitting in a cell. But there was no trial. I didn’t have a chance to speak for myself.”

“You were wearing the clothes and had just finished eating the stolen food...what would you have said to defend yourself?” Did Nate believe he had been unfairly punished?

“That I needed to survive.”

“What about the person whose cloak you were wearing? Did they not need it? Did the seller of the food not need the coin to feed his family? Why does your survival matter more than the survival of those you stole from?” Rohan pressed.

“It doesn’t.” Nate stared at the ground. “Back home, people complain when thieves get light sentences, but while locked up, they just learn how to be better thieves. And it’s harder for them to find work afterwards, which means they’re more likely to steal to survive. What happens when my year and a day is over?”

“You will be found work. Teachers are always in demand, and even if you only teach about Earth, there are many who would be interested because it has changed since we

last roamed between the worlds.” The Strega nodded as if that was exactly what Nate would do once his debt was repaid.

“And no one will care that I stole?” That note of disbelief filled the human’s voice.

“Why would they? You will have worked hard to repay your debt and your reputation.” What Nate would do over that time, Rohan hadn’t decided. And he couldn’t keep the human tied to his bed unless Nate wanted to be there.

Or was ready to admit he wanted to be there.

“Ah...” Nate nodded. “The year and a day is to prove myself to the community.”

Rohan put his hand on Nate’s shoulder. “Yes, and your sentence was lightened because you did it to survive.”

They turned to follow the river until Nate stopped near a pile of rocks and a fallen tree. “This is where I woke up. I think the rocks came through with me. I walked all around here trying to go back...” He shook his head. “I tried for two days until the food I had with me ran out.”

“How did you determine you weren’t at home?” The Strega walked around the rocks twice before picking one up.

“Because this area looks nothing like where I was hiking. There should be mountains. The trees are different. And I had no reception on my...” Nate made a hand gesture and brought it to his ear. “Phone. It’s a tool used for communicating over long distances. The stars are different, too. That’s when it really hit that something was wrong.”

Rohan didn’t know what he’d have done if he’d suddenly found himself on a

different world, not knowing the language and with no way back.

“I was still hoping I was wrong, and that when I found the road, I’d find a town... And then I thought I was dead and this was my afterlife. Or maybe I’m unconscious, and this is all in my mind.” Nate pressed his lips together and glanced at Rohan. “But it all feels too real, and if it is a dream, since I know it’s a dream, I should be able to change the dream?”

Rohan considered Nate. Despite everything, he’d tried to solve the problem. “Is that what you were doing this morning, trying to change the dream?”

Nate blushed. “That was me giving in. If this is a dream that I can’t change, I might as well enjoy it. If I’m unconscious, then I will wake up eventually. And if all of this is real, then I need to find a way to live with it all.” He lifted his bound hands. “My wrists are chafing. Perhaps something softer?”

Rohan gave him a lazy smile. “I had been thinking much the same.”

Nate’s eyes widened.

“There is no doorway here. Though there is residual magic indicating there was a temporary one.” The Strega dropped the rock. “It wasn’t created on this side.”

Rohan put his hand on his hip. “Is that even possible?”

“It appears so.” She didn’t seem very happy about that. “There is little magic on that side, so I don’t know how it was made.” She fixed her gaze on Nate. “Were you hiking with a god? Did you run into one?”

Nate shook his head. “No. My friends are human. There was thunder and then a rockslide.”

“The god of thunder, by his many names, is with one of my sisters. It was not him.” She crossed her arms. “I do not like this. Doorways should not open without reason, and they should not open from your side.” She pointed at Nate.

“Can we go to another doorway...maybe if you come to my world, you can find the answers you want.” There was a note of desperation in Nate’s voice.

Rohan wanted to see him happy, yet at the same time, he wasn’t ready to let him go. Nor could he go to the human world, as it had become inhospitable to beings from Tariko some centuries ago.

“The nearest doorway is over a moon away and through two city-states. Politically difficult.”

“It’s my only way home. Please.”

Rohan lowered his head. “No one has crossed to your world in a long time. It is too dangerous because your people began to slaughter mine. That doorway is guarded, a remnant from the last war. Had you come through there, they would have killed you.”

“But you can ask?” Nate pleaded.

“There are no humans in that city-state. They do not allow them to live.” The Strega said. “You could try pleading your case to the gods. Though there will be a price. Consider your options as your debts are mounting.”

“You will need to serve your year and a day before making a new deal, Nate.” Making a deal with a god was a dangerous thing and not something Nate should do before he understood the rules around magic and gods.

Nate tipped his face to the sky and shouted. “I fucking hate this place!”

Rohan didn't speak English, but there was more than enough intent and magic that the meaning was clear.

Nate would rather be anywhere else than there.

CHAPTER 8

Gods were real.

There were doorways between worlds.

Magic and mythological creatures existed.

And so did debts and deals and danger.

Nate gripped the edge of the chariot and tried not to focus on the way Rohan's body bumped into him with every rock the chariot made. No, it wasn't Rohan bouncing around; it was him because he couldn't keep his balance. Rohan had kept his hand on his back on the way out of town, now it seemed he no longer wanted to touch him. Which shouldn't matter.

Rohan was a minotaur. He shouldn't want to be touched by him, but he wanted the reassurance of his hand.

Everything was so fucking messed up. He screwed his eyes shut. They might all be lying to him, and how would he know? He knew nothing of magic or doorways.

The chariot bounced, and Nate stumbled, smacking his elbow on the side. He swore, and several things happened at once. Rohan called out, the chariot stopped, and Nate landed on the floor, staring up Rohan's tunic...again. His vision blurred, and he brushed a couple of stray tears off his face.

“Fuck.” He switched to Tarikian. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to be difficult.”

Was Rohan regretting buying his debt already?

The Strega and the prince hadn’t learned anything from him. He was useless.

Rohan squatted and swept his thumb over Nate’s cheek. “Are you hurt?”

“No.” He shook his head, then sighed. He was hurting in his heart, though that wasn’t what Rohan was asking. “My elbow will be fine.”

There was nothing funny about hitting the funny bone. The ache radiated up his arm and made his stomach tight.

The guards talked amongst themselves before one turned. “Your Highness, one of the horses has a stone. I will unhitch and?—”

“We are close. We will walk. See to the horses and chariot.” Rohan stood and offered Nate his hand.

Nate took it and winced. His elbow throbbed. He didn’t want to walk. He wanted to lie in the middle of the road and give up. He’d had a few rough patches in his life, but this was something else, and there was nothing he could do. He couldn’t change jobs, ditch a boyfriend, or work harder or anything...

Rohan helped him down. He nodded at the Strega. “Will I see you at the palace?”

“You will.” She urged her horse on, and Nate watched her leave.

They were on the edges of the town, so it couldn’t be far.

“Come. Perhaps a little walk while we watch the sunset will ease your anger and pain.” Rohan put his hand on Nate’s lower back. “I should not have let you fall.”

“I should have held on better.”

“You had other things on your mind and are not familiar with?—”

“Could you stop being so nice and understanding? I just...” Nate huffed. He didn’t know what he wanted. “I’m sorry. You bought my debt and have given me the language, and I’m being overly dramatic.” That’s what his ex called him. He needed to be buttoned up and in charge of a class five days a week, and at home, all he wanted to do was relax.

“You lost your home for a second time. I am not sure I would cope any better.”

He hated Rohan for being so perfectly logical and sensible and calm. That he was always halfway to smiling...how the fuck did he smile when he had a head like a bull...not that he was an expert in bulls. “I have no doubt that if you walked through a doorway, someone on my side would attack and kill you out of fear. Here, once I put the tunic and cloak on, I looked like I belonged.”

“Perhaps when it is not so raw, you can tell me more about your world and speak English to me so that I might learn.”

“You don’t need to humor me.”

“The Strega believes you are here for that reason.”

“Did she tell you that over lunch?” Nate had sat with a guard while the Strega and Rohan had discussed things just out of earshot. They had both worn serious faces, and soon after, they had packed up for the return trip.

“Amongst other things.”

“Such as?” Nate pressed. If they’d discussed doorways and such, it concerned him.

“Such as things for the rulers of the city, not naughty humans who haven’t learned the rules.” There was that smile again, as if Rohan were thinking of something very different.

Nate was sure he hadn’t misread some of the double meanings, but he couldn’t be certain because while he spoke and understood Tarikian, there must be a hundred small nuances he didn’t comprehend.

