



One Night with Her Mountain Orc (Toothsome Monster Romance #1)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: One former bad-boy orc working on a fresh start.

One distressed woman yearning to belong.

One night together.

I'm stranded on the side of an icy mountain with a busted ankle. Alone. And night is coming.

This is what I get for trying to prove that I'm independent.

My heart twists in relief when I hear the voices of Search and Rescue.

Other parts of me clench when I see my rescuer—tall, muscular, green, and tusked.

How do I explain to myself and my family that after one night, I'm in love with the bad boy orc?

One Night with Her Mountain Orc steamy, cozy, forced proximity, small-town romance with an orc who thinks he's no good for her.

It is the first in the Toothsome Monster Romance series of stand-alone, sweet spicy, cozy monster romance novellas. Guaranteed to have an HEA, intended for mature audiences.

Total Pages (Source): 17

Page 1

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August

“O kay, August, watch your footing. You got this. Ow! Shit. Okay, don’t step there. Deep breath, girl. What a stupid thing to do.” I’ve given up caring about looking foolish talking to myself, as the only things around are some mice I scared out of the undergrowth and a random mountain goat that occasionally bleats at me. I swear he’s laughing at me as I limp down the mountain.

Checking the sun, I curse again. I’m not going to make it down before the sun dips behind the icy peak of Wolf’s Ridge Mountain. Then I curse myself for succumbing to such a reckless decision. And I curse May, my cousin, for her terrible taste in men. As my feet slide on loose rocks and I try not to fall, I curse Chad, her boyfriend.

He’s a jealous asshat. Since I moved in with May two weeks ago, she’s been spending more time with me than with him. It’s been a long time since we spent our childhood summers together, and we’ve had a lot of catching up to do. Unsurprisingly, he has the personality of a horny billy goat. Tiny penis and no brains.

Leaning against a giant boulder to rest and pull out my cell phone to see if I have signal. Low battery, probably because of the cold, and no signal. I’m going to have to make it all the way down before I can call for help. Tears sting. Blinking fast, to prevent them from fully leaking out of my eyes, I realize my eyelashes are crusty with frost. Pretty sure the tears will just freeze to my face at this point. I imagine myself at the bottom of the mountain, busted ankle, and eyes half-frozen shut, frozen snot on my nose. The picture of independence and strength.

Ugh, I’m so shit-fucked right now. All I had to do was ignore Chad’s taunting. Why

did his opinion matter? It didn't. It doesn't. Why did I make such a reckless move?

Now I'm going to die up here. Hypothermia and exposure—check. Dehydration—probably. Starvation—working on it. Feels like anything could happen right now.

Maybe I should reconsider making dares with asshats and stage an intervention with May. But first I have to get off this god-forsaken mountain. One painful step at a time.

Ahead of me, or rather down the hill from me, I hear voices. I hate the way my chest fills with relief at the sound of other people. And an overwhelming sense of embarrassment. My estimate says I'm totally on track to be down the mountain only two hours after sunset. I don't need them.

I've got this.

"Hey! We're Search and Rescue. Are you in need of assistance?" Damnit. Their flashlights and reflective clothing are the first things I see. Search and Rescue. But not just SAR. Huge muscular orcs. Groaning, I close my eyes, hoping they'll magically transform into less handsome monsters. People I can handle, people are fallible. But orcs are the epitome of strength and stamina. And the two of them are totally watching me limp down the trail toward them as if I'm the latest episode of reality TV.

"No! I'm good. Thanks for asking." My voice surprises me, I'm breathing heavier than I should be. It isn't warm out by any means, but I'm sweating in my snow pants and coat. A lot of exertion, pain, and stress. My good foot lands on a patch of refrozen snow—ice—and I go down hard, legs painfully spread wide, and I slide twenty feet looking like a sliding snow angel. Well, probably look like a broken yeti—not nearly graceful enough to be an angel. The cold seeps through the bottom

of my snowpants—a rip. My inner thigh and hamstring burn where they were stretched beyond their normal range.

I will not cry. I will not be a spectacle. As I attempt to gather my breath and catalog my new physical state—did I break anything else? Is my other ankle injured?—there’s a blur of green. The orc is at my side, kneeling, staring intently at me. There’s a slight smile on his face, like he’s enjoying this. His nose looks like it’s been broken a few times, and he has a scar over one eye that still looks fresh. But while I probably stink from a day of sweating, he smells refreshing and delicious—like fresh-brewed coffee and caramel. Not a combination of scents I typically associate with orcs, but I like it. A lot. Too bad I’m in pain, and my ass is freezing.

“I suppose you get a kick out of seeing injured people. It means you have a job, right?” I know I sound like an ass, but I’m not interested in making friends right now. I need to get off the mountain before I lose any more heat, and I want to do it under my own power. Chad, May, and these orcs be damned.

“I love my job,” the orc says, his black eyes laser into mine. I purse my lips at him. The other orc stands behind, watching us closely. He clears his throat.

My orc—not mine, just...the one next to me—straightens up. “My name is Bjorn. I’m an emergency responder with Moonfang Haven Search and Rescue. We’re here because of a call from a concerned family member. Are you August Mason?” I nod, not trusting my voice to be steady. “We’d like to help you down the mountain and to the hospital before nightfall.”

I heave out a sigh and start to lift myself out off the ice. Bjorn puts a giant hand on my shoulder to stop me. Heat radiates from him and into my body, warming me as if I’m curled up next to a raging campfire. Looking at his hand—my, his fingers are thick—then at him, I say, “Please remove your hand. I’m going to get up and start walking.”

“Please sit and let me assess your injuries. Did you hit your head? Any blood?” His eyes roam over my padded body. Though I’m wearing more clothes than I’ve ever worn before, I am exposed under his gaze. My body shivers against my will. Damned body betraying me. I shake my head a little too vehemently, making me dizzy. He notices, and the pressure of his hand increases just enough to steady me.

“Just my ankle. I think it’s sprained. No other injuries, though I just overextended this leg.” I pause as I slowly shift. “But it’s fine. I’m sorry you came all this way.” I huff each sentence as I get to my knees, then my feet. His hand shifts to my upper back, like he’s just there to steady me if I fall.

Little does he know; I refuse to fall anymore. I don’t need anyone’s help. Especially a burly, delicious smelling orc’s help.

“No apologies necessary. It’s good training. And it’s boring when no one asks for help. Steady,” he says the last word in a whisper as I stumble on my feet.

“So, you’re saying you are using my experiences to further your education and be your entertainment for the day? Hmm.”

“Basically, yes. I appreciate you being here right now.” He grins, and his tusks shine despite the thick clouds overhead. “Now, I have bandages to secure your ankle, so it doesn’t get injured further. I can make you a cane or crutch—” Bjorn’s voice trails off as I make an ugh sound and march past him toward his compatriot. Or, well, I limp unsteadily, hands stretched out wide in case I pitch forward onto the rocky ground. Most of the ice seems to be gone from this part of the trail. I remember this place from the way up—the line in the sand between rocks and snow.

I make it to the other orc, just as handsome, though he’s older with a streak of gray in his trimmed beard, and he smells like motor oil. He gives me a cool, analyzing gaze. I can hear thrashing behind me from Bjorn, but I don’t bother to turn around to see if

he is trapped in the bushes or throwing a temper tantrum. I keep going.

Their footsteps don't follow at first, and I'm grateful. I know they'll follow, eventually; they aren't having a slumber party up here in the frozen tundra tonight. No one is, except that crazy goat.

"Alright, see if this will help you." Bjorn's rumbling voice startles me out of my revelry of never again. No more stupid decisions. When will I learn? Never again. When I pause to steady myself and turn, he appears before me so I don't have to twist. Limping in the dying light of day is causing more problems with the leg I overextended, but I'm not sure how to fix it right now. Bjorn has a long, smooth branch in his hand. Not quite a crutch, not quite a cane.

I stare at it, trying to figure out how it will help me, when he sighs and says, "It's a hiking stick. All sorts of healthy hikers use them. It will help with your footing and get you off the mountain sooner. No one is going to judge you for having a hiking stick. But they might for not having one."

Unsure what has come over me, but that last statement makes laughter bubble up and out of me. I slap a hand over my mouth to prevent anymore frivolity oozing out of me. "Thanks," I mumble from behind my mouth. Mostly, though, I take the stick to get him out of my way. He's blocking the entire trail with his wide, muscular body. One side of him is the cliff's edge, the other side is shrubbery that I'm too tired and cold to fight my way through.

I guess the only way down is by placating the orc. My gloved hand touches his as I take the hiking stick, and I swear sparks between us almost light the not-a-cane on fire.

The hiking stick fits my grip perfectly. It's the right height for me walking down this mountain in one piece. How did he know?

“If you get too tired or cold, I’m happy to carry you down the rest of the way. It can be our secret. You don’t have to tell anyone.” I scoff at his offer.

“You know, I’m strong and independent. No, I wasn’t fully prepared for conditions today, but I did it, didn’t I? I refuse to be carried down this hill. We’re almost done now. Look, I can see the lights of the village.” I point, pausing a moment to catch my breath and enjoy the sight.

Neither of them responds, and it doesn’t take a genius to know that my veiled attempt at declaring victory is a lie.

We hike together in silence for several minutes. I’m loathe to admit that it is easier with the damn hiking stick.

“So, why are you up here today? Not quite summer hiking weather.” His inquiry is gentle, and I suppose I owe them some sort of explanation for why they were dragged away from the warmth of their homes today. I sigh.

“I’m staying with my cousin, May—or, I was. I can’t go back there now. Her boyfriend and I were fighting. I needed some air. Some man he is. I spent a lot of time hiking as a kid; I thought it would be a cakewalk. But I’ve been in the city for too long. This was rougher than I remember, and the cold hasn’t helped.” I shrug, unsure what else to say. I hear him snort, mumble something under his breath.

It's dark now. He asked if I wanted to borrow a headlamp, and I begrudgingly said yes. A cloud of frozen breath puffs out with every step. I think of dragons hoarding treasure and orcs fighting in their traditional garb of loin cloths. That’s a book I’d like to read. At least I have something to warm me up out here.

The headlamps illuminate SAR’s SUV ahead. The metal glistens like we’ve found precious treasure. My heart thumps harder at the idea of sitting down. Of being warm.

My legs and feet hurt so much. Much more than I want to admit.

“Is your car here?” Bjorn asks, even though there aren’t any cars in the gravel lot. Snow whips around us as the clouds begin to release their fury.

“May and Chad dropped me off. I had to sell my car.” I stop before I spill my entire story to these strangers. My rescuers look at each other, then snort.

Two monster rescuers and I ride down the bumpy gravel path to the base of the mountain; I feel like it’s the setup for a joke. Only, I don’t know what the punchline is yet. The scent of them both threatens to unravel my sanity. My fingers, warming with the car’s heater, itch to touch Bjorn, even though I still don’t like him being my rescuer. I don’t like needing to be rescued.

Nothing can happen with him, I remind myself over and over. My life is a disaster right now, and the last thing I need is a romantic entanglement. Especially one with an orc. I’m positive the last thing this orc wants is a hot mess.

As the lights of town grow larger, looming ahead of me to showcase my failure, a pit in my stomach rolls around. I can’t let Chad know SAR rescued me from the mountain, even though I made it on my own two feet. I also can’t let him know that I fancy my orc rescuer.

“We are taking you to the hospital to get checked out. You can fill out our paperwork then, okay?” The other orc, Brann, says. It’s really the first time he has spoken directly to me.

“I can’t really afford the hospital,” I say, my voice weak with embarrassment and fatigue. They glance at each other.

“We can take you to the station, check out your ankle, and you can do the paperwork

there. But you'll have to sign a form saying you refused to go to the hospital." Bjorn seems to have my best interest at heart.

Brann growls at him. "Do not let feelings get in the way of our job." He clears his throat and starts again, glancing at me in the rearview mirror. "It's best if an actual doctor checks you out. You were in the wilderness all day, you might—"

"No." I cut him off. "You rescued me. Drove me down the mountain. I appreciate all of it, even though I've been an ass. But I refuse to go to the hospital. If it's an issue, you can stop here and I will stumble my way home."

