



One Stolen Night with Her Orc (Toothsome Monster Romance #2)

Author: *Jilli Waters*

Category: Fantasy

Description: One rugged, grumpy, uptight cinnamon roll orc.

One desperate thief.

One night that will change everything.

One last theft. Then my sister will be safe, and Ill be free from our despicable stepdad.

All I need to steal is the prize-winning recipe from Stone Barrel Brewery.

Except the recipe belongs to a strong, rigid, broken-fanged orc.

Now Ive botched the theft.

And Im in his bed.

One Stolen Night with Her Orcis a steamy, cozy, forced proximity with one bed, small-town romance with an orc who has to grovel to the one he loves.

It is the second 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

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:33 am

A hundred years ago , there was a monster migration, many went west, but a few felt the call of the wild northeast and headed to the cozy, quaint island of Wolf's Ridge, named after the formidable mountains on the island, and founded the town of Moonfang Haven. Perhaps the island felt reminiscent of simpler, more magical times—lush, deep forests, craggy cliffs, a glittering unspoilt ocean teeming with life, and a protected valley perfect for a town. Or perhaps the blazing western sun wasn't something the Cragbeard, Suthorn, Fangst, Havet families and others were interested in.

I was here when they arrived. Watched as they set up a new life for themselves, amongst the small human population already carving out a living, mostly by fishing, on my beloved island. They've integrated peacefully, minus a few hiccups. I think the wild goats of the mountains still resent the surprisingly nimble orcs invading their mountain.

Don't worry, magic still exists, though it's been diminished over time. My granny told me the formula once...time multiplied by disbelief divided by the square root of love...maybe? I don't remember. Math was never my strong suit.

Who am I? My story is of less importance right now, but I will say I was banished to Wolf's Ridge a long time ago. My magic has been reduced mostly to simple potions. One day, I'll have my comeback tour and everyone will remember my name. But until then, I'll be mixing macchiatos at Moonlit Grounds Café and Bakery.

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:33 am

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 is on the sign outside: Stone Barrel Brewery—Orc Crafted Artisan Beer. It’s not like I made it a secret.

Still, I know that giant, burly, tusked, green creatures can be intimidating. 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.

Everyone is deep in their cups and games; no one pays her any attention. Out of the corner of my eye, Bjorn rises off his stool, concerned 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 I 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?

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Poppy

“S orry for the inconvenience ,” I say as I scrape the bowl of stew clean and take another drink of the best beer I’ve ever had. Actually, it’s the best food I’ve had in a long time. My sister, Addy, and I mostly eat sandwiches and cheap pasta. I feel like a wild animal, hunched over my food. My eyes scan the room, taking in the group of tentacled monsters and orcs playing Rummikub in the corner. The kitchen and brew area must be behind the swinging door by the bar.

The fire in the stone hearth crackles as it warms me. The copper pipes and kettles reflect the flames in a mesmerizing dance of nature and architecture. It melts away all my embarrassment at having fainted. I would love to curl up in this booth with a book. Cozy and safe.

But that’s not why I’m here.

“You could never be an inconvenience,” Koru, the orc, says with an intense frown on his face as he sets down a mug of tea for me. His one broken fang sends a tingling shiver up my spine—I wonder how he broke it. I imagine the other guy looks worse.

Empty dishes picked up, he looks like he’s about to say something else, but then turns and walks away. It’s for the best; I’m here for one purpose. Flirting with the orc is not on my schedule. And if I want Addy and me to be safe, I need to stay focused.

Standing, I gather my scarf, hat, and layers to wrap up, trying to ignore Koru stoking the fire. Even though there’s still snow outside, his flannel shirt is cuffed over his forearms, exposing his thick, ropey muscles to the world. I’ve never thought much

about orcs one way or the other, even though my family certainly does—which is why I’m here. My core flutters with something like anticipation as I gawk at him. His shirt must be thin as his back muscles ripple under his shirt as he makes the fire grow, hypnotizing me. My heart rate increases, a steady thump of, get closer. I’d love to feel those muscles flexing under my hands.

No, Poppy, focus. You have a job to do. Look away .

Begrudgingly, I look away. The brewery is atmospheric with wood and stone walls, big furniture—comfortable for both human and monsters, and a neat row of metallic steins lined up neatly behind the bar. It’s got such a great feel for it. My stepdad’s attempt at building a brewery is like child’s play compared to this place. Not that he would ever listen to my input.

Ah! There it is! An old-timey parchment paper rolled up and tied with a golden ribbon. It sits on a special shelf just above the golden, engraved stein.

It can’t be this easy. Can it? The recipe worth my freedom and my sister’s safety, just sitting there on a shelf in a brewery in this tiny town. I thought orcs were more possessive than this. A step closer, and I can see a small sign next to it that says, “Award winning recipe from the Great Northern Beer Rack Competition.” The idea that it sits there, unguarded for anyone to see, touch, take...takes my breath away and makes my hands itchy.