“I’m not sure how to respond.”

“How do you want to respond?” Rohan’s smile widened.

How was he supposed to answer that? “Am I misreading your words? Hearing hints where there is nothing else intended?”

“And what are you hearing?” Rohan teased.

Nate shook his head and glanced away. His cheeks heated. Behind them walked a guard who was no doubt watching.

Rohan’s hand slid lower, and his fingers brushed over Nate’s ass cheek. “You hear my intent correctly.”

Nate lifted his bound hands. “And this doesn’t bother you?”

“I will arrange something new so your wrists do not become sore.” Rohan used the rope to lift Nate’s hands to his lips and kissed his knuckles. “I bought your debt, not

you. You are free to refuse.”

“You are a prince.”

“That does not grant me free rein over my subjects. I follow the same laws as everyone else. If you do not wish to sleep in my bed, I will have a pallet made up on the floor.”

“And you won’t be upset?”

“You are asking if there will be retribution? No. I will find a purpose for you to repay the debt. Probably in the realm of teaching. There will only be problems if you attempt to flee the city or engage in other illegal activities.”

They rounded a corner and entered a square filled with market stalls. People lowered their heads as Rohan walked by. He smiled and nodded and spoke to a few people. Nate felt as though he was on display, paraded through the market for all to see as if he were the minotaur’s pet.

“I don’t know the rules,” Nate whispered.

“And that is why I am keeping you close.” Rohan gave the rope a tug. “You cannot get into trouble while attached to me or my bed.”

Nate glanced around, worried that someone might overhear. But the markets were noisy, and after acknowledging Rohan’s presence, everyone returned to what they were doing.

“I think you like me tied to your bed.” He hoped the intent came through. That if Rohan insisted on teasing him, he’d tease back.

And hopefully, he wouldn't get in trouble.

Rohan laughed. "I think you enjoy being there."

Nate had nothing to say to that because he did. Crossing between worlds had unlocked a door inside of himself that he had only ever peeked through and flung it open. It was not hard to walk through at all.

CHAPTER 9

“ W hen you said bath, I thought you meant in a bathroom.” Nate eyed all the tiled surfaces and the steam rising out of what was more like a small swimming pool. It reminded him of the Roman baths he’d seen as a kid.

He rubbed his wrist. The skin was raw in places from the rope, and he carefully stretched his arms.

“This is the bathing room.” Rohan pulled his tunic off and dropped it into a basket. “That is for dirty clothes. You may put your shoes beneath the bench.” He stood there, not caring that he was naked with everything on display.

“So we bathe together?”

“Yes. Do you not? Who washes your hair?”

“Me. I wash alone. Except...” He couldn’t find the word. “After exercising, there are communal showers, but no one is looking or helping.” Most of the time, anyway, but he wasn’t about to discuss hookups.

“Undress, and I will show you how to bathe the Tarikian way.” His dark eyes glinted as if there might be more than bathing.

He’d have welcomed a rule upload along with the language upload.

He pulled off the tunic and put it in the basket, then sat to undo his boots and pull off

the socks he'd been given.

Rohan waited. He cracked his neck and then his back. His muscles flexed with each move. He was all power and yet so gentle.

Yet there was a part of Nate that questioned the attraction. The power imbalance. The difference in their...species?

He unlaced his pants and pulled them down, aware that Rohan watched his every move with more than casual interest. He was not that buff, and he'd lost weight over the five. No, six days that he'd been there.

Aside from being an oddity who didn't belong, Nate wasn't sure why Rohan was so intrigued. Did it matter why?

Why was he questioning everything so much?

This morning, it had been much easier to pretend he was in a coma or something and that this wasn't real. But it was, and this was his life for the next year and half a day. And it was better to be a minotaur's pet than to labor for vampires or humans.

This way, he could teach and learn.

Rohan's gaze drifted up to Nate's face. That smile danced over his lips again, and he wasn't hiding the heat in his eyes.

Nate tossed the pants in the washing basket. "Do you like what you see?"

"I do," Rohan said with a small nod before turning and walking away. "Follow."

Nate obeyed.

A man with pointed ears and long brown hair, wearing a simple robe, was in the main room. He inclined his head at Rohan. “I have gathered your favorites. Your new friend will need to make a selection.”

“He is used to bathing on his own, so will have the full experience.”

“Wait...what is the full experience?” What was he getting signed up for?

The elf smiled and appraised him, no doubt taking in the marks on his wrist and the bruises on his arms and legs from the rockfall. “Hair, nails, shave, wash, rinse, massage.”

Nate touched his jaw. It would be nice to shave, and his fingernails were a mess. He nodded but gave Rohan a look for using that tone when saying the full experience.

Rohan smiled, then walked over to the bath and down the steps. The water just covered his junk. Then he sat with a groan.

The elf picked up a rolled towel and placed it behind Rohan’s head.

Rohan tipped his head back and closed his eyes. “Make your selection, Nate, then join me in the bath.”

“What am I choosing?”

But the elf was already walking toward a set of shelves. Each glass pot was neatly labeled in the script Nate couldn’t read.

“I don’t read Tarikian.” He hated admitting that. If he was stuck here for a year, he needed to learn to read.

The elf gave him another look. This time, loaded with more concern. “Where did he find you?”

“In a tavern.”

The elf picked a jar off the shelf. “Were you raised by the rats in the rubbish?”

He was about to argue, but it wasn’t said with malice, and there was something about it that suggested it was a common phrase.

“This one? Or...” He reached for another jar and took off the lid. “This one?”

Nate sniffed both. The first one was more floral, the other woodier. “The second.”

“I will gather the rest based on that. You can try other scents another time, but sniffing all of them now will only muddy your nose.” The elf motioned him away.

With nothing else to do, Nate crossed the floor to the bath. Steam rose off the water, and he stepped in cautiously. The water was hot, but not unpleasantly so. Like everything else in the palace, from the chairs to the bed, it was minotaur-sized. If he sat on the bottom, he’d drown, so he sat on the step.

“There is a ledge opposite me for sitting.” Rohan didn’t open his eyes.

Nate moved around. The cut on his leg stung, as did his wrists. “How is the water heated?”

“Magic.”

“How often is the water changed?” Or was he sitting in unchlorinated people soup?

Rohan lifted his head, eyes open. “It is cleaned after every use...do your people wash in dirty water?”

“No...I was just trying to understand how it works. At home, I shower. Um...A spout that makes rain. You stand under it. And the water isn’t heated by magic.”

“And you are alone. It sounds terrible.”

The elf placed a towel behind Nate’s head, and he let his head fall back. “Not everyone could afford all of this.”

“Everyone has family or friends. No, no.” Rohan waved the elf away. “Start with Nate. He needs the most attention.”

Great, now he wouldn’t have the chance to see what happened first.

The elf dropped his robe and joined them in the bath. Nate swallowed, all relaxation gone.

“If you could sit up, I’ll wash your hair first.” The elf moved efficiently, pouring water over his head and then using a bar of what looked like soap to lather his hair, all the while giving him what had to be the best head massage of his life. His fingers worked into knots at the base of his skull and his jaw. By the time elf rinsed his hair, Nate wanted to melt.

The elf picked up a cloth and washed his back and arms before guiding him to lean back. Nate didn’t resist, resting his head on the towel. Next came the shave. He didn’t open his eyes even as the blade swept over his skin.

“Would you like other areas shaved?” the elf murmured when he was done.

“What? No.” The words out of his mouth were English. He repeated his refusal in Tarikian.

Rohan laughed. “We didn’t need the translation. The meaning was clear.”

The elf picked up Nate’s hand and began trimming and cleaning his nails, pushing back the quick with a tool that must have been designed for the job. There was no way Nate could have used the little knife-like thing to trim his own nails, not without shedding blood.

The elf moved onto Nate’s other hand and then his feet before washing his chest and abs. And while Nate tried to relax, he became aware of Rohan watching. He peeked beneath his lashes to confirm that was the case. It was. And Rohan’s cock had risen. The elf had to have noticed.

“I can do the rest.”

“Are you worried that I have never seen a prick or washed one?”

Nate tried not to cringe. “I am not comfortable being washed yet. This is new to me.”

The elf moved around to wash Rohan’s hair as if it didn’t matter. He took his time giving Rohan the same scalp massage that he’d gotten. And while Rohan’s eyes were closed, Nate took the opportunity to watch both of them.