Except I can't go home to May; Chad's there. Closing my eyes, I try to think of where else I could spend the night. Would one of May's friends let me stay on their couch for the night? Do I even remember any of their names?

No one. There's no one. Not only can I not spend the day alone on the mountain without getting injured, but I also have no money for a hotel; no place to sleep.

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Bjorn

First day on the job, and I got to scale an icy mountain to rescue my dream girl—feisty, curvy as hell, and brave. It was the perfect first day. Now though, I have to do the boring part of the job. And let her go. I am a professional. Why did I have to decide to turn over a new leaf now?

“Bjorn, make sure she fills out the paperwork, especially the refusal to go to the hospital. Once she leaves here, she’s out of our care.” Brann, my captain, slaps me on the back like he’s my father or mentor before stomping to his office. There’s a weird twinge inside me—Brann trusts me to do my job correctly, and on the first day—when no one has trusted me to do anything right in a long time.

After I’ve fully inspected August’s ankle and shapely calf and bandaged it, I watch as she fills out the SAR paperwork. A light sweat glistens on her brow as she writes. Infection? Nerves? Possibly both. Maybe our monster presence makes her uncomfortable? My co-workers ignore us, but that doesn’t mean she ignored them—minotaur and kraken. I didn’t notice a scent of fear on the walk or car ride here. Needing to keep busy, I make her a cup of cocoa and bring it to her.

“Thank you. This is really sweet of you,” she says, her smile a delight to my senses. She seems to have improved her mood sitting in a heated room, snacking on beef jerky, and now drinking hot cocoa. Did she really just call me sweet? No one, not even my own mother, has ever called me sweet.

“So, August. How’d you end up with a name like that?” Deep, growly voice, I’m trying to reclaim my typical bad boy persona.

“One guess,” she says, her sly smile exposes her right dimple. How is she not put off by me? How is she so beautiful and adorable?

“Your mom loved late summer peaches.” I wink.

“I’m sure she does, but no. And how is that your one guess?” She laughs at my stupidity. I shrug.

“Beats the obvious birth month, right?” I don’t say that I smell peaches when I’m close to you. Summer sunshine and dripping ripe fruit.

“I’ll give you that. And it isn’t my birth month. October is.” She goes back to filling out forms and drinking her drink. She has a tiny chocolate moustache on her top lip.

“Funny. Then, I don’t know. Tell me?” I bat my eyes at her, then remember myself and cross my arms, leaning against the table where she’s sitting. She laughs again, and this time it isn’t at my stupidity. It’s a laugh of bliss and enjoyment. Two things I want to give her more of. Or, possibly, she’s hallucinating from cold exposure? Tough call.

“My grandpa’s name. He died the day I was born.”

Crickets. I don’t know how to lighten that topic, so I nod and scratch the back of my head, searching for a way to change the subject. Respect blooms inside me at the way she just dropped that bomb in my lap. Kudos, August.

Something clanks inside of the captain’s office. It jolts me back to reality. I’m supposed to be working, not warring within myself about flirting with her.

“Do you have someone to call who can pick you up?” She shifts uncomfortably and wrinkles her nose as she thinks. She does not make eye contact with me. Hmm,

curious. Stepping away from her, I busy myself hanging gear and organizing supplies.

Like all the good things in my life, I've killed any chance we had now.

"Okay, I think everything is filled out. Thanks again." August stands, wobbly on her injured ankle and fatigued legs. Then she hobbles toward the big red door that separates us from the icy wind outside.

"We were lucky getting off the mountain when we did. It sounds miserable outside," I say conversationally as I flip through her paperwork on the clipboard. She's signed the release. No phone number. No address.

"I'm sure it's fine. I'll see you around." With a weak smile, she flips her dark brown hair over her shoulder and limps outside. Huh.

"You going to let her go?" Brann's deep voice sounds incredulous. He's peeking out from his office.

Groaning, I ask, "How much did you hear?" I'm not sure I really want the answer to my question.

"I'll tell you this. It's obvious you like her. And she didn't give me the light of day. I think you should go after her. Besides, this weather is only turning worse."

"You don't think it's unprofessional? This was a training day. She was my mission." Brann's lips curl into what I think is a smile. I hope that's not the smile he gives to women—it's terrifying.

"I wouldn't be telling you to go after her if I thought it was unprofessional. She signed the release. She's out of our care. Now, go, you idiot." With that, he turns

back into his office and shuts the door. Behind the door, a phone rings.

Whelp, I guess I should follow orders. Somehow, my heart is pounding with the strength of my grandpa, who supported his family by bare-handedly hunting bears that harassed folks in town.

“Fine,” I mumble to myself. Not bothering with a coat, because I am, in fact, an idiot orc, I walk outside to find millions of tiny balls of ice whipping around the air as the wind howls. A reminder for us that spring is really just a figment of our imagination. It hurts.

Squinting into the dark left and right, there’s no sign of her. She can’t have got far with a bum ankle. No footprints are visible in the slippery layer of ice on the sidewalk. The wind rips through my flannel shirt to my skin. Her delicious scent is gone. Growling, I pick a direction and start walking.

When I get to Stone Barrel Brewery, my older brother Koru’s place, I pause and sigh. Through the big window I can see it’s lively inside. I hate how successful Koru is. Stupid domestic god in orc form. I hope she’s inside—the roaring fire in the stone hearth calls to everyone.

“Little brother! Here to drown your woes?” Koru’s snide remark isn’t lost on me, but I’m turning over a new leaf. I unclench my fists and paste a toothy grin on my face.

“I’ll be here to celebrate my first day’s success soon. But first, have you seen a woman—” Before I can finish my question, Koru snorts at me and gestures with his meaty hands in a ‘look around’ gesture. I do not flip him the bird, but instead continue, “—wearing a big, white, puffy coat, and limping? Her name is August. She would have come in only a few minutes ago.”

Koru sets a metal pint in front of me with what I’m sure is his latest delicious brew,

and shakes his head no. I don't take the pint. I need to find her before she freezes in this storm.

"You know, little brother, when you said you were moving back to town to join Search and Rescue, I had my doubts. I still do, but I'm impressed you survived the first day."

Koru's brewery is the only bar in town I'm allowed in, due to the indiscretions of my youth. I'd hate to get kicked out of here, as well. Instead of throwing the beer at him, I turn away from his ugly green face and broken tusk to look at the crowd of humans and monsters eating and laughing together.

There, out the window, across the street framed by what is now a blizzard, I see a white puffy coat pause. She limps past. Staring at her, I will her to feel my gaze, stop and look. It's probably for the best, but I can't let her wander outside in the middle of a blizzard.

Cursing under my breath, I stomp out after her. "August! Wait!" She jumps a little at the sound of my voice over the howling wind, then turns slowly to me. Her cheeks are bright red from the cold and tears stream down her cheeks. I suck in a frozen breath at the sight of her looking so miserable.

Before I can say anything or move, she launches herself at me, arms wrapping tight around me as her body heaves with frantic tears. She looks up at me and steals my breath with her vulnerability and beauty. Slowly, I wrap my arms around her—she's so cold, despite her snow pants and coat.

I run my hand down the side of her cheek, wiping away her tears. "Shh, it's okay. I'm here now. I'll take care of you." She nods into my chest.

"Get a room, you two," a familiar voice bellows at us from across the street. Koru. I

flip him the bird behind my back. He snorts in response. As much as it pains me to admit, he's right. We can't just stand here kissing as the wind whips around us and sleet falls from the heavens.

Besides, this is just rescuer syndrome, right? Or the after-effects of her being scared and almost hypothermic? This isn't real. No one like her would possibly want me; I'm too tarnished for her.

"Let's get you something warm," I whisper. August nods and shivers. Wrapping her arm over my shoulder, my arm holding her close to me, I help her to the next shop, Moonlit Grounds Café and Bakery.

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Bjorn

It takes two mugs of Ravena's special hot cocoa, and her famous chicken pot pie for August to finally start talking. Each time she brings her mug or spoon to her lips, I feel a pang of jealousy for the damn cutlery and crockery. Her full red lips are their own siren's call, and I sit here at their mercy.

"I don't have anywhere to go." She fiddles with her spoon rather than look at me, which is for the better that she didn't notice me staring longingly at her lips. Trying to be the good guy is harder than it sounds. Six months ago, I'd already have her in my bed. Instead, I'm buying another round of hot cocoa and trying to solve her problems. And the annoying thing is, I'm not sad. There's something about the brightness of her eyes that makes me want her to always look at me like that, not just for one night.

"Your friend? May?" I scratch my head. "Why are you both named after months?" She snorts at my question but shakes her head.

"She's my cousin. But I can't go to her place—her idiot boyfriend is not a person I can be around anymore. I promised myself on the mountain that I wouldn't go back there." She blushes and this time it isn't because of the cold.

I snort, appreciating her flushed skin, as well as her boundaries, as I wipe my bowl clean with a piece of hearty bread.

"Look. He made me mad. I moved in with May two weeks ago, after trying to make a living off the island. It just wasn't for me. He heard me telling May how I was going to be strong and independent and alone after I get on my feet here. Well, Chad

thought that was bollocks. ‘There’s no way you’ll survive. You aren’t made for life alone.’ So, I had to clear my head.” She shrugs, and I understand there are a lot of emotions in those two shoulders.

“And now, everything in my head says he was right. You rescued me on the mountain. And now we’re here together. How do I explain that away?”

“Just because I insisted on helping you down safely doesn’t mean I rescued you. Well,” I say as I scratch my chin, “I did give you a big stick.” She almost snorts cocoa out of her nose at that statement. “Having a meal with me doesn’t mean you aren’t strong and independent. Just that you aren’t alone. Which can be good or bad, I suppose. I don’t think you should let Chad dictate your health and safety, or your happiness.” There’s more I want to say, but I bite my tongue. She gets to make her own choices.

I also don’t say that I want to pound Chad’s head into the pavement, then toss him into the icy North Atlantic for a swim with the fishes.

After nodding as if I’m sage and wise, August goes back to eating. I do the same. I want nothing more than to sweep her away to my apartment and show her how glorious being together can be. Show her that I’m nothing like Chad, or her ex, or any other rotten man she’s ever experienced.

But she has to want it. Want me. So instead, I drink hot cocoa and try not to wish it was beer. As if she heard my disgruntled thoughts, Ravena, the café’s owner, shows up at our table, a gleaming smile on her face.

Ravena has been here longer than I’ve been alive, and I swear she looks the same as when I was just an orcling, begging her for another hot cocoa after sledding all day. I’m fairly confident she’s a witch, but my brothers refuse to acknowledge my arguments.

“How are you two doing? Have you warmed up any? Made any life altering decisions yet?” She rubs her hand in comforting circles along August’s back as she asks.

“You change your recipe?” I ask as August finishes chewing so she can speak.

“Oh Bjorn, this is my special cacao blend. I only use it on special occasions.” She winks at me.

“What’s the special occasion?”

“Well obviously, this glorious weather that’s brought you together today!” She holds a hand out to the window, as if I hadn’t noticed the blizzard. Hmmm.

“This is the best food and cocoa I think I’ve ever had. Thank you so much.” August continues to gush at Ravena as she clears our plates away.

When I go to pay, Ravena gazes at me with her pale gray eyes. “She’s fragile right now, but she has a deep strength within her. You take care of her.” She quirks an eyebrow at me, making me feel like I’m an adolescent again, and she knows I’m about to get into trouble. I nod, but don’t say anything.

I wonder what Ravena knows as I step away from the crazy witch and her pet crow that sits on a perch behind her, looking at me with its beady eyes, and her voice stops me.

“Bjorn.” There’s no inflection, as if she’s asking for my attention. It’s a command. Reluctantly, I turn back to her, ignoring the crow as it fluffs and shakes its feathers, like it’s prepping for a fight. “It’s good to have you home. Not everyone thinks the same as me, yet. But they will.” A nod in thanks, and I walk away as fast as I can, unwillingly to acknowledge the meaning of her words. Besides, the sight of August is bewitching enough.

I can't stop Ravena's words from echoing in my head as I watch August wrap herself up in her fluffy coat, scarf, and hat with a white pompom on top. Sigh. Watching her breasts rise and fall with each breath while we ate was mesmerizing. I'm pretty sure my definition of "take care of her," and Ravena's differ.