Marcus, my stepdad, said this would take a while. That it would be hard to find the recipe, seeing as orcs are sneaky vile creatures, his words, not mine. This one cast a spell on the judges. Be careful. One meal in, and I think orcs, especially Koru, are majestic and powerful. It’s possible his fire and body have already put a spell on me. From all I’ve seen, I’m okay with that. Though, they may be a bit gullible if they’re leaving prize-winning recipes lying about in plain sight.

Then again, when do I ever trust Marcus? Never.

Except for now. I'm here only because I have to hope that he'll uphold the end of his promise. This will be my last theft. I have to believe that he'll keep his word. That my sister Addy, and myself, will be free after this. She'll have an education paid for, and I'll no longer have to be his pawn and thief. I will be free to make my own choices, forge my own path.

Flannel, sweater, coat, six feet of blue scarf that Addy knit for me, the matching hat she also knit, fingerless gloves, and mittens. Oof, I'm already sweating. When Koru stands and stretches, the fluttering sensation inside me feels out of control. I put my hand on my heart to steady myself—but my stupid heart sends me messages that conflict with what I need to do.

What I need to do is get away from here, quickly, with the recipe, and hide to wait for Marcus to collect me and his prize that he swears will change his life. My stepdad is such a sore loser. He raged for days after the beer competition, swearing that the orc had put a spell on the judges. That there was no way possible that an orc could make a better beer than him.

After he calmed down and sobered up, he concocted this plan. To steal the recipe, claim it for himself, and make himself rich off the work of this orc. I stopped questioning Marcus's schemes years ago. It's safer that way. I do what I'm told so that one day, very soon, I can be free.

What I need is to not get weak in the knees at the look of pure devotion Koru gives me. I don't understand. No one has ever looked at me like this, like I am the sun. The intensity of his eyes on me takes my breath away, like he can see into the darkest places inside me. I have to get out of here now.

Taking two steps toward the door. Now that I know where the recipe is, I'll come

back later when it's closed. He shakes his head at me, and I stop—an obedient puppy waiting for her treat. My cheeks flush with embarrassment. Koru walks over to me and gently unwinds the scarf from around my neck.

“You can't leave. It isn't safe. I don't know what you're running from, but I will protect you here.” Koru's words strike a chord inside me. No one has ever offered to protect me, not since I was a little girl. I wish I could let him. Just curl into him and have him fight the demons for me. Unfortunately, I am the demon here. I'm the one stealing from him.

He tugs the hat off my head, smiling gently at my mussed hair. Instinctively, I reach up to smooth my brown tresses, but he grasps my hands and holds them in his. Though his hands are large and rough, they are gentle with me. Seeing my small hands in his giant ones fills me with a satisfaction and longing. In another life, I could see this working out very well for us both.

We'd walk hand-in-hand through town. Folks would wave at us, and we'd wave back, smile, be part of this community. My hands would scrape against his rock-solid chest when he holds me in his giant paws. His thick fingers would twist my nipples while I kiss him deeply. At night, he'd hold me close in bed and be mine, forever.

“Have you ever heard of fated mates?” Koru's eyes pierce my soul with their earnestness.

I shake my head vigorously to shake my thoughts and his words away. “That's a fairytale. A lie to keep young kids waiting for the impossible. Besides, you don't want me.”

The lighting is low and soft, but his earrings and septum ring glint in the firelight. When I heave a sigh, unsure how I can possibly leave the safety I feel here with Koru, after just a couple of hours, when I know my staying puts everyone I love at

risk. I can't put Addy at risk. My sister is my everything, and my responsibility. If it were just me, I would disappear from Marcus. But it isn't.

Koru's eyes flash, a hint of something dangerous—but not for me. I feel nothing but secure with him. As I breathe, his eyes watch my chest rise and fall, and a shiver of delight runs down my spine. It's hard to believe that this massive orc believes in something as outlandish as fated mates.

“Maybe you have never dealt with orcs before, but we can hold our own. We know what we want. And we protect what's ours.” His voice is rich, deep, growly. The kind of voice that could read the alphabet aloud and make my toes curl with desire.

“Protect what's ours?” I swallow hard. Does he know why I'm here? My heart thumps hard, heat flashes up my torso. I need to get out of here. What have I done? With every other theft, I've kept my wits about me, stayed invisible or kept my distance. I can't get caught, can't let these wild thoughts and feelings compromise me. Coughing a bit, I bend over, letting the cough overtake me. I can't let him see the panic and desperation in my eyes. Or the tears that prick my eyes. Damnit Poppy, get it together.