“What are you considering, Nate?” Rohan asked without opening his eyes.

The elf said something in another language, and Rohan smiled. Was the elf making fun of him?

He wasn’t about to share his thoughts. He didn’t want to discuss his attraction to

Rohan or his confusion over how society worked. “Just thinking.”

“You are supposed to be relaxing. Bathing is a time to enjoy and connect, not for solving problems.”

“It’s social?”

“Yes.” Rohan cracked open one eye. “You can ask your questions. It is the only way you will learn.”

That was good in theory. “I don’t want to be offensive.”

“Are you intending to offend?” Rohan asked.

“No.”

“Then what is the problem?”

The elf rinsed Rohan’s hair, then washed his skin, running his hands over Rohan’s back and arms. Rohan turned and leaned back as the elf kept going, washing his chest and abs, before running the cloth over Rohan’s erection and then his balls as if it were normal.

Did bathing come with a happy ending?

Is that what was going on here?

Rohan murmured something, and the elf nodded, wading out of the bath and slipping on his robe.

“Um...” Nate moved over to Rohan’s side of the bath. “Am I misunderstanding this?”

Does he...”

Rohan smiled. “Have sex? If he feels like it, and if the bather wants it.”

“It’s not his job?”

“Certainly not.”

“But he’s allowed to and won’t lose his job?”

“Of course he can.”

“But what if someone...” Nate frowned. “Where I come from, there are rules that people in charge can’t sleep with workers because they might coerce them.” Finding the words wasn’t always easy. It was like he couldn’t quite remember them.

“Your people coerce others?”

“Yes.” And worse.

“I have concerns about your world. No wonder you were troubled about me buying your debt. But consider this, why would anyone want a reluctant or unwilling partner?”

“I don’t know. But it happens...” He kneeled on the tiles next to Rohan, remembering the way he’d asked, as if to be sure Nate had wanted his touch to come. “And it’s okay to be... gay ...” There wasn’t the word. “For men to like men?”

“Non-breeding pairs occur. Two men, two women. A werewolf and anyone else. Not all couplings result in children.” Rohan shrugged. “No one troubles themselves with who someone loves. Why would they?”

“You’d be surprised,” Nate muttered in English. He went to sit back on his haunches, but the water was too deep.

“If you want, you may sit on my thigh, as I’d prefer it if you didn’t drown and make extra work for the attendant.”

Nate eyed the massive cock.

“I am offering you comfort, nothing more. You really were raised by rats.”

“My parents are lovely. They’ll be wondering where I am.” They’d take one look at Rohan and scream. If Rohan had gone through the doorway by accident, no one would be helping him adapt. He’d be dead.

“I am sorry about that. But requesting a favor from a god will carry a high cost, and you cannot take on another debt, especially one that may not be known until the favor is collected.”

Nate wasn’t ready for another debt. He needed to treat this as a holiday. A sabbatical to learn about another culture.

He perched on Rohan’s thigh instead of going back to his side of the bath. The minotaur’s thigh was warm and hard beneath him.

“You cannot relax like that.” Rohan lifted him and turned him so Nate’s back rested against Rohan’s chest. His cock brushed against Nate’s thigh, and he was very tempted to wrap his fingers around it to appreciate the size. “All your troubles will still be there when you get out of the bath. Close your eyes, little human.”

Nate rested his head on Rohan’s shoulder, but relaxing was impossible because he was so aware of Rohan. The way his chest lifted as he breathed. The hair on his thigh

tickled Nate's skin.

Rohan's nose nuzzled at his neck, and his tongue flicked beneath his freshly shaven jaw. "I can smell your desire."

A part of him wanted to pull away and climb out of the bath. But what would that achieve? Or prove?

What did staying prove?

"And?" The word fell off his tongue.

"And I like it. Have your massage before I am tempted to do more than you are comfortable with."

"How do you know what I am comfortable with?"

"I think it is easier for you to let go when your hands are bound...though you may not be ready to admit that, either."

CHAPTER 10

Rohan had enjoyed watching the elf work the tension out of Nate's muscles and making his skin gleam with oil. It had been even better when the human had turned onto his back, and his hard cock slapped against his belly, causing his face and chest to turn red.

While he hadn't put the rope around Nate's wrists for the robed walk to Rohan's chambers, he had kept a hand on the back of his neck.

On the low table in the outer room were the items he'd requested. He released Nate and shut the door.

"What is that?" Nate appeared rooted to the spot.

"A replacement for the rope." Rohan picked up the leather leash.

"Not that, the collar." He pointed at the other piece of leather.

"Then you know what it is."

"No." He shook his head and backed away. "I'm not going to run away."

Rohan held up the collar. "It bears the red flower of the house of Calla, placing you under its protection, and will give you some leeway should you make an error. Though I prefer that you remain within the palace walls for at least one turn of the moon."

“I had no intention of leaving them, so I don’t need it. You can’t collar me like you own me.”

“It’s not ownership. You cannot own another person.”

Nate stared at him.

Rohan lowered his hands, a sick feeling taking over his stomach. “You can own people in your world?”

“Not anymore, but in the past... You never could here?”

“No, Nate.”

“Oh, so this place is perfect?”

Rohan shook his head. “If Tariko were perfect, there would be no wars or violence. All diseases would be curable, and no one would go hungry. But we value free will, love, and respect, and we understand that actions have consequences, the same as magic. I am troubled that you do not share the same values.”

Nate’s shoulders slumped. “We have different expectations of normality.”

“We do. And I dislike the sound of your world.” It seemed callous.

Nate nodded. “I understand. I don’t like all of it either. But I am taking your word that the collar is not ownership.”

“Yes. Is my word not good enough?”

Nate opened his mouth. “People break their word all the time.”

“Should I swear in front of an elf?”

“What would that change?”

“An elf can make the words binding, so if they are broken, it becomes painful. I am within my rights to ask you to swear your loyalty for the year. Accidents happen, Nate. Think carefully.”

The human man frowned as he fought an internal battle. Rohan didn't like the binding words of elves or vampire compulsions, but he understood their place and their many uses.

Nate jerked his head in a nod. “I will wear it.”

“Will you attempt to uphold your words?”

“Yes. I...I think promises are more easily given and broken in my world.”

“You lack the magic for there to be consequences.” Rohan walked toward him.

Nate turned, allowing him to fit the collar. “Perhaps.”

The collar was a narrow strip of leather, with a stamped disk hanging from the center, with a simple clasp Nate would be able to undo. “I am trusting you to wear this.”

“I understand.”

Rohan turned him and tipped his chin, forcing Nate to look him in the eye. “Do you? I am offering you the protection of my family. Your behavior reflects on my family.”

Nate nodded.

“Say it.”

“I accept your protection and understand the responsibility.” His lips remained parted as if he sensed something different in the words.

“You tasted magic on your tongue for the first time.” He tapped Nate’s chest. “If you speak with your heart instead of trying to think of the right word, you will not stumble so often.”

Nate touched the collar and the disk with the red flower stamped on the center. “You make it sound easy. You have lived your entire life with magic and think nothing of it. It is like...like air.”

“Magic is a part of all of us. Part of our society. The gods are direct conduits and are very powerful. They see the world differently than the rest of us. The Strega are connected to the magic, and together, they have the power of a god. Elves and vampires can draw little threads of it while the rest of us can sense it, taste it, and appreciate it. You will learn.”

“I want to learn, but every question leads to ten more.”

Rohan smiled. At least Nate was curious and wanted to learn. Unlike some of the others the Strega had told him about. “That is usually what happens. The more you learn, the more you realize how much you do not know.”

“I have one more collar-related question.”

“Then ask it. No one will reprimand you for asking, though they may not have the answer, or they may not have the time to explain in that moment.”

Something flickered over Nate’s face. Was it shock or a memory that he didn't want

to share?

He touched the collar again. “This isn’t a sex thing?”

Rohan laughed. “No. Though, there is a place in the city that allows people to surrender control. It is run by vampires. Some people go for the bite, which can be euphoric. Others enjoy taking the experience further.”

“Euphoric?”

That was the bit he got stuck on?

“Would you like to experience the bite?”

“No...” Nate shook his head, but the color of his cheeks and the scent of his skin told a different story. He winced. “Maybe? Have you?”

“Yes. Though they do not like my blood.”

“And you’d let me?”

“You are not mine to control.”