Rescue lady off mountain—check.

Feed her food and warm her up—check.

I guess it's time to send her on her way, though it pains me to do so. I can't prove Koru right that I'm still a fuck-up my first week back on the island.

"Where are you headed?" I ask.

Her expression clouds like when Wolf's Ridge fogs over. I can't read it. At risk of a misstep off a cliff, I follow her lead. Don't be the hero. Let her write this story. I remind myself with each step. Each painful step. It physically pains me to watch her limp through the café to the slippery outside. Once there, the wind still howls, but the sleet has eased up. "I'm glad I'm SAR and not a town EMT. I bet there are a dozen accidents tonight on the roads this dangerous. Which way?"

She shakes her head, looks at me with soulful eyes, and whispers, "I don't have anywhere to go." My heart stops at those words. For fuck's sake. Of course she doesn't. What am I supposed to do now, Koru? Let her freeze to death out here?

"Are you asking for help?" I turn to block her from the wind as it whips around the edge of the brick building we're up against. She nods. "Good." I'm smart enough to not say, finally, though I shout it in my mind.

Sweeping her up into my arms, I cradle her against me and make my way to my apartment.

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Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 7:28 am

August

I don't know what I expected from an orc's home. I know they've been part of this island for over one hundred years. They work as police officers, search and rescue, gardeners, and brewers. Gorgeous yet disturbing monsters aside, they're part of society's fabric.

So why did I think Bjorn was going to carry me off to a cave? I'm not sure. Ashamed, but undaunted, I inspect around while he fiddles at the stove, making tea for us. Boxes everywhere. No furniture. Just stacks of cardboard boxes that look like they've been rolled across the country and floated to the island.

"Are you moving?" I ask, inching closer to the tiny kitchen, made tinier by Bjorn's giant frame taking up all the breathing room. His back muscles ripple under his flannel shirt with each movement he makes. His neck flexes as he turns to look at me. I've heard a lot of women talk about how strong and angry orcs are, but I've never heard anyone talk about how soft their gaze can be. Bjorn's eyes have the same calm in them that they had on the mountain earlier—like the banked coals of a fire.

"Just moved in. Yesterday." Bjorn hands me a blue mug, then sips his own. We stand awkwardly in the kitchen. I try not to touch him, but gods, it's difficult.

"You act like you know your way around for just moving here," I say, bobbing the tea bag up and down in my mug. He nods and huffs out an almost laugh.

"I grew up here. This is my first time back in five years. Needed a change of pace and scenery. What about you?"

I sigh. I was enjoying hearing his deep voice vibrate through me. “My cousin, May, grew up here. My mom and I used to visit, so I have fond memories. Mom passed away a few months ago, and I’ve been a bit... nomadic since then. Lost. Moved in with my cousin May two weeks ago. But now, after today, I can’t go back.” Shrugging, like it’s not a big deal that I lost my mom, and now I’m essentially homeless, I yawn loudly. My mom always said I could wake the dead with my yawn. I sip my tea, floral yet spicy. I like it.

With a grunt, Bjorn sets his empty mug on the counter and walks away. His arm brushes against mine—there’s no way around it. Fire sears my arm where we touched. Why am I torturing myself this way? He clearly does not want to have anything to do with my idiotic ass, who tried to climb a mountain on a dare.

After hearing a couple of thumps that are not my heart pounding, I follow the sound. Bjorn is on his knees, creating a nest of pillows and blankets. He looks up when my toes reach the edge of the nest, rests his meaty hands on his thick thighs. “I should have put you straight to bed. You will sleep here. I’ll be down the hall if you need anything.” Something rumbles inside me at him on his knees before me. Something dangerous.

“You don’t have a bed?”

“No, I only moved what fit in my truck. I’ve been sleeping in a chair I borrowed from my brother.”

“Well, thank you?” My voice goes up at the end, because I don’t know what to do with any of this information. I don’t know what to do with his kindness.

Exhaustion hits me like a semi-truck. Yawning again, I stretch, then pull off my sweater. I’m finally starting to warm up. There’s nowhere to put it, so after holding it awkwardly while I spin in a circle looking for a chair, I finally drop it to the floor.

Whatever.

My eyes catch his, and there's clearly more than warm coals in his eyes now. His nostrils flare as he stares at me. Looking down, I forgot what I was wearing. A long-sleeved, skintight red thermal. And beneath that, perky nipples. They've been like that all day because of the cold. Of course, I'm not cold now. Bjorn clears his throat and stands.

"You will thank me in the morning. The bathroom is down the hall," he says begrudgingly. And with that, he walks down the hall to what I guess is the bedroom and closes the door. But not before my eyes see the bulge in his pants. The enormous bulge that makes my mouth water.

"Well, goodnight, I guess," I whisper into the silent room. Once he is out of sight, I take off my pants and thermal shirt. It's a camisole, panties, and socks kind of night. Snuggled into the nest, under the mountain of blankets, I think for a moment how funny it is that he has so many blankets and no bed. But that's as far as I get; sleep overtakes me.

When I wake, it's still dark out. My phone, with ten percent battery, tells me it's two in the morning. I should be asleep. Rolling over, I try to match my breath to the gentle snores I hear coming down the hall. But I can't, too deep, too long. He must have the lung capacity of a whale. When I focus on his breath, I remember the way his arm brushed against mine. The way he held me when he carried me here from the brewery. The way he helped me down the mountain without judgment. His eyes in the light—teasing and also ablaze with intensity that doesn't scare me, but maybe it should.

Eventually, I limp out of bed, forgetting for a minute that my ankle is injured. Fire shoots up my ankle and leg. Catching myself, I bite my lip before I yell and wake Bjorn. I find mouthwash in the bathroom, then attempt to tiptoe toward the snores.

There's enough moonlight streaming in through the window to see that Bjorn is asleep in the only chair in the entire apartment. I don't understand it. Why didn't he make himself a nest?

His skin is a silvery green in the moonlight, and his fangs have a slight gleam in them. The sight of him makes me shiver, which has nothing to do with the cold and howling wind outside.

"You going to say something or just stand there staring?" His rumble awakens me further, his raspy voice resonates somewhere between my thighs. I swallow hard.

"Why—" words leave my mind. My feet shuffle forward of their own accord. Now that I'm up, the chill in the air on my bare legs and arms makes me shiver.

His sigh doesn't sound annoyed, just tired, like my presence woke him from a long hibernation. "Your scent," is all he says.

My scent woke him up? Or my scent caused him to stuff himself into a recliner made for a man—not an orc?

"I can't get back to sleep."

"That's because your bed is in the other room."

"Ha. You're funny at two A.M. Where is your bed?" Before I can think of anything else to say, to ask, he's up. Towering over me, I don't think I was cognizant enough on the mountain to realize just how massive he is. At eye level, I'm looking at his chest—very muscular and well-defined chest. I gulp. He isn't wearing a shirt, just a pair of sweatpants that do little to hide how muscular his thighs are, or how hard he is. I gulp again. My fingers itch to caress his skin.

“Your scent is driving me mad. And I don’t have much willpower at two in the morning. So unless you are prepared to be ravaged, I need you to go back to your bed.” How many times can one girl gulp in the span of just a few minutes? I smile a little, because I like the idea of driving the gigantic orc mad.

“By ‘mad’, do you mean—” I don’t get to finish, because Bjorn’s lips press against mine, kissing all logical thoughts from my brain. One of his large hands knocks aside my hands making quotation marks, then cups the back of my head, keeping me close. As if I would leave. His other teases up and down the side of my arm, causing chills, before resting on my lower back. One finger plays with the waistband of my panties. I let myself get swept up in his kiss. In the smoothness of his lips. In the exoticness of running my tongue over his fangs, of savoring his massive hard planes against all my soft curves.

When he releases me, it’s just enough to rest his forehead against mine and purr like the happiest cat in town. I gulp a breath of air.

“You are the most amazing creature I’ve ever met. Brave. Sexy. Stubborn. Now, please go to bed.” The words sound almost painful as he whispers them. “I’m no good for you.”

“No. You don’t get to decide what’s good for me. You don’t get to kiss me like that, light me on fire, then walk away for me to burn all by myself. That is not a kindness.” My whisper has an edge of slightly furious that he’s pushing me away.

Tucking my hair behind my ear, he asks, “What would be a kindness?”

“Tending to my fire,” I whisper, my heart thumps a million miles a minute, as I’m not entirely sure what that will entail, what that will look like with our sizes—our differences. He cocks his head like he is listening to something.

“Your heart sounds erratic. Are you sure?” Words fail me, so I nod.

“August,” he groans my name. My heart melts. “Your head and your heart clearly don’t agree.”

“Yes. I’m sure,” I say with the same confidence I had when I thought I could climb the mountain alone. What could go wrong?

With that one sentence, he swoops me up again and carries me back to the nest he made. Back on the squishy blankets, I sigh in delight. I’m warmer already. His hands stroke my legs, seemingly knowing where the knots in my calf muscles are. Slowly, he makes his way up and down my legs—to the top of my thighs and hips, then down to my one good ankle. In between strokes, he places gentle kisses along my torso, lifting my camisole to expose my stomach, dipping down my waistband to my hip bone. Kisses flit up to my shoulder, along my collarbone, my neck, back to my lips.

Inside me, part of me is fire, part of me is boiling water—churned and unsettled, needing more. When his hand reaches the top of my inner thigh again, I spread my legs wider. A whimper escapes me, making me blush. I never whimper, but Bjorn has a spell over me. One of pure craving and ecstasy.

“You like that, little goat? You like my hands on your skin. My lips teasing you.” When I don’t answer because my brain is a catlike puddle, purring in delight and oblivious to the need for words, he stops. Hands and lips off, he leans back on his haunches.

The absence of his hands startles me. Propping myself up on my elbows, I can see his erection through his sweatpants, and there I go, gulping again. It’s an architectural thing of beauty.

“Answer me, August.” I love the way my name sounds on his lips.

“I—what was the question?” I’m glad it’s dark so he can’t see me blush.

“I asked if you liked this. I need an answer before I continue.”

“What? If I don’t, you’re just going to walk away? Go sleep in that stupid recliner with your giant hard-on?” My eyebrow arches and my lip twitches in a smirk. A voice in my mind reminds me I’m playing with fire, but fire is the only thing that matters.

“Our species and size differences aside, consent is very important to me. You need to be a team player.”

“Team player? As in, more than one of you?”

“Gods, no!” He chuckles, then shifts to lie next to me, careful to leave millimeters of space between us. I bring my foot over to his leg, and he removes it from his body. I make a pouty face, and I wonder who I’ve become in the last twenty-four hours. Whimpering? Pouting? This is not me. “I mean, you have to be an active participant with me. Only me.” The only is a growl that makes me quiver from head to toe.

“What do I have to do for you to believe me when I say yes?” One fat orc finger makes little circles, starting at my shoulder and working its way across my chest, slowly sinking lower toward my breasts which continue to betray my excitement with their pointed peaks.

“Say it again,” he growls into my ear, his finger tantalizing my skin. His skin is so smooth. I swear my finger tingles from the sensations of touching him, just like my chest tingles. Maybe he has magic tingly skin?

“Yes.” The word is a squeak as he twists my nipple.

“Yes, what?” Cool air tickles my skin as fingers once again leave my body. I can’t believe he is going to make me say the words out loud.

“I want this, with you. There, that better?”

“Much better, August.” He yanks down my top, his mouth hot on my breast as he sucks, his tongue licking my nipple, teasing. My brain scrambles as I moan and arch my back to him. Fingers claw and dig into his skin.

He growls, then blows over the top of my nipple. An involuntary groan escapes me. I pull down the other half of my top to expose my other breast. Bjorn just laughs at me. His deep rumbling is the best thing I’ve ever experienced. It vibrates through me.

He does the unthinkable. He stands up. “Wait! Don’t leave!”

“I’ll be right back.” Squirming, I cover myself with the blanket and wait with a stupid pout on my face. When he steps back into the nest and sits down next to me, my center tightens and twists with an intensity that has me breathing hard.