“Can I get you some water or tea?” His voice is concerned as his hand rests tentatively on my back. I nod, continuing to cough, refusing to stand tall and look at him.

“I'll be right back.” His big, spiked boots walk away, making the floor wobble under every step. I stay hunched, coughing, until I hear the swish of the door to the kitchen. Now.

Continuing my fake hack, but quieter, I climb the chair nearest to the shelf and grab the recipe. For good measure, I take the stein, too. Oof, it's heavier than I imagined. I hope this orc doesn't kill me when he realizes what I've done. No one looks at me.

No one cares about me.

In another life, I imagine coming back here, being a waitress and bartender here during the evenings. Loving Koru every night. My chest tightens at the thought of what could be. If I didn't have an asshole for a stepdad. If I didn't need to make sure my sister Addy gets an education so she can get far, far away from Marcus. My life for hers. Whatever it takes. Even if it means love with this kind, gigantic orc can never be mine.

I plunk my hat back on my head, re-wrap my scarf around my neck, tuck a piece of the hearty bread that came with the stew into my pocket for later, and walk through the door of the brewery. I can hear him whistling as pottery clinks together. Tea for two?

Damnit. In another life, Poppy.

I step out into the frosty evening air. The moon greets me with its cold light overhead, a promise that if I keep going, it won't be okay, but my journey will be finished.

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Koru

As the door shuts behind Poppy's sweet, sweet round bottom, I roar in anger, dropping the tray of tea service, stoneware shards and hot liquid spray everywhere. Another mess.

Am I going to just let her walk away into unknown danger? She didn't explain the fear of why she was here, or why she fainted when she entered the brewery, but the energy around her was nervous, fearful, and secretive. Who knows what awaits her out in the cold dark? If nothing else, the ice storm is dangerous enough.

No. I am Koru, eldest brother of the Cragbeard clan. I will not let my future mate travel in the frigid darkness to face dangers untold.

The word mate rattles around in my head and heart as I grab my knife, coat, and hat. I never believed that a mate existed for me. Or that fated mates were real. It was just the stories our mother told us. Fairy tales.

I follow Poppy's scent out of the brewery. Before I close the door, I speak to the Gordon, the last customer inside, "Leave your money by the till."

The night air is frosty. Luckily, the moon is full and bright, shining down to bring me good luck. Every step is a crunch of snow and ice. Poppy is nowhere to be seen, but past the parking lot, I see a pair of petite boot prints headed into the forest away from town. Why would she head into the wilderness?

Her scent grows stronger as I travel. The moon continues to light the way for me. My

mind is focused on tracking her, but all I see in my mind's eye are the dangers that lie in wait for her out here in the wild, away from Moonfang Haven. Away from me.

The path she is on heads north, a dangerous place to be at this time of year. Though we are in the cold snap of spring, there's no denying the warming of the ground as our days get longer. Weak ice lies in wait to gobble up unsuspecting individuals. Risk of avalanches increases up in the hills. Bears stir from the winter slumber and hungry wolves prowl. To say nothing of whatever danger she is running from.

Ahead—a crack. A shriek. Nothing.

I run toward the sound, lumbering through the trees, my heart racing. In a small clearing, there is nothing but glittery white untouched snow. No more footprints. No more scent. No sign of predator—animal or human. I retrace my steps, find where Poppy's end.

In my panic, I leapt over the small frozen stream, not even registering it. Now though, I see the jaggedness of it, the lump of snow, the hole. Fuck.

On my knees, I dig away the ice shards and snow. The stream still looks like solid ice. But I know she's there. Punching the ice, I plunge my arm into the icy water. It feels like fire overtaking me. I roar in pain and panic, continuing to reach under the ice, hoping against hope that I find her. Each second is like an eon. A race against death.

My fingers touch the softness of fabric. Grabbing hold, I pull her up with all my might, careful not to scrape her skin on the ice.

For the second time tonight, she's in my arms. But this time, her skin is blue, illuminated by the moonlight. She coughs, erupting water out of her. Rolling her onto her side on the stream's bank, I hold her in place until she's coughed and heaved all

she needs to in order to breathe easily. When she's done, I gather her into my arms and run home. She is a popsicle.

I can see the lights of the brewery ahead when I hear her words, a raspy whisper barely audible over my own pounding heart and boots stomping through the snow. "Twice in one night. You need to stop rescuing me. Girl's going to fall in love with her hero. And you're going to get a savior complex." Looking down, there's the hint of a smile on her face as she tucks herself into my chest.

I snort a laugh. "Too late, baby girl. I've got you, and I'm never going to let you go."

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Koru

I inside the brewery , the fire blazes, but the bar is empty. Sniff just in case, no human scent. I spy a napkin written note on the bar, a small pile of cash under it. I have the best customers.