His eyebrows pinched together. “You paid my debt but don’t own me. I sleep in your bed, and...and more? But then the bath? And you’d let me be bitten?”

“You are confusing me, human. Dress so we can have dinner.” Before he was tempted to make sure Nate went to dinner smelling of him.

“What is between us?”

Rohan cupped Nate's jaw, enjoying the smoothness of his skin. "There is an attraction, is there not?"

Nate gave a single nod. "Why?"

"My brother will say it is because I like my men small and pretty. Which is true." He was glad his brother was king, not him, and already had two heirs. "Or was that a question for yourself?"

Nate closed his eyes. "Both."

Rohan lowered his head and kissed him. It was more like a whisper than a proper kiss, giving Nate the time to pull away. He didn't. His lips parted, inviting Rohan in. And he took the invitation. He stepped in closer. One hand cupping Nate's jaw and the other on his hip. It had taken everything he'd had not to do the same in the bath. To touch him and ask to be touched.

Nate's hands pressed against his chest, finding the gap in the robe. That wasn't the only thing that found the gap. His erection brushed against Nate's robe as if seeking an opening in his. Nate made a little noise and moved his body to rub against Rohan's cock.

"You either pull away now, or you go to dinner smelling of my cum."

CHAPTER 11

The smart thing was to pull away. Nate knew that, but he seemed incapable of taking that step back. Rohan's tongue slid against his, fucking his mouth. Instead of breaking the minotaur's hold, he reached for the hard length pressing against his stomach, running his fingertips over the hot flesh, before finally grasping it. His breath caught, even though he'd known his fingers wouldn't meet.

"Last chance," Rohan said.

Nate's heartbeat quickened. "It's not going to fit."

Not today, anyway, but he could work up to it.

Rohan laughed, that low rumble that now made Nate's toes curl against the wood floor. "I never said I was going to fuck you. Not yet, anyway." He pushed the robe off Nate's shoulders, and it slid to the floor, leaving him naked.

This was very different from being naked in the bath.

This time, Rohan intended to do a lot more than look. And so did he. He wasn't tied to the bed, and his hands were free.

"Humans are more delicate than vampires and elves," Rohan finished as he stripped off his own robe and cast it aside.

Nate dropped to his knees and glanced up. Once again, he was struck by Rohan's

size. The minotaur towered over him. His thick thighs bracketed his cock, which bowed under its own weight, reaching for Nate's mouth as though it wanted to be licked.

He ran his tongue around the head and over the slit. Yeah, it wasn't going to fit in his mouth, but that wasn't going to stop him from trying. With one hand, he stroked the shaft, and with the other, he cupped Rohan's heavy sac. Memories of cum splashing onto Rohan's chest filled his mind.

The thick white strands as they'd landed on his chest...

Rohan's fingers threaded into his hair, cupping his head as he licked and sucked on the head. "Do you want a taste?"

Nate nodded, lapping at the slit.

Rohan gripped his cock, his fingers wrapping all the way around as he gave himself two firm strokes. Pre-cum beaded out of the tip. Nate lapped it up as Rohan watched.

"If we had more time, I would let you continue until I came. I want to see you swallow everything I spill." He gave himself another stroke. "From the moment you sat at my feet, I have wanted you like this." He held Nate's head as he pressed the head of his cock into Nate's mouth.

With his jaw stretched wide and his head held tight, there wasn't anywhere for him to go. And there was nothing he could do. He made a noise as he stared up at Rohan.

The minotaur's eyes were dark with lust. He gave his cock another couple of strokes, and pre-cum spilled onto Nate's tongue.

"That's it. Swallow. And I'll let you go."

He did—what else was he going to do—and Rohan released him, his cock slapping the side of Nate’s face. Rohan smiled, then reached down and picked him up.

Nate let out a gasp, not used to being thrown around with such ease. But before he could draw breath, Rohan sat on the sofa, positioning Nate on his lap with his legs spread. Rohan’s cock rose up in front of him. Dark and ruddy, the head slick with spit. For one heartbeat, all Nate wanted to do was attempt to sink onto it, even though it would be a monumental mistake.

Rohan wrapped his arm around Nate’s chest, holding him close as if to stop him from doing something stupid. Then he wrapped his other hand around both dicks and stroked, giving Nate a front-row seat to the show.

“Mmm. You look good spread out like this.” Rohan moved his legs apart, spreading Nate’s thighs further.

Something tickled the back of Nate’s upper thigh and he flinched.

“Tail,” Rohan said as he pinched Nate’s nipple.

Rohan’s tail traced over his ass cheek, finding his crack and then his hole. Nate drew in a breath as the tip of Rohan’s tail teased his rim. Rohan’s hand swept over the head of his cock, swiping up the leaking pre-cum and slicking his strokes. He adjusted his grip so Nate was barely being touched.

Nate reached down to help.

“Put your hands around my neck.”

Nate hesitated, and Rohan pinched his nipple again.

“Ow.” He squirmed but couldn’t escape.

“Hands.”

“Fine.” Nate lifted his arms and held the back of Rohan’s neck, the ends of his hair brushing his fingers, but Rohan didn’t adjust his grip. He teased the head of Nate’s cock with his thumb but offered no relief. Nate rocked his hips, desperate for more, his cock sliding against Rohan’s much larger one. Watching Rohan slide his hand over his cock, while his tail tormented his hole was almost too much.

“So pretty on display. Your needy little cock rubbing against mine. Are you going to make me come?”

“Yes.” He kept thrusting, grinding his cock against the much thicker minotaur’s.

“You want to wear my cum to dinner so everyone will know how much you wanted it?” Rohan’s thumb brushed over the head of Nate’s aching dick.

“Yes.” He’d agree to anything for another touch.

Rohan groaned as he came. Thick white ribbons splashed onto Nate’s belly and chest, each stroke drawing out another stream.

What would it be like to swallow it all? Would he be able to? There was so much more...

Rohan released both dicks, and Nate whimpered. He never whimpered and begged. Or at least he hadn’t.

Rohan ran his fingers through the mess and brought them to Nate’s lips. He opened his mouth, sucking the slightly bitter cum off them without being told. Rohan did it

again, giving Nate another taste. The third time he coated his fingers, he dipped them between Nate's thighs. Nate expected to feel them against his hole, but the touch didn't come. Instead, Rohan held his hip.

He was three seconds away from letting go of Rohan's neck and finishing himself when something slick and firm pressed against his hole.

The tail.

It thrust in, fucking him, brushing over his prostate on each withdrawal and sinking deeper with each thrust.

"Oh, fuck." Nate tipped his head back and closed his eyes.

Rohan smoothed his hand over Nate's chest, smearing the cum over his skin, working his way lower over his stomach as his tail fucked him. It wasn't enough...

"Please."

"I'm getting there." His cum-slick hand glided over Nate's belly. "What do you want?"

"I want to come."

"And my tail isn't enough?"

"No."

Both of Rohan's hands caressed him, rubbing the cum into his skin. There was no need to wipe it off. Nate rocked his hips.

The tail slid out of him and was replaced with something thicker. One finger, and then a second, pushed into him, stretching his hole as Rohan grasped Nate's cock. Displayed and open for the minotaur's pleasure, there was nothing he could do. Rohan curled his fingers, and Nate fell apart with a cry.

Rohan caught the cum in his hand and licked his palm clean with a single swipe of his tongue. Then he gently turned Nate's head and kissed him, his cum-coated tongue sliding deep.

Nate swallowed. Spent and breathing fast.

Rohan nuzzled at his neck. "You need to dress."

"I can't move." And Rohan still had his fingers in his ass.

"Then I guess I can do whatever I want." He fucked him with his fingers, making him groan as another trickle of cum escaped. "And when we are late, I'll have to say how greedy you were."

Nate made a small noise of protest, only to have it turn into another moan.

"I can't wait until I have three fingers inside you, stretching you ready to take my cock."

"You're doing this deliberately so I can't get up."

Rohan chuckled. "You want a third finger now?"

"Yes," he gasped. He wasn't sure he could take a third finger...but he wanted to try. "Don't we need to dress?"

“We do.” He lifted Nate off him and set him on his knees, face down on the sofa. His tongue swept over Nate’s cum-slicked hole and pushed in as though they didn’t need to go anywhere.

He gasped and squirmed, but Rohan had him pinned with one hand between his shoulder blades. Two fingers pressed back into his ass, fucking slowly, separating and stretching him. Then Rohan added a third finger.