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Bjorn

Am I the luckiest orc alive? Or am I being punished for all my stupid life choices? It's really a toss-up. Deep breath.

But August is more than a sweet piece of ass to fuck. Her scent has entered the deepest part of my soul. Her smile has etched itself into my heart. There's no walking away from this, from her. I can't fuck this up.

"Bjorn," she whispers. I want to wipe away the worry wrinkle between her eyes. Hold her and worship every inch of her.

"August, I just...I'm just no good for you." I breathe out hard, half-imagining fire as I expel my lungs. What the fuck am I doing? Wiping my hands down my face, I know I should walk away. Just walk away Bjorn.

But then August sits up, her breasts barely contained under her tank top. Her round face peers at me in the moonlight, looking not just beautiful, but worried and ashamed. I never want to be the source of her feeling shamed.

"Look. I just moved back here, to my hometown, to turn over a new leaf. A mature leaf. There's no denying there's something between us, but me ravishing you right now, on our first night, is something the old me would do. And I don't want to fuck this up before we've had a chance to see where we could end up."

"Oh Bjorn, I get that. I'm still trying to figure out my own path. But you've got some sort of orc magic. My skin tingles when you touch me. Your rumbling voice

penetrates my soul. I can't imagine leaving here, leaving you. Maybe it's rescuer syndrome." She laughs awkwardly, like if she makes fun of her emotions, it will mean less.

"Don't downplay how you feel. It's an insult."

"I'm sorry. I'm serious—I want this. I want you. Please, Bjorn."

Oh, gods. The please on her lips is sweet nectar. What if walking away from her right now is fucking it up? Dammit.

Another deep breath. I unscrew the lid to the jar I brought over. "This is what we're going to do. We are only going to do what you are comfortable with. I have lube here for you. It's a—it's made with our size difference in mind. Magic sometimes has its uses. I want to pleasure you. And whatever doesn't feel good, or makes you uncomfortable, you tell me, okay?"

She nods. Not good enough.

"August, you have to say the words."

"Okay. I'm saying the words. I want to be in your arms and be touched by you. I want everything you have to offer. And I want to return the favor."

"No favors here."

She rolls her eyes, thinking the dark is protecting her from me. But she's wrong. Every time she blushes or makes a pouty face, I see.

"I just mean—I want this. I want you. Please." Gods, that word on her lips again. And with that word, I dive back in, pushing her legs apart. She giggles nervously, and I

make eye contact with her to make sure she's comfortable. Her eyes sparkle with delight in the moonlight.

“Anything you need. A break. A pause. A pizza. You just say the word.” This time her laugh is music, true and happy. “We’re going to go slow.”

Running my hands up and down her legs, a review of just a few minutes earlier. But as I reach her hip bones, I grab her panties. “May I?” She nods. I glare.

“Yes,” she says, sounding annoyed I made her say the word. I don’t care. She can be annoyed all she wants. Slowly, I pull her panties down, just to the top of her mound. I layer kisses on her skin, soaking in her scent, her moans. She runs her fingers through my hair, I might be in heaven. Down a little further, I don’t kiss her clit, but I blow air across the top of it, enjoying her shiver and her fingers digging into my hair harder. Yes.

One more pull, and they’re off completely. My hands trace the curve of her inner thigh. So curvy, so sweet. She’s entrancing. I could stay here all night and worship at the entrance to her pleasure. I drape her legs carefully over my shoulders and nestle down. Her uninjured foot pushes me down into her. I love this—that she needs me like I need her. Smiling, I whisper, “I’m taking my time, little goat. Patience is a virtue.”

“I don’t have any virtues. And I don’t care to cultivate any. Please.” Groaning, I give in, and take her in my mouth. The gasp that escapes her lips as she spreads her legs even wider, making room for my head and shoulders, sends a shiver of delight down my spine. Damn.

“You taste delicious.” I moan against her, then continue to tongue her clit, her lips, her slit. She pants, whimpers, whispers my name. My hands travel north, clasp her breasts, one in each hand, tweaking her sweet pink nipples. She says my name louder.

Music to my ears.

Coming up to check in with her, I pull her top off, exposing her sweet, round breasts to the moonlight. “You are perfect. I hope you know that.” She smiles a shy smile, runs her fingers lightly over my shoulders. “I know this is stretching your comfort zone. First the mountain, now an orc. Relax. I’m going to take care of you. I Promise.”

In response, August arches her back toward me. I oblige, taking her breast in my mouth, leaning in against her center. She rubs against me, and I want to come right now. I want to roar in the pleasure she brings me. Spill myself to her, in her. Her softness, sounds, sweet flesh, every bit of her is almost too much. Together, it’s painful to hold on to my senses.

I make my way back down to her center, sucking and licking with a fervor that has her panting my name with every breath. I don’t stop. Don’t let up. I need her to come almost as much as she needs it.

We don’t wait long. Her pleasure comes in waves. My hands grasp at her, holding her tight. Her hands push against my head, trying to get me off her. I grudgingly oblige, but I stay right there between her thighs as her body bucks with pleasure.

“Bjorn. I don’t even know what to say,” she whispers, emotion choking her voice.

“You don’t have to say anything.” I crawl up next to her, hold her against me. “This is just a taste of what’s in store for you.”

“Reciprocation?” She asks, but her voice is quiet, sleepy already. Kissing the back of her head, I pull the blankets over us.

“You’ve had a long day. Rest, little goat. We have all the days ahead of us.” There’s

no answer. She's already asleep. I smile, thanking the universe for the moment of bliss, hoping it will last. I've never been happier. How do I hold on to this, her, without fucking it up?

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Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 7:28 am

Bjorn

“O h my gods, it stinks in here! What did you do?” Grev’s booming voice wakes us both. August gasps, it’s the cutest sound. She burrows down deep under the blanket, her ass rubbing up against me as she wiggles down. I growl in pleasure, my erection aching for relief.

“A female.” Grev grumbles out the word, as he opens the fridge and rummage through. As if I have any food for him. Why is he here?

I hate my brother so much.

“Get out.” I rotate my head away from August as I snarl my words at him, but I don’t let go of her. She feels like paradise on a summer day.

Grev continues to go through my kitchen, just to annoy me. I just moved in; I don’t have anything for him. Mentally, I calculate all the ways I’m going to beat him up later.

“Koru wants your help at the brewery today. And lady, please know that Bjorn is bad news.” And with that, the door shuts. I curse under my breath. Way to go, brother. Way to ruin the one good thing that’s happened to me in the last five years. Or maybe ever.

“Well, now you’ve met one brother.”

“How many brothers do you have?” she whispers. I exhale at her melodic voice.

“Too many.”

I can sense how tense her body is. See the arch of her neck as she listens with both ears. Once his footsteps fade away, August exhales loudly, plops her head back on the pillow, her hair billowing out around her, and lets out a great laugh. She laughs and laughs, until I’m caught up in it. Watching her neck arch and her mouth open wide in joy is like watching birds take flight—mesmerizing, majestic, full of life that gives me hope.

We lie together, laughing until she can’t catch her breath and tears stream down her cheeks. Gasping for air, she finally settles a bit. We make eye contact, and my cock isn’t the only thing swelling. Her eyes are so sincere, so full of delight—my heart is full. Before I can say anything poetic or romantic, her lips are on mine. Now I’m the one sighing in delight.

“I’m sorry, I have to go,” she whispers against my lips. My heart plummets to the floor. I knew it was too good to be true. Resigned, I release her. She jumps up, yells as she lands on her ankle, then hobbles down the hall, shooing my hands away as I try to steady her.

I don’t follow. There’s no need. She’ll dress, walk through the door, and I’ll get on with my life. Make an actual list, mark off the boxes. Buy a bed, like a grown-ass orc.

The bathroom door opens, and rage fills my veins. I’m an orc. I don’t play at these stupid human emotions. My kind have found their mates in caves and hillsides and palaces and mc-mansions. There’s no reason I can’t have every good thing I want. And I refuse to let August mess me up. I have work to do.

It was stupid of me to think that falling for the woman I rescued on my first day at my new job was a good idea. Folly to consider that touching her would help in my meager attempts to reform my bad-boy persona.

Footsteps echo down the hall, interrupting my pep talk to myself. A squeal. Silence.

Ooof. August lands on top of me. Hair and blankets fly around me. Huh.

“Sorry, did I hurt you? I couldn’t tell where you start and stop.” She’s straddling me, her petite hands pushing down on my shoulders, as if she could keep me here. The smile on her face falters. “What’s wrong?”

“Aren’t you leaving?” I growl. It’s my turn to pout.

“Do you want me to leave? I just really had to pee.” She moves off me. I grab her thigh to stop her.

“You’re not leaving?”

“I didn’t have plans to. I really like being here with you. You make me feel safe and desired.” Her cheeks flush with her vulnerable words.

“You are safe. And desired.” I pull her back on top of me and kiss her. Pressing her into me, molding her soft curves to my hard lines is art worthy of the classics. Feels like joy—the same joy that rushes through me as I dangle off the side of a mountain. The same rush of satisfaction of helping someone in need—like August earlier.

August

B JORN HAS ROLLED ON top of me, his elbows keep him from crushing me. I’ve never felt safer. His lips make light, tickling kisses down my neck and across my chest. My skin prickles in delight, and my core twists—wanting more and more.

AC/DC blares from somewhere in the apartment. “What is that?” I ask, wondering if we aren’t really alone like I thought.

“A different brother.” His groan matches the slump of his face as he rolls off of me. “I have to get it. If I don’t, he’ll never quit.” Sighing, he gets up and saunters down the hall, and I snuggle back into my blankets.

Fatigue washes over me. I must fall asleep, because I jump when I hear Bjorn banging around. Getting up, keeping the blanket wrapped around me, I ask him what’s wrong. A flash catches my eye on the counter. My phone’s been charged, and it’s flashing that I have messages.

“Hey. You’re awake! I didn’t want to wake you. My other brother, Koru, called. He has a stick up his ass about some brewing competition. I have to help him at the brewery.” He sighs, angry. I know he isn’t angry at me; I would hate to be on the wrong side of his anger.

“You’re welcome to stay here and rest, or come with.” Undecided as to where to go today, I contemplate if tagging along to Bjorn’s brother’s brewery is a good idea, I look at the messages from May. Uh-oh.

“I think I need to get dressed and go. My cousin, May, is really worried about me. I guess she thinks I’ve been abducted.”

Bjorn’s nostrils flare—whether in anger or amusement, I’m not sure, but then he growls, and I understand. “Call her and tell her you’re safe.” He mutters something under his breath that I don’t quite catch. I don’t dare ask. His frustration is understandable; lots of misinformation spreads about orcs, but I don’t know how May knows who I’m with.

“I think I should go talk to her and set her straight. Yesterday was so stressful. I don’t

think I called her once I was safe.” My fingers twist, unsure that I want to do this.

He catches my gaze. So steady and true. I am calmer, surer of myself with his dark eyes on me. “Brann called her. Part of the process with the rescue. My guess is he told her we were together.”

“Orcs are more gossipy than I imagined,” I say, teasing him. He huffs and rolls his eyes.

“My brothers are the worst. But just wait until you start hanging with the gargoyles—their need for gossip is insatiable. Alright, dinner together tonight?” His eyes glint with desire. I nod, embracing the butterflies coming to life in my stomach, knowing who I want for dinner.

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August

“O h my God, August! I was so afraid! So worried about you!” May wraps her arms tightly around me, causing me to gasp for breath. I pat her back to get her to release me. Then harder when she doesn’t get the hint. Now she does.

“I was fine the whole time,” I say as I walk gingerly through the small living room to the kitchen, where all important conversations happen. Her kitchen table was my aunt’s, her mom, and when I sit there, I feel both my aunt’s and my mom’s presence. It’s comforting, even if my heart aches a little at missing them, especially mom.

“Fine? You didn’t come home. Didn’t call or text. I had to call Search and Rescue, and be told by the orc captain that you are hanging out with an ORC. An ORC, August! Can you imagine my surprise and disgust? What would our moms say?” She pauses long enough to take a deep breath and gulp some water. Shuddering, as if the thought that I would hang out with the person who rescued me is physically repulsive to her, her eyes bug at me before she starts again.