Two at a time, I take Poppy to the upstairs apartment I sometimes rent out. Strip off her frozen clothes and towel dry her hair, I barely register the beauty of her. I have to get her warm. Tuck her into bed, then pull out all the extra blankets from the closet to make sure she's plenty warm. I can't hear the thoughts in my head for the pounding in my heart. Her skin is so cold, so blue; it's otherworldly. I get the fire in the fireplace going, adding lots of fuel. By the time I finish with that and check on her in bed, there's slightly more color to her lips and cheeks. I sigh in relief.

Though icy, her body calls to me. Satiny, soft skin with all the curves and dimples I could possibly want. I love that her skin against mine invokes images of trees. My green against her warm honey oak skin. It takes an incredible amount of self-control not to pet the skin of her arms while she warms, not to wrap my body around her to give her my warmth.

Downstairs, I make sure the doors are locked, put the kettle on the stove, and warm two mugs while I wait for the kettle. The first time I've stopped moving since making tea for her hours ago. Why did she leave? Why does my heart hurt so much? Now that I've stepped far enough away from her scent, I can see the ridiculousness in thinking we are fated mates.

The kettle whistles and I pour the hot water into the mugs with tea bags. On a tray

with the mugs, I add toast with butter and jam; hopefully she'll eat something. A quick wipe of my cheek on my shirtsleeve, and I catch a whiff of her scent—lilac and honey—persistent even after the river. Enough that I know again—she's my mate. And with that resolution in my gut, I carry the tray up to the bedroom.

I set the tray down on the dresser and stir the fire. Her breathing is shallow, and she shivers with every breath. This isn't good. Her forehead is feverish to the touch. I could call Bjorn, but that would mean admitting I can't care for my mate myself.

Sitting gingerly on the bed, I lift her upright to sitting, my arm supporting her, so she can take a sip of tea. Her skin is ice against my hands.

“Here you go, just a sip,” I say, coaxing her. Dark lashes flutter but don't open. She takes a sip, her teeth chattering against the rim of the tea mug. After a couple of sips, she grunts and tries to roll away from me. Gently, I lay her back down, put the tea back on the tray.

She needs more warmth. My warmth. Flannel shirt off, I leave my pants on and climb into the bed. This bed is small, together we barely fit. She smells like forest air, with a hint of lilac and honey. My lungs swell with her scent, and all my nerve endings accept that this is now my new favorite scent. I will find her anywhere, I promise, as I bury my nose into her slightly damp hair and wrap my body around hers.

Her back is so cold it stings my chest. No matter, she'll warm soon enough. Wrapping my arms and legs around her soft body makes me purr in delight. She fits in my arms perfectly. A moan from her, but this time it sounds less like death. She pushes into me ever so slightly, bringing a smile to my face. My flower.

I must have fallen asleep, for I wake with a start at the sound of banging and deep voices downstairs. Poppy stirs, surprising me. When I look at my arms, she is snuggled into them, her nose breathing gently against my chest, our legs scissored

together, intertwined. My heart beats faster at the sight of her here, safe.

I'm rock hard. While I long to rub against her and wake her with waves of pleasure, she hasn't consented. Not to mention she's fragile and possibly still in danger. I slide my hips away from her. My desire grows stronger; I have to tame it. I have to keep her safe.

The minx has other ideas. Her body follows me, like a magnet seeking its match. "Alright, Poppy. Someone's here. I need to check." I keep my voice at a whisper, not wanting my voice to carry. The bedroom door is closed to keep the heat of the fireplace in, but there's no lock on the door. There's no protection from whoever is downstairs.

She harrumphs at that declaration, her mouth a pink, kissable pout. More relief at the color of her lips, along with amusement that she's pouting, makes me feel lighter, hopeful. When her dark eyes finally open and gaze up at me, it's with longing. That she wants me just as much as I want her twists something in my gut—no one has ever looked at me like that. I want nothing more than to give her everything she wants.

"Shh," I brush her hair away and bring my lips close to hers—the breath of a kiss. I can't kiss her right now; can't start something when she isn't safe. I'm almost out of bed when her hands claw at me, pulling at me to come back to the warm cocoon we've created. Obliging, because it's impossible to say no to this, to her, I savor the moment she wraps her arms and legs around me, molding us into one being. Her pink lips press against mine, gentle but powerful—certain.

There's the clunk of something downstairs. Groaning softly, still conscious of not letting my sound travel, I pull myself away and slip out of bed before she can protest. With one finger to her lips, she nods in understanding to me. I don't bother to hide my throbbing cock tenting my pants. She settles into the hole I've made, cozy and beautiful.

Damn, she's irresistible. Careful not to creak the floor, I pad out of the bedroom, closing the door behind me.

Shadows shift below the stairs; low voices still growl at each other. How dare they enter my place? I can't decipher what they're saying, but as the shadow comes back close to me at the top of the landing, I leap over the banister, using the creature below as a cushion.