Nate hissed. That was not like having three human fingers in his ass.

Rohan’s hand smoothed over his back as his fingers moved. “If I hadn’t come already, I’d hold you open and fill you. Press the head of my cock hard up against your hole so it opens even if it won’t let me in.”

Nate groaned, his cock hardening from the image Rohan was painting and the way he was tormenting him with his fingers.

“You’d sit at dinner with your ass full of cum and either hold it in or let it leak out.” Rohan pulled his fingers out. “Another time.”

Nate lay there, face on the sofa, dick hard and ready to go. Not quite sure how he’d ended up as the minotaur’s new sex toy or why he was enjoying it so much.

Rohan pulled him up and set him on his feet. He held him close and kissed his temple. “I am so glad I found you.”

“Same.” His words were muffled by Rohan’s chest.

Maybe it was because, for the first time in Nate’s life, he had no responsibilities.

CHAPTER 12

“ I finally get to meet your new pet,” Sebah said as Rohan walked into the dining room with Nate close behind.

That was about the worst thing his brother could’ve said after Rohan had been telling Nate that he was his own man. And while Sebah meant it in jest, Rohan felt Nate bristle.

“Brother, he is not my?—”

“You are always finding little things to rescue,” Ireni said with a sweet smile. Her eyes betrayed her concern.

“I cannot help if the fate lines draw them to me.” Rohan turned, wishing that he hadn’t given in to desire and that Nate didn’t smell of sex and cum. He would take the lesson to heart—no more fucking before dinner, in case his brother decided to show. “This is Nate, from Earth.”

Sebah considered Nate for longer than was polite. But then he was the king, and no one was going to pull him up on it.

“Nate, sit with me and let the brothers butt heads,” the Strega said from the end of the table. Except her. She had the power to argue with the king in public and put Sebah firmly in place.

Nate jumped as though he hadn’t noticed her there. Rohan gave him a gentle push in

the Strega's direction and watched him leave. He hadn't been avoiding his brother...though he hadn't been expecting him to be at supper. Most of the time, they dined with their children.

"You brought a thief into our home," Ireni said.

"He isn't from Tariko. I couldn't leave him to struggle."

Seba frowned. "All the more reason to be cautious. He is the kind of temptation someone might set to create trouble."

Rohan opened his mouth to argue, but Sebah placed a hand on his arm. "The Strega has assured that is not the case. For which I am glad, though I am questioning the way he is repaying his debt."

His nostrils flared in warning at his brother's insinuation. "He will repay it by teaching about his world. Anything else is by mutual desire." His gaze flicked to Nate, who was talking to the Strega. Nate must have felt his stare because he turned his head and smiled. "I am disappointed you think so little of me."

"I worry your heart will lead you into trouble."

"Better to have a heart that finds trouble than to live without both."

"True. He is not to roam unattended," Ireni said. Her concern was for her children, and there was no malice specifically toward Nate.

"I have explained that to him, and I have assigned two guards. He has sworn to obey the rules I have set."

"Did he swear by elf?" Sebah pressed.

“No. That will not be necessary.” He didn’t want it to be needed. A forced vow was only kept out of threat of pain, and he didn’t want that from Nate.

Sebah placed his hand on Rohan’s shoulder. Their horns tapped in a warning Rohan would heed. If there were trouble, it was his head at risk. “I pray you are right.” Then he leaned in. “And I pray that your heart has not led you astray. A human from Earth? There are those who believe them nothing but stories.”

“His people think much the same of us.”

Ireni tilted her head. “Interesting. Perhaps he will share some of those stories with us.”

“The Strega believes he is here to remind us of Earth, so we can learn how it has changed since our stories were first told.” Perhaps it’s time to make some new tales. Though why they needed to learn about Earth, Rohan wasn’t sure. Neither was the Strega, which was far more concerning.

“If more Earth humans are going to wander across, then we need to learn something about them and their language,” Sebah conceded. “He is your responsibility.”

“I am aware,” Rohan said dryly.

Sebah grunted. “Perhaps next time you might consider asking before buying out someone’s debt?”

“If not for the Strega’s request...”

Nate laughed, and Rohan turned, a smile forming on his lips. Nate would have caught his eye regardless, though it would’ve been harder to argue with the guards, and he’d have needed the knight to intervene.

“While it was her request, you need it, so clear it with the knight,” Sebah said as if Rohan didn’t know there were things he needed to do to formalize the arrangement.

“That is a job for tomorrow. I was out of town today.”

“So I was informed. Is he aware we can smell how well you bathed him before dinner?”

Rohan winced. He’d been hoping his brother would be too polite to mention it. It was one thing to make threats of everyone smelling his cum on Nate, but another for the threat to be made true. “I did not expect you to be here. It won’t happen again.”

Ireni rang a small bell. “Enough has been said. Let’s dine and hear some tales from Earth.”

“Y our brother—er, the king—doesn’t seem to like me,” Nate said while cleaning his teeth.

“He does not know you or trust you, which is different.”

Nate stared at him, his finger still in his mouth as if he didn’t understand. “Why do you trust me?”

That wasn’t the question Rohan expected, but it was easy to answer. “You haven’t tried to kill me. You are genuinely grateful to be able to speak our language and to have been given a chance. And you are curious because you have a love of learning.”

Nate lifted an eyebrow. “I might be pretending.”

Rohan laughed. “I can smell your desire. And you cannot hide your true intentions from a Strega. She read your fate lines.”

Nate spat in the sink. “And what did they say?”

“You already know what she told me.” The Strega only told what she was certain of. Fate lines were always changing. The choices a person made created ripples that had far-reaching consequences. That she and her sisters were concerned about the recent crossings was enough to make the rulers of many cities wary of strangers, as if they expected the humans to launch an attack on a place they had forgotten about.

If the humans were planning an attack, they would not send through unprepared teachers. They’d send scouts or traders, people able to slide into society and report back.

“That I’m here to teach about my world.” He frowned. “But why?”

Rohan shrugged. “I do not have the answer, but we all enjoyed your stories tonight. Tomorrow, I will show you the palace gardens. You might enjoy our maze.”

Nate’s eyes widened. And Rohan found it far too easy to imagine himself stalking Nate through its winding pathways after listening to his stories.

“And I will also ensure you are given a place to prepare lessons and teach.” He cupped Nate’s jaw. “Do not wander without a guard. There will always be one with you.”

“What if he doesn’t like me and leaves so I get into trouble?”

Rohan frowned. “Are you always this distrustful?”

“I don’t want to accidentally find myself in trouble.”

Rohan pulled him close, and Nate pressed his face against Rohan’s tunic. “No one is

trying to trip you up. My guards are loyal to me, and you will come to know the ones I assign to you.”

Nate leaned into him, his muscles easing with each breath. “I am grateful for this chance.”

Rohan smoothed his hand over Nate’s back, waiting for him to finish unburdening his mind.

“What happens when you have learned everything I can teach, and you find a new lost thing?” Nate’s voice was soft, as though he didn’t even want to speak the words.

Rohan kissed the top of his head. “You haven’t started the journey, but you are already counting the last steps. How do you know what you will have learned along the way? No matter the paths you choose, you won’t be the same person you are today. And neither will I.” He couldn’t give Nate the reassurance he needed, in part because Nate would return to his world the moment he had repaid his debt. “Let’s enjoy the journey together.”

CHAPTER 13

THREE WEEKS LATER

Nate had been given a room in Rohan's wing of the palace to use as his workspace. Even though Rohan had returned to his regular duties, the day after the terrible dinner with the king—who Nate hadn't seen since—everything he requested had been provided.

He had a desk, paper and vellum, inks in several colors—the creator of them going to great lengths to show him samples and explain their virtues, so his selection was informed, before asking about the inks and writing implements on Earth. He'd been fascinated by the idea of ballpoint pens and pencils.

The royal children's tutor had given him a lesson on letters and left him with homework—while Nate didn't need to practice his pen grip, he needed to learn the forty letters and the sounds they made. He'd written the sounds in English as best as he could beneath each letter.

Pinned to one wall, there was a map of the world. And he was in the process of creating one of Earth for the other wall. The accuracy of it was dubious, but it was enough to give the people an understanding.