“You would never believe what Chad said about you and the orc!” She laughs that awful laugh she only makes when Chad says something she’s pretending is funny and not at all offensive or stupid (when, in fact, many times it’s both).

“Stop.” I hold my hands up. “I don’t want to hear what Chad said. I can’t believe you’re upset. I was shook up, almost hypothermic, and I strained my ankle. So yeah, I forgot to call you. It was a shitty day. But I wouldn’t have been up there if it weren’t for Chad’s taunting about not being independent.”

“It was your choice.” Now her voice is quiet, almost meek. She runs her hand through her hair and I see the crease between her eyebrows that wasn’t there a few months ago. The dullness in her eyes. She looks ragged, which I hadn’t noticed before. An exhaustion that has nothing to do with being worried for her cousin yesterday, and has everything to do with something or someone stealing her happiness and energy from her.

Carefully standing, I limp to her and wrap her in my arms, gentle but steady. “I love you, May. Thank you for calling Search and Rescue. They took excellent care of me, even though I insisted I could do it myself.” She snorts into my shoulder. We continue to stand like that until I realize her body is bouncing a little. May is crying. “What’s wrong?” I whisper.

This is my cousin and closest friend. My sister from another mister. Our lives have been intertwined our entire lives. Holidays and lazy summer and cozy winters—our lives don’t exist without the other. Visiting was always a highlight for mom and me. It’s hard to untangle those childhood memories and emotions from the present.

Since my mom died, and she started dating Chad, we’ve fallen away from each other. I’ve been filled with grief, unable to verbalize or actualize the black pit inside me. And she’s been caught up making a major asshole happy. Neither of us has been able to help the other. Is this what growing up means?

But I can’t stand to see her in pain. Gathering reserve, I grapple to find words to get us through this—together. Before I can open my mouth, her confession spills out.

“Chad said the orc kidnapped you. I freaked out. I went to search and rescue and demanded the name of who you were with. I called the police. I called the mayor’s office. I—I called the newspaper.” She bursts into aching sobs. My shoulder quickly goes from dry to drenched.

My heart stills. My breath stops.

All I hear is a squealing whirling in my head. May called the cops on me. On Bjorn. She tried to get the government to...what? Have the mayor ask Bjorn to let me go?

Bjorn. His brothers. Even Brann. My heart pounds loudly as the screechy whirling gets louder in my head. This town lives in a delicate peace with our neighbors. I know it won't take much to set chaos and vitriol into action.

"What exactly did you say to the police?" My mouth is dry and the words are hard to utter.

The screeching is outside. On the street. Louder and then quieter again as car after car race down the road under us.

"Brann gave me his name. Chad helped me find his address. His brothers' names. I told the police he kidnapped you and was keeping you captive against your will."

"Chad found his address, but didn't come get me himself?" I mean, I wasn't in danger, but it's nice to think that if I were in danger, May and Chad would have my back.

Except, they didn't.

Tamping down my anger is an effort in futility. Asshole is too kind a word to describe him.

"Too dangerous," she whispers. She's pulled away now. Her face is red. She won't make eye contact with me. Shame covers all her movements as she smushes her palms against her eyes. And she should be ashamed—that she hasn't dumped his ass yet.

Scrubbing my face to shake the cobwebs from my brain, I turn away and grab a root beer from the fridge. May follows, shuffling in her ridiculous bunny slippers. The sweet fizz gives me courage. “Look, May, I love you. I think Chad is an asshole you need to dump; I wasn’t kidnapped. The only time I was in danger was on the mountain with a twisted ankle and the sun sinking below the horizon, with the temperature dropping below freezing as I hobbled down. That’s also the only time I was scared. I had a lot of time to think—lots of quiet on a snowy mountain with a mountain goat. Chad is using you. And you deserve better. And if you can’t dump him right now, at least think for yourself.

“I’m going to leave now. I’ll be staying with Bjorn. Apparently, you know where to find me.”

Hopefully after today, he’ll still want me. Otherwise, I really will have nowhere to go.

Outside, I breathe in the crisp, cold air. The perfect accompaniment to my bubbly root beer. Now, I need to find Bjorn before the cops do.

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Bjorn

The red and blue lights announce the fun before the four cops pour in from the outside. Koru and I are in the brewery's kitchen, prepping ingredients for tonight's dinner, as well as some spices for a new beer he wants to make for whatever blah blah competition he's entering. I will never understand Koru's fascination with boiling water with hops and herbs and yeast. Don't get me wrong, I love drinking it. But the process of making it makes me want to swim across the North Atlantic, in the middle of winter, in nothing but a Speedo.

"These pals of yours?" Koru asks under his breath just before he plasters his fanged smile to his face and saunters out to the bar to greet the demon sheriff and his minion officers in minotaur, gargoyle, and troll forms.

"Good afternoon. We are looking for your brother, Bjorn. His neighbor said he may be here." I growl. Mr. Palmer is always trying to screw me over; I'll be sure to thank him next time I see him.

"Bjorn! Get your ass out here!" Koru bellows. My finger twitches to flip him the bird, but I use self-control. Seems like demonstrating my self-control is a good thing to do with visiting police.

I wave as I leave the safety of the kitchen. Before I can say anything, the deputy with the shiniest badge and the biggest hat come right over to me—I don't recognize the gargoyle, he must be new to town. His menacing wings twitch, like he's hoping there will be a fight as I crack my knuckles. New leaf. You have turned over a new leaf, I remind myself. Officer Stone is apparently a snuggler—he's standing way too close

to me. I refuse to take a step back—two can play his game. He says, “Bjorn, you’re under arrest for kidnapping August Mason.”

At those words, my vision narrows, and my ears block out every sound around me. I see Koru’s face appear, his god-awful mouth open in a yawn or yell. Probably a yell. He slaps the bar countertop, cracking his precious gleaming wood he’s so proud of. Another cop appears near him, hand on his holster, and Koru’s hands go up grudgingly in surrender.

Cold metal pinches my wrists; it really is too bad that they don’t carry orc-sized cuffs. Or maybe it is a good thing. We all try so hard to be good citizens...most of the time.

It isn’t until I’m being pushed out the door into the chilly sunshine that my brain kicks into gear. Koru is cursing me out, following the cops, but at a distance. The second cop keeps one hand out toward my stupid brother, as if Koru were a dog about to attack. I mean, he is...

“Wait, is August missing?” Words finally funnel themselves out of my head and mouth.

“She was last night. Her cousin reported her missing.” The curt reply makes me angry.

“But is she missing now? Because when I came here, she was on her way to her cousin’s place. Is she in danger?”

“Not anymore,” the cop says with bravado, like he’s just saved the world. He pushes me at the car with the lights still spinning and flashing. This doesn’t make any sense. If she’s with May, why am I under arrest?

The last thing I hear as the engine starts is Koru shouting at me, “She better be worth

it!” He stalks off as the car shifts into reverse. I hope that means he’ll post my bail. And yeah, she is worth it.

The next two hours pass in a blur. I’m fingerprinted. Mug shot taken. I’m put in a cell by myself. When I ask where my inmates are, the lonely officer just shrugs and says, “Small town. It’s quiet.” That explains some things. I will say, this isn’t my first time to be arrested, but this is the first time for charges so serious, and the first time it wasn’t my fault.

Leaning back against the wall, I let my mind wander. It doesn’t matter where I start—work, climbing mountains, past misdeeds, current misdeeds—my mind always comes back to August. Her succulent curves, her spirited laugh, her keen wit. And her lips. Always, her lips. The taste of August’s lips is tattooed to my soul.

I hear my brothers’ voices echo. Then I hear what I think is my captain’s voice. Shit. I’m in serious trouble now. One day on the job and now my boss is coming to visit me in jail? Suppose that universal truth is right, and I can’t go home.

I’m released in quick fashion by a human deputy. He keeps his sunglasses on, even inside to hide his nervousness. No matter, I can smell it on him. He makes no apologies. All charges dropped. Good. I need to buy a bed, and I did not want to spend the night on the hard bench in the cell. It’s not orc-sized.

Brann, Koru, Urk, and Grev are waiting for me outside. All four look pissed. Koru opens his mouth, I’m sure to yell at me some more, but I hold up my hand in a stop motion, as does Brann.

“Is August okay?” The words are croaked, as if I haven’t had water in a week.

“We think so. Her cousin says she came by. We got her to call and explain to the lovely Moonfang Haven PD that August has been seen and is safe.”

“Glad you’re out. Try not to fuck up anymore, okay?” Urk says, slapping my back and walking away, back to his weird wood art in the forest. My reclusive brother, ladies and gents.

“Where is she?”

“I’m not sure. Now, before you get completely riled up, I want you to know that this will be in the paper tomorrow. Small town.” Brann shrugs like that’s a perfectly good explanation for my embarrassment. “And I’m going to get pushback to fire you.”

Fire flares up in me. He sees my chest puff and my hands clench into fists as I prepare to wage a one-orc-war on this town. I will burn it all down. How did I think it was a good idea to come home?

His posture changes to be less forceful, less captain-y. “Don’t. It will be under control. I’m not letting you go anywhere. You were incredible scaling that mountain yesterday. Quicker than anyone else on the team. And you were able to help August without crushing her pride or causing any sort of scene. Impressive. You are great at your job. I hope you know that.”

Damnit. I hate when people put out my fire. Especially with compliments. Stupid captain, knowing how to take care of his people. “Fine,” I growl. As I suck in a breath, I realize I no longer have her scent in my nostrils. An ache builds in my chest. I need to be with her, hold her. “But I need to know she’s okay. I need to find her.”

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Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 7:28 am

August

After waiting outside his apartment for an hour in the pale, chilled sunlight, I meander through town, looking for signs of Bjorn. I wish I had my hiking stick he made me. My ankle protests with every step. The trouble is, there are quite a few orcs here—all green, bulky, strong. Like Pavlov's dog, at the sight of each of them, my heartbeat flutters in anticipation. Then my heart falls into my boots when I realize that once again, it isn't him.

I check the search and rescue station—empty. Green Orc Grocers. Moonfang Library. Moonlit Grounds Café and Bakery.

At Moonlit Grounds, Ravena tsks as I tell her my story and makes me a special tea to go. I asked for coffee, but after one look at me, she said my nerves needed something calmer. She wasn't wrong. "A special blend for a special person." That's not weird at all. And she wouldn't let me pay her. Just gave me a wink.

On my way to the brewery—his brother Koru runs it, I think he said, my hopes are high, only to be dashed when the place is locked up. Several pickup trucks sit outside, people sitting in them. I see heads swivel to look at me, hoping I'm going to unlock the door to the golden elixir for them.

Hungry, chilled to the bone and shivering (despite the tea), and sore as fuck from my jaunt up the mountain, I slump down against the side of the building. My ankle is swollen, a painting of mottled blues and purples. I've made a royal mess of things now, and all because I was too mad and distracted to call May last night and tell her I was okay.

I hear him before I see him. His heavy footfalls crunch the gravel at the edge of the building. A growl, snort, and then my name. Opening my eyes against the light, he's here. Bjorn is here, squatting beside me, his hand hovering over my outstretched leg. A weird déjà vu swirls around me as he asks if I'm okay, if he can touch me. I nod yes, then break out in ugly tears. Mad that I'm so emotional, I cry harder. I can't imagine that he wants anything else to do with me after this.

My stomach flips like I'm on a roller coaster as he scoops me up into his arms and stands as if he has picked up a feather and not my disheveled, teary-eyed, grumpy ass. "I'm so sorry. I was trying to find you. May and Chad..." The words stick in my throat.

Bjorn doesn't seem to care. I hear him whispering, and then the creak of the brewery door opens. Wafts of barley, beer, and coffee hit my senses as I'm carried through and into the cozy inside.

Before Bjorn can set me down, I wrap my arms tighter around his neck and burrow my face into the space where his neck and chest meet. "Please don't leave me. Don't let me go."

We sit, me in Bjorn's lap. Koru throws an ice pack on the table and Bjorn gingerly sets it on my ankle, which is stretched out on the booth bench. I murmur my thanks, but Koru has already stomped back into the kitchen.

"You're safe," he says, one hand making small circles on my back as he holds me.