Curses erupt. Then, laughter from behind me. Under me is Bjorn, nose bleeding, a dark scowl on his face. "Get off you fucker." He shoves me hard. I oblige.

"Haven't you ever heard the phrase, 'look before you leap'?" Grev says in between bites of stew that he's shoveling into his mouth.

"Just help yourself to my food."

"Gordon called Bjorn, concerned. So, we came to check on you."

"Aww, you were worried. I'm touched. Don't drip your bloody nose on my floor or furniture."

"So, what's the deal? Big brother playing hooky from work to get some nookie?" He giggles, his hand covering his mouth like he's a schoolgirl.

I glare at him as Grev gasps in mock shock.

"Never utter those words again," I growl at Bjorn. My brothers are the worst. It's a wonder I even let them grace my doorstep.

"She's running from someone. I don't know. But she fell in Burnt Owl Creek." Both brothers curse and grumble at that statement.

“So, you were...warming her up? Why not call a trained rescue responder?” Bjorn’s eyes are calculating. “A little Beauty and the Beast action, huh? Nice work, big brother.”

“Leave before I put your head through the wall.”

“Grev, you should have seen the way he reacted when she fainted and he caught her. It’s textbook fated mates.” Bjorn sounds earnest as he describes his lie to Grev. I snort in protest.

“That’s a load of bullocks.”

Grev looks between us, a studious look on his face. He scratches the scar on the side of his face. “I’ve never seen you go after a lady before, Koru. And of the three of us, Bjorn now has the most, or only, experience. I’d listen to what he has to say.”

Bjorn’s nodding excitedly, like a dog ready to fetch a bone. “That ache in your chest at the idea she might get hurt? The need to protect her and touch her at all costs? The willingness to throw away everything you’ve worked for to make her happy? Yeah. That’s fated mates, man. And I saw it happen. Instantaneous . As soon as she came through the door.” He points to the door, as if I might not remember what happened.

“Maybe you’re right. There were some—intense emotions—but love isn’t in the cards for me. We all know that. I’m not made for love, or to be loved. Fact.”

“Fact, bruh—you’re wrong.” I want to smash Bjorn’s smug face into next week. Fists clenched; I take a step toward him. He can’t be right.

“Let’s go,” Grev pulls on Bjorn’s arm. At least one of my brothers has a little sense in his head.

“Hold up.” Bjorn holds a hand up to Grev, yanks his other arm out of Grev’s grasp. “You can’t possibly believe that. Look at me. Look at the last five years of my life, and now, look at August. I don’t deserve her, do I? Yet here she is. Being lovely and sassy and sweet. All mine. That same love is for you, too.” He shakes his head like he’s just emerged from the ocean. “Never bring up what I just said, though. Let’s get some peanut butter habanero stout for the road.”

“Wait, you have pb habanero stout? And you let Bjorn taste it, but not me?” The incredulous look on Grev’s face is hilarious. His crooked nose and notched ear adding to the effect that he will also pummel Bjorn’s ass tonight.

“Here,” I growl as I follow them to the bar to fill a growler for them. Whatever it takes to get them and Bjorn’s ‘fated mates’ talk out of here. Something catches my eye, and I freeze, staring at the shelves on the wall. Except, it’s the absence of something that catches my attention. My golden trophy.

And above it, the prize-winning recipe that’s launching me into a whole new level of brewing.

“Where is it? I just watched you dust it earlier tonight.” Bjorn says, quietly assessing me. My hands balled into fists, my breathing heavy to catch the scent of whoever stole it. But all I smell is my disgusting brothers, and the faint lilac and honey scent of Poppy.

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Poppy

G asping awake, I freeze , trying to figure out where I am. I'm swaddled in a bed full of more blankets than I've ever seen. Turning, the pillow next to me smells of leather, wood-smoke, and hops, and my stomach flip-flops as if an entire kaleidoscope of butterflies is trying to emerge. The fire in the stone hearth crackles, just like the one in the brewery. Straining my ears to hear anything besides the drumming of my heart—there. A growl? Snarl? It's not a human sound. Pained, angry, the sound chills the inside of me. A shame, considering I feel like I'm barely warm—like tepid water.

Sitting up slowly, as my head throbs against my skull, I take in my surroundings. Certainly not home, or the place previously known as home before my mom died. I have no idea where I am, but I think I'm near orcs. Or, an orc. A furious orc with a septum ring and a broken fang. Probably because someone stole his recipe and golden stein. Shit. I have to get out of here.

Biting my lip to avoid whimpering at the idea of getting out of the deliciously warm bed, I push myself. The smooth trodden wooden floor is cold, but thankfully creak-proof. Tiptoeing, I find my clothes in front of the fire. Still damp, I put them on. I focus on Addy's face in my mind to avoid gagging at the feel of the wet, still-chilled clothes on my skin. I'm doing this for Addy . Remember that.