Most of all, he appreciated having something to fill his days. Even though the only person he'd taught so far was the Strega, he'd prepared classes on language and history and geography as well as mythology—though he wasn't sure if that would be appreciated. While Rohan seemed amused by the Greek minotaur myth, the king had

not been so easily entertained. He'd wanted to know why humans thought minotaurs ate people, to which Nate had no answer.

Though when Rohan had taken him to explore the maze, he'd seemed determined to show Nate how much he enjoyed eating humans by bending Nate over a bench and tongue-fucking his ass. Which would've been a lot more fun if a guard hadn't been standing less than five meters away.

Now he couldn't sit in the maze without thinking about being chased through it...

Which was probably Rohan's intent.

He dipped the pen in the ink and continued to label the countries in English. He planned on eventually writing out their names using the Tarikian alphabet when he was more certain of the sounds. Being able to magically speak the language did not help him at all with the reading and writing of it, he was trying not to become frustrated with his inability to progress. Even Rohan had said that learning to read and write was harder than speech.

A knock on the door made him look up. "Come in."

The door opened, and Rohan walked in. "My brother has decided that the first class will be made of the senior city guard and the knight."

Since the king had decided, there was no point in arguing. "And when will they be starting?"

Rohan walked around the desk as if to look at the map, but his hand snuck around Nate's waist and tucked him close. "Tomorrow. From breakfast to noon. For three days, as that is all they can be spared for."

“Why them?”

“Because they will be the ones dealing with any other people who accidentally cross.” Rohan’s tail slid up Nate’s inner thigh.

Rohan was far too good at fucking him with it, but after over twenty nights in the minotaur’s bed—not that he was counting—he wanted more than tail and fingers.

“And what am I teaching them?”

“Anything you want, as long as it is in English.”

Nate stared up at him. “So I am not teaching them anything. I am speaking so that they may learn.”

Why had he bothered making lesson plans, aside from protecting his own sanity?

Rohan tipped Nate’s chin up. “How different might your arrest have been if they had spoken to you in English?”

“Less confusing. But not all humans speak English.”

“The ones where you are from do.”

And doorways were apparently fixed. They didn’t jump around, even temporary ones. The Strega said the doorways were a thinning of the barrier between the worlds. Which sounded a bit like Samhain lore to Nate.

Maybe Samhain was recognizing that there was another world and that it was possible to cross. He’d ask her about that the next time she was at the palace. Which could be tomorrow or next month or next moon.

He was still learning the months and the days of the month—there were no days of the week because there were no weeks. Time also appeared to be flexible, with some meetings scheduled to be held next time they got together. He'd asked the Strega when that would be, and she'd said when she returned. His request to know when she planned on returning had been met with puzzlement, as she'd return when she was meant to.

Nate sighed. "I suppose I should be glad they have agreed on a day and time for the class instead of just turning up when they felt like it."

Rohan grinned. "I told Sebah you would appreciate that. Now, can I tear you away from your lessons and maps?"

He leaned down and kissed him without giving him the chance to answer. Nate was tempted to sweep the map and inks off the desk, but he didn't want to clean up the mess, and he didn't want any vampires or werewolves in his study smelling sex.

It was bad enough, knowing that the palace guards could smell it on him.

Mortifying to know the king and queen had. However, Rohan had apologized, saying that he hadn't expected them to be there. That hadn't stopped Rohan from coming on him. There was something about the obvious claim that was more than a little thrilling.

"What do you have in mind?" Nate murmured, hoping that it involved getting naked. He let his hand drift over Rohan's hip.

Rohan's tail smacked him on the ass. "Patience."

"I have been patient." Nate licked his lip. "I want..." His face heated. "I want to try."

Rohan gave him that smile. “Try what, little human?”

Asshole. Nate pressed his lips together, refusing to give Rohan what he wanted to hear when he already knew.

Rohan’s smile widened. “Is my tail not enough?”

Nate shrugged. “It is fine.”

“Last night it was too much.”

“I didn’t expect you to try putting it all inside me.” His tail wasn’t that thick, but it was long. Nate had been on his side, with Rohan’s hand around both their dicks—something they both enjoyed watching—when his tail went from fucking him to sliding deeper and deeper, turning corners that had never been explored. That he’d come while gasping that it was too much hadn’t made his pleas particularly convincing.

“It all went in. And then you swallowed everything I spilled in your mouth.” Rohan’s tongue flicked over Nate’s lips. “Without making a mess.”

That had taken him a while to learn how to do it because it wasn’t a mouthful when Rohan came, and Nate was never going to get more than the fat head in his mouth.

“You are the one who likes to make a mess.”

“It is not my fault you don’t spill enough to make a mess.” Rohan’s tail slipped between Nate’s thighs and caressed his balls.

“Did you come here to insult me?” Nate feigned hurt the way he always did.

“I came to ask if you would like a walk in the maze before we bathe for supper.”

Nate considered Rohan for a moment and wondered how much walking they’d do. Sometimes, they did walk around the palace gardens with Rohan pointing out various plants and animals; other times, the walk was an excuse to find a quiet place. Nate suspected Rohan was making reasons for the walks so Nate wouldn’t feel trapped in the palace. “Why don’t you fetch some oil and come and find me?”

Rohan drew in a breath. “You want me to hunt you through the maze?”

“Maybe?” Was it too much?

“I will be able to find you blindfolded.” Rohan tugged him close so there was no gap between them, his fingers pressed into his ass cheek, and Rohan’s interest in the proposed game was clear as the thick length of his dick pressed against Nate’s stomach. “The scent of your lust will make you easy to locate.”

Nate’s heartbeat quickened. “You want to play?”

“Yes. I have thought about it since you told your story.”

“Why didn’t you say something?”

“Because it’s much more fun to wait for you to ask.” Rohan kissed the end of his nose. “And yes, I want to fuck you. I was beginning to think you’d never want to try.”

“Are you going to let go of me so I can wander around the maze?”

“In a moment.” Rohan rested his chin on the top of Nate’s head. “I missed holding you this morning because I had to get up so early.”

“I missed waking up in your arms.” He’d never felt as safe as he did when tucked against Rohan.

With a last kiss, Rohan released him. “Grab a cloak on your way out. The evenings are becoming cooler.”

CHAPTER 14

Rohan didn't rush, but he also didn't want to leave Nate wandering the maze for too long, even though he had a guard at his heels. He grabbed the thick oil and slipped the jar into the pocket on his belt before throwing on his cloak.

He had always liked to wander the maze, even though he knew the shortcuts to the center. There was something calming about it. Not that he felt at all calm, as he entered the maze.

His blood was hot, and his dick was half-hard. He closed his eyes and inhaled, seeking Nate's scent. The air chilled his lungs as winter had begun to wrap her arms around the city, but it wasn't yet too cold to be out.

Nate's scent lingered in the air, drawing him on. Thrown over one hedge was Nate's tunic. Rohan gathered it up and kept walking. At the next split in the path, he paused, not sure which way Nate had gone. He went right only to find Nate's pants hanging from a branch. He brought them to his face and inhaled.

Cheeky.

Nate had left a false trail.

And now he was naked except for his cloak.

Rohan turned, trusting his feet to lead him to Nate. His pace quickened as he hunted his lover. A gasp and then silence. Rohan grinned, hearing Nate's heartbeat on the

other side of the bush. He wanted to reach through and grab him. Instead, he'd take the shortcut he'd just passed.

He backed up and peeked through the gap. Nate had his head tilted as if listening. The guard was near enough to act if needed but far enough to not ruin the game.

As if satisfied Rohan had moved on, Nate turned and walked toward the cut-through in the maze. Rohan waited, then lunged, grabbing him and lifting him off his feet.

Nate yelped.

The guard ran toward him, hand on his sword, before slowing as he saw the reason for Nate's yell was because Rohan had him. Rohan gave him a nod, then slung his prize over his shoulder, carrying him to the center of the maze.

"That didn't take you long," Nate's words were breathy.

"I told you it wouldn't. While leaving your clothes provided a good distraction, it only spurred me on, knowing you were naked beneath your cloak." He gave Nate's ass a squeeze. He'd been waiting for Nate to want more, to be ready.

"Well, I was trying to be caught."

"That's why you startled like a deer." He sat, placing Nate in his lap, trusting the guard would be at the entrance to the center, preventing any interruptions. "Take the oil out of my pocket."

Nate reached into the pocket and stopped. "You brought the leash."

"I did." Would Nate also take that out or leave it?