"Did the police find you?" I ask, scared of the answer. One curt nod. "I'm so sorry. May and her asshat boyfriend—" I don't get to finish my rant.

"Listen, I would do anything to keep you safe. Apparently, our rendezvous is going to be in the news. Small town gossip fodder. So, we are going to go our separate ways

until it dies down. I know it isn't fair to ask you to suffer just because I'm an orc who didn't follow every proper protocol." His voice is strained as each word comes out.

"What are you talking about? I don't care about gossip or newspapers. I care about you."

"May explained how hard the last few months have been for you. I want to give you the best possible future. That means not being associated with me." With that, he slides me off his lap and onto the worn wooden booth, then leaves me to spiral. What does he mean 'May explained'?

When he returns with bowls of steaming spicy stew and mugs of hot cocoa, my stomach erupts in growls that make him laugh. I wipe my tears and dig in, unable to form a coherent thought while my stomach tries to leap out of my body to claim the food.

"I don't know how May found you before me, but I want you to know that whatever she said doesn't matter." I've scraped my bowl clean, and to say that my full stomach is now fueling my anger would be an understatement.

How dare she interfere after what Chad did?

And how dare he listen to her instead of me?

"She pulled into the station as I was leaving to find you. The damned police wouldn't tell me if you were safe or not. I worried something happened to you after you left this morning. So if nothing else, she put me at ease."

"But telling you how hard life has been? Making you think you're responsible? That's nonsense. Yes, I've been untethered since my mom passed away, and I've been a bit nomadic, trying to find my place in the world." I stop to flutter my eyes at

the ceiling, trying to prevent the tears that are filling my eyes from falling. I hate crying. Hate showing that I'm weak. Missing my mom won't bring her back. Showing Bjorn I'm a hot mess isn't going to win him over.

When I catch my breath again, certain I won't cry, I look at Bjorn across from me, and my heart melts with the tender expression in his eyes. No one has ever looked at me this way before. It's startling, comforting, unsettling, and delicious, all at once. He reaches his hand out across the table, an invitation. I take it. The heat from him is a tingle that spreads through my hand and up my arm to my chest. His fingers are thick, fat, and as they close around my fingers, I think I want to stay like this forever, protected by him.

"Bjorn, I don't know how to say this. You are the only person who has ever made me feel seen. The only person ever to accept me at face value. What'd you say yesterday? Stubborn? Rash?"

"I think today I'd use the words headstrong and gorgeous and tantalizing." At his low rumble, I squirm in my seat, heat slowly creeping up my neck to my cheeks. "I want the best for you. And it seems I am not the best."

Shaking off the doom he just dropped, I squeeze his hand. "Don't let my cousin's opinion stop you, us, from being together. I can no longer respect her opinions and choices after yesterday and today. I want you. I want to be with you. In your pillow nest." I clench my thighs, feeling sensations in my core when I picture us together in the nest he made me.

A sniff. He smiles. "You liked that?" Bjorn asks, but the fire in his eyes says he knows the answer. "You know, orcs have finely honed senses. I can see when you blush in the dark. And I can smell your arousal." The words are barely there, kissing my spine with a shiver.

“Will you please take me to your home?” I ask, batting my lashes, not to prevent tears, but to encourage him. His chuckle is low and slow as he nods.

“I’d love that. But are you sure? I don’t have the most stellar reputation.” He gives me a long, serious look, as if he is inspecting my soul for signs of hesitation. There is none. Nodding, satisfied, he says, “Let me clean up and tell Koru bye. That orc is going to ride my ass hard for the rest of the month to ensure I stay out of trouble. Big brothers are the worst.”

He carries our empty bowls and mugs back to the kitchen while I let my mind imagine us together tonight, tomorrow, in a year, in ten years. My heart swells with excitement, trepidation, and something that might be close to love.

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Bjorn

It's hard to describe, let alone admit, how big my heart swells at the sight of August lounging in the pillow nest, naked, hair draped over her shoulders, nipples teasing me from underneath her smooth locks. Her curves are lush and inviting; my fingers yearn to caress, to dig in, to hold her to me and never let go.

This drive of wanting to protect her, I've never felt it before. Not with my brothers, not with any other girlfriends of the past. It's like she's ignited a shield power, an inner dragon, a tarnished knight from within me. Nothing will keep me from her. Nothing will hurt her.

Is this fate? Is this love?

A laugh bubbles out of August as she watches me watching her. I put a sock on the door—unnecessary because I've also triple locked the door. Candles lit around the small apartment, I stoke the fire in the fireplace. This might be the best feature of this apartment. Warm. Safe. Aching with need.

“Are you done fussing? I'm getting cold waiting for you.” Her voice is melodic.

“Can't have you getting cold.” My knees creak when I rise from the hearth, and I lumber toward her like a bumbling fool. At her feet, I pause, in awe of her beauty and strength. I am not worthy of her love, her adoration. But then she extends her hands in a gimme gimme motion. Who am I to deny her? I shed my clothes and come to her.

“I never knew I could feel like this until I met you,” she whispers in my ear as I straddle her. Orcs aren’t known for their gentleness and delicate touch, but I want nothing more than to ravage her in tender, sweet kisses. She deserves caring, safety. Pleasure.

“Like what?” I ask in between kissing along her collarbone, from her left to her right.

“Safe. Adored. Treasured.”

“Look at me right now, August.” My voice is a growl, and my lips protest leaving her succulent skin. “You are a goddamned treasure. Don’t let anyone ever tell you otherwise. And now, you’re my treasure.” Her eyes glisten in the low light of the fire, but her smile beams, guiding ships to her safety. Until her lips are mashed against mine. So sweet and delectable.

Her hands roam my body while mine caress hers from top to bottom. I cup one breast, heavy and perfectly round, then take it in my mouth, sucking her nipple, twirling around it with my tongue.

She whispers my name, and the sound lights me on fire. I switch breasts. My hands travel down her curves to her hips, where I have her pinned with my legs. Every touch is the wild wind on the edge of a cliff. Sliding down her legs to expose her center is like finding treasure in a cove.

I settle in, licking her, lapping her wetness, loving her body as it trembles in delight. August scratches my head, moves me in sync with her hips. Ecstasy in this moment comes running me down, and it’s all I can do to not get swept away in my own momentum. My nose rubs her nub, she rasps out, “More.” And so I give her more. More pleasure. More love. Until her body is bucking at my face, her fingers digging into my biceps.

“More,” I say into her juicy folds. My tongue makes contact again, only to have her push me away with a sucking in of her breath. “Are you okay?” Now I’m face to face with her, inspecting her eyes for hurt.

“So—intense,” she pants, squirming her thighs together once I’m out of the way, lying next to her. I blow cool air over her nipples. She shudders again, then puts her hand on my mouth and laughs. “Seriously. You gotta give me a minute.” At that, I arch an eyebrow.

“That good, huh?” She nods, and I preen in delight at having made her feel so intensely.

“You can hold me,” she whispers, and I do, glad to get to touch any of her. My cock is hard, aching, throbbing to be inside her. Pressed against her thigh isn’t going to cut it, but for now I’ll survive.

After a couple minutes, her body relaxes more. Her thighs untwist, breathing gets deeper, and her hand strokes up and down my side. “You have so many muscles I never knew existed.” I laugh a little.

“Maybe our anatomy has some differences?” She shrugs her maybe, continuing her exploration of my body. Pushed onto my back, she is now straddling me, my cock pinned happily between us. I flex it so it thumps against her belly, making her giggle.

August sits on me, sliding down my thighs a little so she can hold my cock in her hands. One hand can’t wrap all the way around. Both hands together around it give the impression of a greedy girl, and I throb even harder at the image.

“Can I?” She looks at me with wide eyes as she licks her lips. I grunt my assent. She can do anything she wants to me right now.

“Uh-huh, Bjorn. Say the words.” The smugness on her face as she says the words is so fucking beautiful.

“Precious little goat, you can do anything you like right now. So long as your pussy stays here with me.”

With that, she shifts down my legs further. Straddling one leg, pressing her wet pussy against me, she licks me. Root to tip. Once. It’s like I’m riding a rollercoaster to the top, all the anticipation building as my balls get tighter.

Twice. Pre-cum leaks at the tip. My feisty goat sucks it off, and I almost lose all control right here. Hands on her shoulders, I stop her when she starts at the root for her third lick.

“If you keep doing this, we’re going to have a big mess on our hands. And I’d really love to pleasure you more. Feel your pussy around me, if you’re up for it.”

In response, she slides back up to my thigh and grinds her hot wetness against me again. “I’m a little worried about how thick you are. But I’m ready.”

“I’ve got you,” I say as I pull out my magic lube from under the edge of the nest. “Remember? I’ve got magic lube. Lie back and relax.”

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August

I 've never thought about sex as something comforting. I mean, I know what an orgasm feels like, but it's never been something that felt like a heavy blanket protecting me against the dangers of the world—or my mind. But Bjorn's heavy body on mine as he kisses me and strokes my hair is exactly like that. Like I could take a flying leap off Wolf's Ridge and he would catch me.

He drags his heavy cock down my hip and thigh, spreading his pre-cum. Knowing he's that hard for me is an aphrodisiac in and of itself. He's a freaking orc; he could have anybody he wants, and yet he is here with me.

Lid unscrewed off his so-called magic lube, and instantly I am lighter, happier. It has a sweet scent that reminds me of lazy summer days; my favorite. Bjorn digs in with one thick finger and pulls out a dollop of cream that's thicker than I would have imagined.

“How does this work?”

He winks. That's all the answer I get. Okay.

Hands rubbed together, he starts at my inner thighs. It doesn't take me long to lose track of where his hands are. Or his mouth. All I know is they never leave me. His finger rubs my clit, then slides down to where I'm already wet and ready from before.

Hot tongue on my clit leaves me panting and bucking against his face. One thick finger slides in and I lose all self-control or restraint.

“That’s it. Relax. You’re going to be so full.” A second finger slides in. My second orgasm comes on his tongue as I clench his fingers. It’s even more powerful than the first and I have to push his face away from my center.

“Shhh. That’s a good girl. My precious goat.” He pulls his fingers out and puts them in his mouth. He kisses up my body, ignoring my overly sensitive nipples, until he reaches my lips. His kiss is deep, exploring my mouth. Completely distracting from him bumping my leg away to make room for him.

He notches himself at my entrance, pushing in the tiniest bit, and I gasp at the heat and the size of him. The stretch.

Nose to nose, he whispers, “Look at me. Good girl.” A shiver of delight sparkles up my spine every time he says I’m a good girl. “You’re supple. You’re going to stretch your pussy around to take me. It’s going to feel so good.” The last sentence is almost a groan, like he can’t wait any longer. The idea of being in me has him panting with need.

Another kiss, just as deep. He pushes in. Now I’m panting. The stretch is a good pain. The fullness is...like I’m eating the richest, most decadent chocolate cake in the world, and I need more.

“Look at how well you take me. You’re so tight, but you stretch so well.” Another deep kiss. Another thrust.

We work together. One push. Another. Until he’s finally seated to the hilt and my clit is rubbing against him. Whatever moments of uncomfortableness are already a distant memory. Multiple orgasms? Magic lube? I don’t know, but it’s working for me.

“Good girl. Take me more. Milk me.”

That shiver goes up my spine. I clench around him, and before I can move my hips against him, he moans and I think he's already come.

"Done?" I try not to sound disappointed. But I thought our first time would be more splashy and momentous. He gives a half chuckle at me.

"Not at all, darlin'." And with that declaration, he moves, sliding in and out of me. Slowly at first. The sensation of him sliding out is an event. And when he thrusts back in, I'm throbbing in delight.

I wrap my legs around him as best I can and hold on to his silvery green muscles as they ripple.

The root of him is perfectly aligned with my clit, and it doesn't take long for me to find my cliff's edge again. "Bjorn, I'm close," I pant.

Those are magic words. He thrusts faster, grunting with each thrust, until he's coming inside me, and I'm falling apart around him.

He fills me. Fills me more. When I'm done, I push him off me. Away from me. Every nerve ending is on fire in pleasure.

Chuckling, he obliges me, though he swipes a lick at me, licking away the excess cum until I hiss at him.