The stein is at the bottom of the creek, and the recipe is legible but wet and fragile. What a disaster of a mission. I'm glad I never have to do this again.

Dressed, shivering, I look out the window. Snow flurries fly through the moonlight, not a care in the world. I'm on the second floor, and there's no easy way down. What

I wouldn't give for a fire escape or a good old-fashioned drain pipe right now. Breaking a leg isn't going to help me escape. Looking down at the frozen ground makes dizzy and lightheaded. Nope.

Still tiptoeing, I make my way to the landing. Low, mumbled voices come from the bar area. But from here, I can't see anyone, only flickering light from the big fire in the dining area. Hopefully that means they can't see me either. Carefully, I make my way down the steps. There's a buzzing in my ears, and the lightheadedness is back. Adrenaline and slight hypothermia don't go well together. Shaking my head, I try to keep calm. Stay in the game, Poppy .

The second to last stair creaks. Loudly. I freeze. The voices stop. I'm positive they can all hear my heart thumping, giving me away.

Run, my brain says. I listen.

Hand on the door, almost to freedom for the second time tonight, a massive hand pulls me away from the door. I smell Koru before I look up and see his fiery eyes. The same hops, wood-smoke, and leather from the bed upstairs. Comforting and warm. I should be afraid, but desire licks through me. His intense black eyes threaten to burn a hole through me. His septum ring flares with each heavy breath of his.

"You're awake."

"Yes. Thank you for—" for what? I don't even remember what happened. "Rescuing me? And letting me nap. You know, when I got to town, the witchy lady at the coffee shop said you were a real gem. She was right! I feel like a new person now, thanks. I'll get out of your hair now." I give a weak smile, kicking myself for opening my mouth and letting every stream of consciousness out. Blink once, twice, and try to erase the image of my hands tangled in his messy hair. His thick fingers caressing me. In another life. Start walking. Get out of here.

“Did you take it?” Koru’s words and movements are careful, slow. My ears strain to hear a growl, but his voice sounds strained, as if it’s hard to get the words out.

His giant body shields me from the door, the other voices, and the rest of the world. I should be afraid. Really terrified. But all I feel is deep sadness that this will be the last time his giant paw or a hand will touch me this way, radiating warmth through my shoulder blades.

“I—I—yes.” I swallow hard, eyes laser-focused on him. Refuse to cower or be ashamed of taking care of my sister. “I’m taking care of my sister,” I say, trying to sound convincing, ignoring the dizziness that makes me lean on his hand more than I should.

At that, he snorts a mocking laugh. “Your sister needs my golden stein and beer recipe to be taken care of? What else, a silver spoon?”

I can’t. I try to make my mouth say the words, but nothing comes out. Or maybe my mouth doesn’t even form the words. Look at Koru’s eyes again, try to focus, but there’s nothing but a swirling mass of orc before me. Never before have I failed to lie to get myself out of trouble. But I find an inability to lie or deceive Koru. Keep it together, Poppy.

“Where is it?”

I can feel the tips of his nails digging into my back. It doesn’t hurt, but it’s a threat. Stiffen my spine, lift my chin, ignore the wooziness that threatens to overtake me. This is my moment. Remember Addy.

“The bottom of the creek.” My voice doesn’t sound like mine at all. I’m ashamed. Heat creeps up my neck and cheeks. “I don’t think I can get it out.”

More mocking laughter. Of course. That was a dumb thing to say. He removes his hand from my body, wipes it down his face, snagging on his tusks.

“Leave,” the whispered word knife to my heart. I shouldn’t expect anything less. I guess I hoped maybe the feeling inside me at the mere sound of his voice, let alone the feel of his touch, was something he felt, too. That it might be stronger than the need for the damned trophy.

“Koru!” Both our heads snap toward the bar, where two other orcs stand, arms crossed over their bulky chests. Now I know I’m in trouble, but the way they look between Koru and me, back and forth, is like two grannies who can’t be bothered to keep their noses in their own business.

“You can’t send her out into this weather.” One of the grannyish orcs says.

“No thieves allowed. I think you can agree with that standard.” Koru’s words are sharp, and the outspoken orc recoils slightly, then nods.

“You can spend the night at my place. Don’t worry, my girlfriend is there,” the other orc rushes to say when he sees the not a chance look on my face. If Koru’s eyes were lasers, they would have sliced through the other orc, leaving a neat pile of orc stew meat behind.

And just like that, I’m shuffled out the door and into a big pickup truck with an orc with a very scarred and beat up face named Bjorn. I try not to let him see how my hands tremble in my lap.