Nate's tongue traced his lower lip as if weighing his options. He pulled the strip of leather—that was far too delicate to be a leash on anything but a willing partner—and handed it to him. “While we play this game today, know that there are others I want to play.”

“You seek to bind me?”

“Maybe? Or is that not allowed because you are a prince?”

Rohan laughed. “I want to hear about your other desires when I am inside you.” He licked the curve of Nate's ear. “But I do not object to being bound.”

Nate's lips parted, and Rohan stole a kiss. Nate lifted Rohan's tunic out of the way and pressed against him, wrapping his hand around both their cocks and stroking. It was a sight he was never going to tire of seeing. He was so used to Nate being in his bed and at his side that he couldn't remember what it was like not to have him.

Nate belonged there, and falling through the doorway had returned him to the correct world.

To him.

He looped the leather around Nate's wrists, tight enough that he could feel it, loose enough that he could slip his hands free if he wanted—not that he ever had—and Nate's heartbeat quickened as his cheeks flushed with anticipation.

He tipped a little oil into Nate's bound hands. “Make me nice and slick.”

Nate nodded, his hands working from root to tip, using the firm strokes that Rohan liked as if trying to make him leak.

While Nate's bound hands were occupied, Rohan teased his human's hole with oiled fingers, wanting him stretched and open. Nate's hole was used to taking three of his fingers now, and he had pressed his cock to Nate's open ass and cum inside of him more than once, the last time the head had slid in, making them both gasp. The tight heat had tempted him to sink deeper, but instead, he'd pulled back. Now, his patience was being rewarded with Nate's desire.

Nate rocked back onto his fingers, then thrust forward, seeking more as he thrust against Rohan's cock. Then he glanced up, eyes dark, expecting Rohan to do more than fill him with his fingers. "You're well-oiled."

Rohan gave a low groan at the glide of Nate's dick against his own. He needed more. He nuzzled Nate's neck. "I'm going to put you on your back and fuck you."

"Yes." Nate gasped.

Rohan lifted him up as if to throw him to the ground. Nate's eyes widened, and then Rohan placed him down gently. It was that little thrill that Nate liked. That moment when he remembered Rohan was big enough to do anything to him while trusting that he wouldn't be hurt. Rohan would never break that trust.

But it made him wonder about Nate's request to bind him.

With the cloak spread beneath Nate, Rohan caught his bound hands and placed them over Nate's head, pinning them there with one hand. Nate's sky-blue eyes were as dark as midnight, his breathing quick, and his lips parted. He was a very pretty picture of desire. He wanted a painting of him like this.

"You look as delicious as you taste." Rohan licked beneath Nate's jaw and down his throat.

Nate squirmed.

“I can’t decide if you are trying to make the most pathetic escape attempt you’ve ever tried or if you are trying to encourage me.”

“Neither can I. When you lick me like that, while I’m pinned like this, part of my brain dies.”

“Is that right?” He did it again, and Nate’s eyelids fluttered closed as his back arched, his cock grinding against Rohan’s stomach. He nipped beneath Nate’s jaw. “Are you trying to come?”

“Mmm.”

“Be still, Nate.”

Nate opened his eyes. He was listening, not completely consumed by pleasure. Rohan reached between them and adjusted his cock, so the head rubbed against Nate’s hole. He pressed forward as Nate exhaled, and his ass opened, letting him in. For a couple of heartbeats, he didn’t move—even with a vampire or elf, he wouldn’t have rushed his moment.

He liked the way it felt as his lover’s body accepted him and welcomed him.

Nate gave the smallest nod.

And Rohan started fucking him, sinking deeper with each thrust, his gaze fixed on Nate, ready for the slightest sign that it was too much. He was almost balls deep when Nate’s legs clamped around his hips.

“Fuck.”

“Too much?”

Nate shook his head, his eyes closed. “If you move, I’m going to come.”

Rohan grinned. Even though Nate’s legs squeezed him, it wasn’t enough to hold him in place. He slowly withdrew, dragging his cock through that tight channel. Nate bit his lip as if trying to resist, but Rohan felt the climax moving through Nate’s body. The tightening of his ass, the movement of his hips, his back, and the change in his heartbeat. He moaned as he came, cum splashing onto his chest.

Rohan licked a long line up Nate’s chest, through the cum, up his throat to claim his lips. He didn’t need to fuck him any deeper to find his own release. The half-smothered moans and the fluttering of Nate’s hole around his cock were more than enough.

He let go with a growl, lowering more of his weight onto Nate as if he were truly trapped, and Rohan wouldn’t get off him the moment he said the weight had become too much.

Nate lay beneath him, eyes closed, head tilted back as if overcome by the climax.

“Did I kill you with my cock?”

Nate sighed as if unable to find words in any language.

Rohan kissed him. “I guess I’ll have to gather you up and carry you back to the palace.”

He slid Nate’s hands free of the leash, and they immediately looped around his neck. His fingers pushed into Rohan’s hair as if he wanted to make sure Rohan didn’t pull away.

He had no intention of pulling out until Nate was ready to get up.

Nate opened his eyes. Still dark, but this time, they weren't full of lust. They were full of love. It was in the magic of each breath he took. He glanced away as if to hide what was easily seen.

Rohan placed a soft kiss on his human's lips, not needing him to say anything.

CHAPTER 15

THREE MONTHS LATER

Nate lay on the bench in the center of the maze, watching the sky turn pink as the sun set. It was one of his favorite places to sit at the end of a tiring day. Now that the weather was warming, he was enjoying being outside in the evening again. While there were guards nearby, he was alone, and it felt as if he was miles away from everyone.

He'd spent the day either teaching people about Earth—the humans in Calla were keen to know about the place their families had come from—or learning about Tariko. He'd also met with the Strega as another city had reported the unexpected arrival of a Ferris wheel and other fairground items, as well as people, coupled with an earthquake that damaged part of the city.

He'd spoken English for a few weeks so that others could learn the language. The way they used magic to learn was fascinating. He still struggled to sense the magic, maybe because he hadn't been born here. Or maybe it would just take more time.

"I thought I'd find you here." Rohan's deep voice dragged his attention from the sky.

He sat up, making room for Rohan on the bench. "Are you done for the day?"

"Yes." Rohan sat and pulled Nate down so his head rested on Rohan's thick thigh, the way they had sat so many times. His hand rested on Nate's chest. "There was some deliberation between the knight and the head of the city guard. Then, after the official

hearings were done, they asked what I was doing with you.”

Nate tensed. “They are aware I have been teaching. They have been to my classes.”

The Strega has insisted that he teach the knight and the city guard about Earth and English so that if more humans arrived, they’d be better equipped to help them. After the initial lessons, more followed, three mornings each month. She had also learned from him, though her questions were more specific, and Nate was sure she then informed her sisters.

“That is not what they meant.”

“Oh...is there a problem?” His pulse quickened. Everything had been perfect. Too perfect. He’d made a life here. Found love and a purpose and he enjoyed learning about Tariko and its people.

“Not a problem, exactly. My brother also asked about my intentions.” Rohan’s fingers traced the leather collar. “And yours. They believe you have gone above what was needed to repay the debt, but they do not want you to stop teaching.” He smiled. “I wasn’t supposed to tell you that.”

“It’s only been four months.”

He put a finger beneath Nate’s chin. “We have both been acting as if we had the year and a day before we needed to think about the future.”

“I don’t understand.”

Rohan’s thumb pressed on his lower lip, and Nate licked the tip. “The knight is ready to commute your sentence, which means you can plead your case with Ishtar. You might be able to go home, Nate.”

Home.

Earth didn't feel like home anymore. The life he'd had back there felt as though he'd dreamed it. Sure, there were things he missed, like the internet and ice cream—though an elf had made something close with goat's milk and honey and magic to keep it cold. Though it was rather too magically costly to be anything other than a very rare treat.

He liked his life, and he loved Rohan.

He sat up and climbed onto Rohan's lap. He put his hands on his cheeks. The perfect man for him was a minotaur. "This is home. You are my home."

While he couldn't remember when he'd started thinking of the palace as home, or when he'd stopped referring to Earth as home, it was the truth, and he hoped Rohan sensed it in his words.

"I don't want to go back...unless you want me gone?" Nate frowned. Rohan had never given any indication that he was done. He could have assigned Nate another room in the palace and never crossed paths with him again.

Rohan put his hands on Nate's hips and pressed a soft kiss to his lips. "I do not want you gone. Ever."