"You are such a delight, my little goat," he says as he lies next to me, arm draped over my belly, careful not to brush against my nipples.

"Mm-hmm." I try to say how much I love him. This. Us together, but sleepiness has overtaken me and I can barely hold on to reality.

I don't know how long we stay like that. But I'm pretty sure he holds me all night, keeping me safe and warm. And loved.

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Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 7:29 am

August

One Month Later

“Congratulations. This is the first day in weeks that your ugly mug hasn’t been in the newspaper.” Each word of Koru’s is a grunt and grumble directed at Bjorn. I wince, but Bjorn just takes it in stride and flips him the bird.

“Thank you, dear brother. Clearly I’ve fallen down on my job of embarrassing you. I’ll try to do a better job in the coming days.” He bows low, and I can’t help but snort a laugh at the ridiculousness of my brawny orc bowing to his brewmaster brother.

Grabbing the newspaper from the bar, I flip through. “Oh! The spring flower festival is coming up. I remember going to that with May and our moms when I was younger.” My voice trails off as my heart catches up with what my mouth is saying.

Though this month has been one of my happiest in a long time, there’s a pinprick of grief where May is concerned. She won’t return my texts or calls. I saw her riding shotgun in Chad’s truck yesterday. I waved. She looked away; her face drawn and tight, mouth turned down.

Bjorn saw and wrapped me in his arms, right on the sidewalk in front of the Moonlit Grounds Café and Bakery. I’m surprised that image isn’t in today’s paper. Do you think folks are tiring of our story, or just used to seeing us together in public? I need a shirt that reads, “Normalize Orc Love”.

Bjorn’s hand rests on my arm. His dark eyes focused, but gentle. “She’ll come

around. I promise. Nothing would make me happier than to take you to the spring flower festival; I've never been." Koru snorts from behind Bjorn. I glimpse the barkeep's face, which confirms to me just how ridiculous the words flowing out of Bjorn's mouth are.

"I can't believe you've never been."

"I tend to stay in the mountains. Away from all the happy people emerging from hibernation." At that statement, I snort.

"Spring is my favorite. Mud, slush. Pretty colors promising life. Seal pups in the harbor. It's a glorious time. I'd love to share it with you."

"You two are gross. And too lovey-dovey for my taste. Tone it down or get out." Koru slides a mug of coffee to me, then marches back to the kitchen to check on whatever delicious thing he's cooking for this evening's crowd. The scent in the air is roasted meat, spices, and, of course, beer.

"How about a walk?" Bjorn waggles his eyebrows at me. My ankle is better, but I still can't hike yet. A slow walk around the pond outside of town sounds perfect.

WE'RE ALMOST AROUND the boardwalk that encircles part of the pond. "Pond" being a limiting word. It's a large wetland. Spring peepers are beginning to sing. A moose peeked through the trees as we trod softly on the aged boards. Ahead, there's a heron standing on a dead tree in the pond. I can't tell if he's hunting or surveying the spot as a future nesting area.

The sky is a light gray with occasional rays of sunshine peeking through. It's really a perfect day to be outside. Bjorn spent half the walk in silence, letting me point out my

favorite bits of spring to him. The other half he spent making fun of his brothers, mocking them, telling me stories of their growing up together. As an only child, I'm both in awe of their antics and horrified at their behavior toward one another.

As the trees open up into a field, which leads to the parking lot, we hear shouting voices. We can't see the people. Bjorn gives me a look and rolls his eyes. I'm about to do the same, when I recognize one of the voices. May.

I take off running, which really means I take a leap and then crumple to the ground. Cursing and hissing at my stupidity, I gather myself up, only to be lifted by Bjorn, who sets me on my feet but doesn't let go of me. "What's wrong?"

"It's May." My voice cracks, betraying my emotions. But I don't need to explain myself. Making sure I'm stable, he takes off at a lope that's both graceful and intimidating. Limping, I follow.

When I can finally see them, tucked into the trees at the edge of the field, Bjorn has Chad up against an old fir tree, his forearm pinning him tight against his upper chest, almost at his throat. May is on the ground nearby, a rag doll, face covered by her hair and hands. She's sobbing.

"May!" When she lifts her face to me, tear-streaked and red from crying, I can see a beautiful purple bruise flowering over her jaw and cheek. I lumber a few more steps and fall down beside her, pulling her into me. "I'm here," I whisper into her hair.

"I'm so sorry. You were right," is all she says. Neither of us pay any attention to the men. We sit intertwined together. I hear shuffling in the plant debris that litters the ground, but I don't bother turning around. I trust Bjorn; Chad doesn't stand a chance.

Eventually, Bjorn sits next to me, a heavy, large hand on my back to steady me. "It's time to go," he whispers. Then, to May, he says, "May, I work with Search and

Rescue, and I'm an emergency responder. Can I take a look at your injuries?" Sniffling, whimpering, she sits up, chin high, still clasping my hand. She keeps her gaze focused off into the forest, away from where the cars are parked. Away from us.

Once Bjorn has determined that she's safe to travel, he guides her to his truck. We sandwich in and make our way silently home. No Chad in sight.

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 7:29 am

Bjorn

“I wanted to rip his throat out. Wanted to pull his limbs off and leave him for the wolves. Break every finger that has ever hurt another person. Cut out his tongue so it can never disparage anyone ever again.”

“But what did you do?” Captain Brann asks as he leans back in his office chair. He has is the persona of relaxed.

“I growled a threat and sent him on his way, letting him know that if he bothered August or May ever again, I know where he lives.”

“Sounds decent. But why are you resigning?” He snorts his retort.

“I figure this loser is going to be a loudmouth, and then public opinion will be down your throat about me. First, a supposed kidnapping. Now, threatening an upstanding citizen.”

“I think you’ve got the pulse of this town wrong. You stood up against abuse. I can’t think of any one person in town who will support the other guy.” Brann leans forward now, back into work mode. Boss mode.

“I’m an orc.”

“Understatement of the year. So am I. But I need you to stop trying to resign. Someone’s going to think I’m keeping you here against your will. And I’m not. Right?”

“Right,” I sigh. “I hate how level-headed you are.”

“That’s why I’m the boss.”

“Huh.”

“Is she okay now?”

“August? Yeah, she’s amazing. She—”

“No, the other one, dummy.”

“You can’t call me a dummy. You’re my boss. And yeah, May is okay. Recovering. Moved into the apartment next door. Away from asshat number one.”

Brann nods sagely. “You’ll be on call the day after the spring flower festival, so watch your alcohol intake. Now, you need to finish these training exercises so I can turn in my report.”

I snort, roll my eyes. “I’m always ready for the job.”

“And Bjorn? I have faith in you.”

Turning to walk out of his office, I wave a hand at him. I can’t let him see how those words impact me. My life has been spent as the screw-up of the family. No one has ever had faith in me except faith that I would screw up.

Today though? I have a fulfilling job with meaning that I love. And more importantly, I have a woman who loves me. A woman I would walk through fire for.

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 7:29 am

August

“A lright, I’m here,” Koru spreads his arms wide inside the cozy bakery. From the outside, it might seem as if he were opening his massive arms for a hug from Bjorn and me. But now knowing him...knowing them, I know that would be a lie. Ravena’s crow caws in a welcome. Bjorn rolls his eyes at the bird which makes me snort a little.

“Glad you could made it,” Bjorn says, sarcasm dripping off every word. I stomp on his foot under the table. He breathes out hard and turns to smile at me. It’s a mischievous smile, one that makes the butterflies that now live in my stomach swoop for joy.

Ravena brings Koru his coffee without it being ordered. I guess this is one of those small town life perks: everyone knows what you’re going to order.

“I haven’t seen you in a while, Koru. Welcome to the world outside the brewery!” Ravena’s eyes twinkle as she studies Koru’s face as he takes a sip. I’ve never met anyone so intent on making the perfect drink for every single patron.

“Thanks. This is good. What is it?”

“I’m so glad you like it! I picked it especially for you. Single-origin Kenyan coffee mixed with my proprietary blend of spices. Gives it a nice kick.” She winks at us all.

“Is mine the same?” Bjorn asks, holding out his cup as if Ravena is going to tell his fortune from his half-drunk milky coffee. His puppy dog eyes are adorable, like he

can't stand missing out on something his brother might get.

"Don't be silly! You had my special hot cocoa, didn't you?" She looks pointedly between us. We nod. "That was a once in a lifetime cup, if you know what I mean." And with that, she skips off to help Betty, the librarian, with her order.

"Do you know what she means? Because I don't" I whisper to Bjorn. He just shakes his head and takes another sip.

"I keep telling my brothers she's kooky. But no one will listen to me."

"It isn't that no one will listen to you. It's that we don't care." Koru take a slow, long sip of coffee, savoring it. You can almost see him dissecting the flavors in his head.

Bjorn reaches over and grasps my hand in his, holding it tightly. I will never get tired of seeing my hand in his, of feeling his skin against mine. It's exhilarating and comforting at the same time.

"I figure, since August and I are together. And since I'm still trying to improve the town's opinion of me, being seen out in public, especially with the two of you, would be beneficial to helping the town forget the things I used to do..." Bjorn's voice trails off as his big brother scowls at him.

"I'm busy, Bjorn. I have to get ready for the Great Northern Beer Rack Competition. I can't be babysitting you and public opinion. Besides, you have two other brothers. Why not one of them?"

"Urk hates to come to town. I still owe him a thank you for coming to help me out of jail. And Grev said he'd be seen with me when I 'actually grow up,' to quote him. So, I took that as a never." He shrugs.

Koru thinks for a minute, staring into the distance of Ravena's crystals and local geodes on a shelf, then looks at Bjorn, sighs, and shrugs in return. "Yeah, guess it's just me then."

At that, they both laugh. My heart clenches, wanting what they've got for me and May again. One day, I tell myself. Maybe, if I bring May here for a coffee, Ravena can work some magic spice woo-woo on her, too.

Walking home together, Wolf's Ridge peaks out at us from behind the clouds. It's a funny thing about fate, and dumb choices, and new leaves—they are nothing without the choices we make and the people we make them with.

"She's looking at you," Bjorn whispers. Looking around, I don't see anybody.

"Who?"

"The mountain. She's making sure you're okay." His tusked grin warms my heart.

"It's just a mountain," I say dismissively, even though his words make me think of my mom.

"Might be. But our world is connected. With each other and with us. I expect she's happy you're safe." I'll play along.

"And what do you think she thinks about you?" He shifts and puts his arm around me, grunting a bit as he puts his face against my head and inhales deeply.

"I think she's proud of me. For coming home. For rescuing you. And she's happy we're together. You know, growing up, I always thought the mountain was more of a malevolent being. Like the ocean. But since I've been home and work on the mountain, I have a new appreciation. Maybe my perception is based on how I feel

about myself.” Looking up, I see his thinking face—a frown.

“Bjorn, I agree. I think the mountain is happy with us both. I know I’m happy you were my rescuer. And I’m happy to be here with you.”

“Oh, my little mountain goat. I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

His kiss is sweet. Hot. Hands roam to clutch my ass cheeks and press him into me, to feel how much he wants me. “Let’s go home. I’ve got a mountain for you to climb.”

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August

I haven't felt contented , safe, in such a long time. I spent a year searching for a home elsewhere, trying to prove to myself I didn't need anybody. And here I am, home with Bjorn. Nothing could make me happier.

Our bed was delivered today. A big mattress with a beautiful wrought iron headboard. Fluffy pillows and a down comforter—I feel like a princess.

“I'm home!” I hear from behind me.

“Don't touch the bed!” I yell from the kitchen as Bjorn closes the front door and heads to the bedroom to change. He freezes, turns to stare at me. I'm stirring the pasta sauce on the stove and glaring back at him over my shoulder.

“What was the point of buying a bed if I don't get to touch it?” He huffs. I keep my lips pinned together, trying my best not to smile.

“Only until you've cleaned up. All our new linens are sparkly white. I'd like them to stay that way for a while.” A little shrug of one shoulder causes my shirt to fall to that side, exposing the shoulder. His eyes flare at the sight.

“In that case, why don't you help me? You know...so I'm up to your standards.” A wink, and then he turns, slowly sauntering down the hallway, pulling his shirt off as he goes, leaving it on the floor. I hear his belt buckle next. Stove off, lid on the pot to keep it warm, I run after him, tackling him as he passes our bed, naked.