What have I gotten myself into? How am I going to get free—of the orcs and also my stepdad? If I hadn’t taken the stein, he probably wouldn’t have noticed it missing. Of course, then I’d still be frozen at the bottom of the creek. For the first time in my adult life, I felt safe and cherished, if only for a few brief hours.?

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:33 am

Koru

A lright. Alright. What comes next? The question is a loop in my mind as I keep myself busy brewing beer and chopping meat and potatoes for today's meal special. Sleep was never going to come, not after the shitshow of last night. Stepping out of the brewery and kitchen space, I do a loop, ending back at my wall of steins again. Shuffle the steins around so the gap where my trophy goes doesn't look like a missing tooth in the shelf's smile.

Bjorn yelled at me on his way out the door for leaving my prize-winning recipe out in the open. As if I don't have a copy in my safe. It was a decorative token of having won. But having someone else make my recipe, sell it, and then accuse me of proprietary theft would ruin me. All some lawyer has to say is that I magicked the poor schmuck into giving me their recipe, and the gavel would come down against me, despite the scientific proof that orcs don't have magic.

I joined the beer competitions to get ahead; to make a name for myself on the mainland and expand the reach of my beers. But it seems all I've done is put a bullseye on my back and attract scum to steal from me.

No, scum isn't the right word for Poppy. But I don't know what the right word is. Rubbing my chest, I think I have heartburn again.

Back in the brewery, I wipe the bottles of beer I just racked and capped, stick the labels to them, and try to ignore the pit in my stomach. The stein and recipe are symbolic. They don't matter. The parchment is ruined now, and the stein will be waiting for me at the bottom of the creek once the thaw comes.

But she stole it. Why?

And now I'm mad at Bjorn, too. Why'd he have to go and save her? Let her stay with him and August? Just makes me more of an ass. I slam a bottle down with enough force that the bottlecap explodes off and beer sprays all over my ceiling and down onto me.

Wasted beer. A ceiling to clean. Damnit.

The bell over the door rings. Just what I need. A customer. Stomping out, dripping in beer, I spread my hands wide on my gleaming bar top and glare at the newcomer, whom I've never seen before.

"Mornin'," the man says, rocking back on his cowboy boot heels. He's tall, pudgy in the middle, complete with jowls, and has a greasy air to him. His eyes are too close together and slightly beady. And his scent...is off. Unpleasant.

"We aren't open yet. Food's not ready." Not entirely true, but it is before lunch time. And I don't want to be being social right now. I just want to fume in my anger and confusion.

"That's fine. My name is Marcus. I'm looking for my daughter. Thought she might be around here. Didn't come home last night."

There. A whiff. Deceit. I cross my arms over my chest. What is he lying about?

"Do you have a picture? A name? Lots of people stopped by last night." Marcus does a slow circle, looking around the bar and eating area. He stops at the shelf of steins, lips pursed, brow furrowed. Then, he looks back at me with a stupid cocky grin on his face.

“I must be mistaken. I’ll keep looking. Thank you for your time.” He makes his way toward the door. The hairs on the back of my neck prickle. Something isn’t right.

“Wait. It isn’t safe to be wandering around the countryside this time of year. Lots of thin ice and animals waking up hungry. What did you say her name was?” He pauses to look at me. The fakest smile I’ve ever seen. But it’s a smile I’ve seen before. Where?

“Poppy. Her name is Poppy. But I think maybe she got her town names confused. You know how young folks are. Thanks again.”

The images from last night float through my mind like a movie unfolding. She was afraid when she entered, but not of me. She talked about how I saved her again, and she sounded so happy. Her sweet ass rubbing up against me while I warmed her in bed. Her sparkly eyes when she smiled at me.

None of that is fake. And this man is nothing but fake.

Leaping over the bar, I block his exit. “ You’re Poppy’s dad?” Closer up, I can see they look nothing alike. And closer, I can smell his slippery lies and cruel pettiness. Trouble, and not the good kind.

“Stepdad. Sadly, my wife passed away when the girls were young. Poppy never really got over her grief. She’s a bit of a troubled soul. I’m trying to help her. But you know, a guy can only do so much. Some eggs are just bad.” He shrugs, like it’s no big deal. Like his daughter is a lemon of a car.

Eyes narrowed, I stare at him. He stares back, shifting from foot to foot. I can see beads of sweat along the edge of his wide, shiny forehead. He’s nervous. Good.

“Where have we met before?” I try to keep my voice cool, though I really want to

wring his neck. Regardless of Poppy's actions, this guy is bad news.

"Gee, I don't know. I've been known to brew some beer before. Maybe at a competition? I don't make my way over here to Moonfang Haven very often. In fact, the last time was probably a decade ago. You were probably just an orcling." He chuckles like we're pals. We will never be pals.