"Then let's not talk of it again." He stared at his lover. "Wait...do the others want me gone?"

"No one wants you gone. My brother asked if I am going to make my claim official or if you will be moving out."

"Official?"

“With your debt paid, you are no longer under my protection. You will be free to leave?—”

“I don’t want to leave.” This was one of those laws that split hairs and had specific requirements. He was protected by Rohan because he owed Rohan—the reasoning being that someone had to be alive to repay their debt, and if the debtor died, it was a bad look for the person holding the debt. Someone had clearly done something to result in protection becoming part of the laws. “I love you.”

There was a tingle on his tongue as magic caught in his words. He’d been wanting to say it for a while but had never been sure of the timing, so he’d bitten his tongue, hoping that Rohan would say it first. Sometimes, it seemed he was about to; they’d look at each other, and Nate’s heart would grow light, but the silence remained.

“I love you, too.” Rohan smiled.

Nate frowned. “Do you?”

“Did you not feel the magic?”

“Just then?”

“All the other times. When I called you mine. When I felt you in my heart.” Rohan placed his hand over Nate’s heart. “I didn’t need you to say it.”

“I needed the words. I wasn’t sure. I didn’t want to mess it up, and magic is... Sometimes, it’s there, and sometimes, it’s not.”

“Magic is always there. Sometimes, you try too hard to find it. Magic brought you to me. You were mine from the moment I saw you. I love you. And we will wed, and I will change this...” He touched the leather collar. “To something finer and more

suited to a prince's consort."

There was that little reminder that Rohan was a prince with responsibilities to his brother, to the city, and to his people. That is what he'd be marrying into.

Nate nodded. "I think rings are more traditional."

Rohan touched the end of Nate's nose. "Yours is too dainty to get a ring through."

Nate smiled and lifted his hand. "On my finger."

"You will get a city ring like mine." Rohan wore a gold ring decorated with the city's knotwork.

"I meant a wedding ring." Which, from Rohan's puzzled expression, was not something they had in Calla. "That's not what you do here?"

"Is it important that you have one? If it is, you will need to describe it to me."

Nate considered him for a moment. He didn't need a wedding ring, but he had gotten used to the weight around his neck and the way Rohan sometimes attached the leash and tied him to the bed. "I would rather wear your collar."

"Then I will have the jeweler create one." He tapped between Nate's collarbones. "With a ruby calla hanging from the center."

Nate smiled, trying to imagine wearing such a thing. "Will a wedding satisfy everyone or cause more trouble?"

"My brother will be most pleased that you are staying. He already has other cities asking to visit for your lessons. He has been holding them off until..."

“He wanted you to formalize your claim so they couldn’t woo me away.” Nate laughed and leaned in and kissed him. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“They might offer you jewels.”

Nate shook his head. “I don’t want them.”

“Elvish princes.”

“Not interested.”

“A pack of werewolves to serve you.”

Nate pretended to consider that for a moment.

Rohan tickled his ribs. “One minotaur is not enough? You need a pack of werewolves?”

Nate laughed and squirmed. “You’re more than enough.”

Rohan pulled him closer so Nate sat on the hard length of his cock.

Nate glanced at the guard not that far away and lowered his voice. “Perhaps we should celebrate our engagement inside?”

“Perhaps I should chase you through the maze like your people’s tales so I can capture you and haul you back to the palace over my shoulder?”

“Are you planning to eat me?” He wriggled his ass, grinding against Rohan’s cock.

Rohan grabbed his ass cheek and squeezed. “I am. And then I’ll mount you.”

Nate's heartbeat quickened as Rohan slid his other hand over the ridge in Nate's pants. "I want to fuck you first."

Rohan on his knees, with his meaty ass in the air, was as enticing as being scooped up and thrown into whatever position Rohan wanted him in. Add in his devious tail, fucking him while he fucked Rohan...

His tail often got involved, teasing Nate's ass or tickling his balls as he straddled Rohan and they ground together. Tying the minotaur's hands to the bedhead so he was on display did nothing to control his tail, and Nate wasn't inclined to change that.

Rohan grinned. "Do you intend to tie me to the bed first?"

He hadn't been, but since Rohan had dropped the bait, Nate picked it up. "Yes. But as much as I enjoy playing in the maze, it's too cold out to be naked, so perhaps we should go inside...and there is already oil there."

"Agreed," Rohan laughed. "I want you shivering with need, not cold."

"Now? Or do you have other plans before dinner?" Nate lifted one eyebrow. He didn't know how he was going to sit through dinner if Rohan wanted to wait.

"My only plans involve you, little human."

"You'll need to catch me first."

"I already have." Rohan used the collar to pull Nate in for a kiss. And Nate didn't even pretend to resist as Rohan scooped him up and carried him inside.

EPILOGUE

TWO MONTHS LATER

The ground rumbled, and the building groaned for the third time that month. Nate rolled out of bed and pulled on pants as Rohan did the same. The first time, several houses had been destroyed, and a fire had broken out. The second time, a sinkhole had opened and swallowed the master blacksmith's workshop and house. No one had survived.

A car had been found just outside of town, lodged up a tree.

Nate had spent the last fifteen days helping to rebuild the houses and forge, fetching and carrying and obeying others' instructions because his building skills were not up to standard.

Everyone helped when they could.

No one understood what was going on.

Not even the Strega, which was far more terrifying than Nate thought possible. She was supposed to know about this kind of thing. It appeared as if someone from the human side was trying to open a doorway, even though that should be impossible due to the lack of magic.

Maybe.

Even magic was glitching, and the gods had no explanation.

Whatever it was, it was getting worse.

The ground shook, and the palace rattled around them.

“Get your shoes on. Something is wrong. It’s different this time.”

Nate muttered a curse and shoved on his boots. The metal chain around his neck bumped against his skin as he did. He pulled on a tunic and grabbed his cloak.

He hadn’t gotten it on before Rohan picked him up and ran down the stairs, carrying him as if he weighed nothing. Nate wrapped his legs around Rohan’s waist and held on. Something fell over, crashing to the ground. Other palace occupants were also making the scramble toward the door. They made it outside as the palace listed like a ship about to be swallowed by the ocean. Rohan wobbled as if unable to find his footing.

“Put me down.”

“No, the ground is...” A fissure opened to Rohan’s left, and he took a few steps away.

“Look at the stars,” someone shouted.

Nate looked up as the stars spun and began winking out. Terror turned his blood to ice. He wrapped his arms and legs more tightly around Rohan as he changed his mind about letting go. “Whatever happens. I love you. And these have been the best six months of my life.”

“Same, little human.” Rohan pressed his cheek against Nate’s. “But I fear for the next six months.”

The palace sank, swallowed by the ground, to the gasps and cries of those who'd lived there. Nate's eyes prickled. The life he'd made was vanishing, and there was nothing he could do. He was about to lose his world again.

A ripple went through the air. A burst of magic or something else? The ground bucked as if trying to throw them off. Rohan crouched as the stars vanished.

Nate closed his eyes. "Don't let go."

"I won't."

Nate's stomach dropped, and then he was falling.

He remembered the feeling, but he didn't want it to be true. His back hit the ground, and Rohan landed on top of him. For several seconds, he couldn't breathe, and he didn't know if it was from shock, being winded, or because of the weight.

Someone screamed.

The earth gave another grumble and stilled. Whatever it was, it was over for the moment. And he was alive. Or at least he was reasonably sure he was, unlike last time when he'd been convinced he was dead.

Rohan groaned and pushed himself up. The thick gold ring in his nose glinted in the light. "Are you hurt?"

"I don't think so." Nate sat up with a wince. He might be a little bruised, but he'd be fine. They appeared to be in a park from the brightly colored play equipment. Though no one would be playing on it as it lay in a twisted heap. Rubble and people were littered over the grass.

"This is not Tariko," Rohan said as he took in their surroundings.

“No.” Nate wasn’t sure where they had landed. He turned and searched for a street sign as an ambulance screamed past.

“A car,” Rohan spoke in English. “Your home.”

Nate listened as the wailing of sirens filled the night and streetlights flickered. While the people of Tariko had accepted him, listened to his tales of Earth, and taught him about their world, he did not believe Rohan, or the other non-humans, would be given the same kindness. He raked his fingers through his hair.

“Fuck. I hate this place.”

P an’s story is next in Magic and other Mishaps .