Tackle is a generous word. My arms don't make it around his body. Neither do my legs. I'm more of a splatted frog against his gorgeous, rock hard, dark green backside. Probably the least sexy thing I could have done.

Laughing so hard, neither of us can keep our balance. We fall together in a heap onto our freshly made bed. Feathers fly out from our new down comforter, as well as flowers.

"Where did the lilacs come from?" I smell them more than see them. Crushed purple petals underneath us. The smell is delicious. Bjorn snickers, but then attempts a faux perplexed look.

"How?" I've been home for the past hour, listening to music and chopping vegetables for our dinner.

"I snuck in through the window, spread them out, then went back out and around to the door." Lifting my shirt, just enough to expose my stomach, he sprinkles petals over me as I stare at him, unsure what to think.

"Seriously?"

He nods. "Don't worry, it'll be in the paper tomorrow. I saw several people gawking. Told them I forgot my key. Then that I was surprising you."

"I'm definitely surprised." Following his lead, I sprinkle purple petals on his body. The colors are beautiful together. "You know, you should wear more lilac. It really suits you, looks good with your skin tone. Maybe you have spring colors."

"I'll ask Brann if our next set of uniforms can be purple. I'm sure everyone will love that." He props himself up on one elbow. His fingers trace lines along my stomach, making a course around the sprinkled petals. It's funny to watch his thick fingers

trace lines, trying not to disturb the petals. I try not to laugh at the gentle tickling sensation that causes me to tense, making all the flowers on me shiver.

“Your body is a field of wonders. Skin so soft.” He places kisses on my exposed skin, nosing my shirt up higher to my breasts. Nipping at the fabric of my bra, then he trails back down to my belly button, then farther south, moving my waistband to kiss the now fabric-wrinkled skin. “Maybe,” he says in his growly voice that makes my panties melt and my insides quiver with desire. “We should break in our new bed and bedding. Then wash up. Then break it in again.”

“Whatever you want,” I gasp out as his hand presses against my mound, a finger finding my clit and applying just enough pressure to make my legs spread wide. Like an automatic door opener.

“Tell me what you want.” His hand lifts. The lack of pressure makes me whimper. His cocky grin is my favorite. The one that says he knows exactly what I want, how to pleasure me.

“Clothes off. Hands. Tongue. Body.” I fight with the words as I tangle myself in my shirt and bra, not wanting to get up to shed my clothes. Bjorn helps me, and his continued gentleness and care continues to astound me.

Clothes shed, I sigh in relief. Delight at the cool spring air, the fresh cotton beneath me. The heat of his body touching mine. “Tongue and hands, huh? Nothing else?” His eyes twinkle in mischief.

Purse my lips together. “I would say yes, but that would be a lie. I want all of you. Always.” And with that declaration, his head disappears between my thighs. He nips one thigh, then licks center to clit and back again. His tongue is one of many talents. I’m not sure how he sucks, licks, penetrates me all at once, but that is what it feels like. Soon, I’m bucking against his mouth, taking my pleasure, leaping high into the

clouds.

Bjorn has learned to go hands off once I climax. I need a couple of minutes of no stimulation while I revel in my glory. Then I'm ready to jump on top of him, take his cock inside me, where it sits so perfectly.

Kissing him while we rock together, his hands cup my ass and help slide me up and down the length of him. Never has my heart felt so full to bursting. Never have I felt seen, known, and still desired. This orc, this man, has given himself freely to me. No inhibitions, no reservations, and it's scary but also so freeing.

We reach the point where we become frantic together. I slide higher, deeper, harder, reveling in every sensation. My second climax comes first, so sensitive. Luckily, he's right with me, roaring my name into the spring air, pumping hard and fast, until we are both exhausted, sweaty puddles.

"I love you," I say. Not a sexy whisper, but an awkwardly loud declaration as he cradles me in his arms. The words slip out before I can think through their ramifications. My heart skips a beat, but only one.

"August, I love you, too. You are my sun and my moon. My guiding light through a blizzard, the fog, the starless night."

"How are you so poetic?"

"Do you think that orcs don't read poetry? Or listen to music?" There's a challenge in his voice, but his eyes are still tender. God, I love his eyes. Deep pools that see right through to my core. It's hard to explain how something which could be so unsettling gives me so much peace. To be seen, known. To be loved just as I am.

Surveying the bookshelf against the wall that we installed, there are a spattering of

books on it. No poetry. “I don’t think there’s a single book of poetry in this apartment,” I challenge. His laugh at my statement is a deep rumble. It shakes us both and rolls through me.

“My mom and grandmother read poetry to us. I occasionally get a book from the library, or did. I think I might have a five-year-old fine to deal with.” His face twists in a funny grimace, as if he just ran in on the librarian having sex, instead of a few dollars fine. I look aghast back at him.

“Tomorrow we can pay your penance to the library. I’d love it if you read me poetry.” I croon, just a little, my toes curling at the idea of my huge green orc reading Elizabeth Barrett Browning or Kate Baer to me.

“That’s a great idea. In the meantime, how about I recite some to you now, my love?” My eyebrows raise in surprise, but there’s a smile on my face, giving me away again. My heart thumps in excitement, in contentment at being his love. Bjorn props himself up on one elbow, clears his throat, places one thick hand on my hip, and begins to recite an E.E. Cummings poem.

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 7:29 am

Koru

“Koru! You’re back. And so soon. I thought it would be at least another year before your presence graced my doorstep again. What can I get you?” Gods, will Ravena shut up? I hate being called out like this. Maybe I should just buy my own espresso machine for the brewery, so I never have to come here again.

“Yeah, I surprised myself, too.” Her damn crow caws, loudly, and I jump. I hate birds. “That coffee you made me the other day...I can’t get the flavor out of my head. Some sort of spice, but not cinnamon. What is it?” What I don’t say is I think it would be fabulous in a beer. Light, hoppy, with some citrus and whatever the hell her spice is.

“Ah! I had a feeling the other day that you would like that. I’ll make you another. Go sit down.” Any normal customer would go sit down. It’s what I would expect someone at my brewery to do if told the same thing.

But I don’t move. And neither does Ravena. Somehow, the coffeeshop owner and I are in a standoff. Great. Her look becomes more pointed, her grey eyes drilling into me, reading my darkest secrets.

No thanks.

Huffing, I go pick a seat in the corner. Away from the game of cribbage being played by Njal and Sune. Those guys. They play Rumikub at the bar, cribbage here. When do they work? Do they even have a life outside of drinking and games?

When Ravena brings my coffee to me, she also brings me a scone. It's a piece of art on a plate. Big red berries, a glaze dripping perfectly along the edges. A groan escapes me as she sets it in front of me. She doesn't smile, just looks smug and satisfied, like I've confirmed what she already knew. How does she do it? Maybe Bjorn is right and she is a witch.

"Thank you. Now, what is the spice in here?" I say after a satisfying sip. Loathe to admit I've been craving it for the last week.

"Ah, Koru. It's proprietary." She winks, and the crow nods his head in agreement. "When you enter my shop, I get an urge for what you need. Then I make it." A shrug, like no big deal.

Arms crossed across my chest, I lean back and ask, "And what is it I need?"

"You don't know? Well then, I'm going to have to let you figure that out for yourself. You and fate. "

With that, she leaves me in unsettled peace. What do I need? What I want is to win at the Great Northern Beer Rack Competition. Expand the brewery. But need? The question brings a deep pain in my chest that I think must be heartburn.

Palate satisfied, but annoyed at Ravena, I shove the last bite of scone in my mouth and get up to leave. I have beer to rack and inventory to catalog.

My foot is out the door, indenting the fresh snowfall, when Ravena calls out again. "Oh Koru!" I've never thought of her as a busybody before, but all that is changing today. She bustles around the counter to bring me a paper bag. "For later. And remember, what your heart desires most will arrive unexpectedly. Be ready to receive."

Before I can ask her what she's inhaled to make her so loopy, or tell her I'm perfectly happy the way I am and I don't need anything, she's gone. Chatting up Dorian, the town's florist, and listening intently to him describe his dream to her as she plates a pastry for him. Dammit.

I decide to spend the walk back to my brewery contemplating what she said. What does my heart desire? I don't think she was thinking of fame and fortune from my beers. Or world peace. And I've known for ages that love isn't in the plot for me.

The sign for Stone Barrel Brewery shines like a beacon against the white and gray background of late winter. This is all I need.

As I walk through the door and inhale the scent of hops and roasted barley, I decide that Ravena doesn't know what she's talking about. She may be an expert at scones and coffee, but she doesn't know anything about what's inside my heart.

THANK YOU FOR READING One Night with Her Mountain Orc. I hope you loved August and Bjorn's story.

To find out if Koru gets what his heart needs, claim One Stolen Night with Her Orc now

Turn the page for the first chapter!

Koru

A BLAST OF ARCTIC SPRING air fills the bar as the door flies open, then stays open. “Shut the door,” I growl, not bothering to turn around from admiring my golden trophy stein gleaming in the firelight. The number of times people open the door and then freeze, like they’ve never seen an orc before, is absurd. The name outside is Stone Barrel Brewery—Orc Crafted Artisan Beer. It’s not like I made it a secret.

Still, giant, burly, tusked, green creatures can be intimidating, I get that. Sighing, I turn around to blast the person who can’t get out of the doorway. Spring is a myth here in Moonfang Haven. There’s ice everywhere—though dangerously thin in places. Tonight’s storm will only bring more ice. The cold doesn’t bother orcs, but I’m tired of the ice and mud thaw cycle; it puts me in a bad mood. My brother, Bjorn, has already rankled me today, and I’m in no mood to comfort pitiful humans.

The person in the doorway is barely visible under their layers of coats, scarves, and hats, but judging by the curve of hip and thigh, it’s a female. My first sniff confirms this—lilac and honey. My second sniff tells me she’s afraid, but not of me. She’s young, fragile, and her gloved hand on the door trembles. Her scent and posture awaken something in me I’ve never felt. Something primal and all-consuming. Snorting out her scent like a sneeze, I try to compose myself.

No one pays her any attention. Out of the corner of my eye, Bjorn rises off his stool, eyes on her. Of all the tomfoolery, no. That can’t happen—no matter that he is a trained first responder with search and rescue. Instinct overtakes me, and I leap over the table standing between me and the door. In two more steps, I shove Bjorn out of

the way, ignore his shout of indignation, and scoop her up and into the brewery. A quick sniff outside to make sure no one has followed her, and slam the door. The feel of her, even beneath all her layers, is satisfying, comforting. I've just found the puzzle piece that's been missing my whole life.

"What the hell!" Bjorn booms at me. There's fire in his eyes; my brother is always ready for a fight. I shake my head and look down at the delicate flower in my arm.

"She's fainted," I whisper to Bjorn. I don't have time, or the desire to play big brother tonight. If he's angry, he knows where the door is.

"Do you think she needs medical assistance?" I can hear the shift in his voice from irritation to eagerness. He wants to touch her; use all that search and rescue training he's got. But she's mine now. Shaking my head, I carry her to a booth and lay her gently down. The chatter of the patrons fades to the background. All my focus and senses are on her.

Bjorn is at my side, a small glass of water in his filthy paw. "Do you think we scared her?" he asks. I shake my head as I gently brush away the dark brown hair from her round perfect face. She's stunning.

"Something else scared her, the scent was there before she came inside."

Her black eyes flutter open, look straight into mine. She doesn't gasp or draw back in fear. Instead, she smiles weakly, melting away all the ice in the Arctic Circle and causing sea levels to rise catastrophically. I'll gladly take all the devastation in order to have her smile at me like that again, preferably every day.

"I made it. You'll keep me safe," she says, almost a whisper. My pride grows at those words. Of course I'll keep my flower safe. Her eyelids flutter shut; she's unconscious again.

Bjorn and I look at each other. He shrugs, “You wanted her, you can deal with whatever drama that is. Good luck.” He gathers his stuff and leaves me alone with the woman I’m inexplicably drawn to. The woman who seems to know without a doubt that I’ll keep her safe.

But safe from what?