"Great Northern Beer Rack Competition. We met there. You had," I pause, searching my memory. There were so many beers to be judged. "Some pale ale, right?" The puzzle pieces slide into place in my mind.

"Your memory is amazing." He shifts again. "Well, I better get going." Head ducked, he tries to move around me to the door, but I block him. Because I know him now.

"You threw the fit. Tossed beer in the judges' faces after I won. Said it was rigged. Or that I coerced the judges. Big, scary, manipulative orc. Isn't that right? And yet, here you are. In my brewery. Looking for your step-daughter. The one who stole my trophy and the recipe from the competition last night. She said she was taking care of her sister. Whatever could she mean?"

Hand on the door to block him, I keep it there to avoid putting hands on him. The last thing I need is my ugly mug in the paper for assaulting some sleazy asshole. Though gods, it would be so satisfying.

"Like I said, she's been in trouble. I made her a deal. She did this one thing for me, and I'd make sure Addy, her sister, made it to university."

"And if she didn't? What happens to Addy?"

"Well, you know. Economy is in the toilet right now. Things are tight. And not being blood related, I can't guarantee that I can keep helping. Those girls have been so

expensive to raise.” He shrugs again, that limp shrug, like it’s no big deal to not care for one’s young, regardless of whether or not they are blood related. My grandmother would roll over in her grave to hear of such selfishness and cruelty.

“Let me get this straight. My prize-winning recipe, that I developed, tested, and won fair and square because my brewing methods are superior, and your daughter gets to go to university? And if not? What? You throw them both on the street? Make them both do your dirty work?”

My nostrils flare. I wish I breathed fire right now, because I would barbeque this less than human man. This creature is not even worthy of the gum stuck to the bottom of Poppy’s shoe. And yet, he wields power over her and her sister. I crack my knuckles, one by one, enjoying him watching, and wondering what’s coming.

“I think you might be exaggerating a bit.” He’s really sweating now. His hand trembles as he wipes his brow with a dirty handkerchief. “Girls are so...what’s the word? So flippant. I’m trying to ground them in the real world. What the future holds for them. Especially Poppy.” Her name on his lips makes me want to roar in anger. How dare he tarnish her name with his lips?

“Marcus. I’m going to do you a favor. Two, in fact. Currently, my trophy is at the bottom of Burnt Owl Creek. If you don’t want to join it there, you’ll do exactly as I say.”

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:33 am

Poppy

The pounding on the door makes my heart pound in echo. I look across the table at August, Bjorn's girlfriend, then we both look at Bjorn, who is stirring some "world famous" stew he's cooking up for lunch. At least, I hope it's for lunch, because it smells amazing, and my stomach is rumbling. I don't know if all orcs are this good in the kitchen, but these brothers have now added guy who cooks well to my fantasy list. Neither Bjorn nor August seem concerned by whoever is on the other side of the door.

Not going to lie, it was weird entering this apartment and meeting August after the doozy of the day and night I'd had. But August has been chill and welcoming. I could see us becoming friends, as long as I don't admit I've already catalogued everything of worth in her apartment.

I need to find some new hobbies, fast.

The only stressful moment was when I wanted to leave after breakfast and Bjorn wouldn't let me. Hands on her hips, face red, mouth a thin, angry line, I thought August was going to go full warrior chick on him. I was ready to make popcorn. Eventually, though, she calmed down and after we talked, I relented. Bjorn's logic made sense. Dumb sexy and smart orcs.

"Koru's angry. But he won't stay angry. Not when he gets his head on straight. Plus, where you gonna go? Not back to your evil stepdad. Stop that idiotic thinking right now. I'm an orc, and part of Search and Rescue. It's in my bones to protect, and sending you away is not protecting." I hated how right he was, at least about not

going back to Marcus. Time will only tell with Koru, I suppose. But that doesn't change the fact that I need a place to live, and a way to feed myself. Somehow, I don't think Moonfang Haven is a haven for me.

So, we've been playing cribbage and watching Bjorn cook. Trapped by the brother of the orc I stole from and also crave, is a weird title for a book. Watching him kiss August, touch her, laugh and be sweet with her twists a knife in my gut. I have no idea what I'm going to do tomorrow, but I can't stay here.

Except now, we're staring at Bjorn while he whistles jauntily and slowly—so slowly—wipes his hands off on a towel, then saunters over to the door, as if there isn't an upset orc on the other side of the door getting more and more impatient by the second.

“OPEN THE DOOR,” Koru finally roars, right as Bjorn's hand touches the lock. His back bounces a bit as he stares at the door.

“Is he laughing?” I whisper to August, never taking my eyes off him and the door.

“Probably,” she whispers back. “They have a weird relationship. I don't get boys sometimes.” I nod in agreement. Brothers are completely different beasts.

“Who's there?” Bjorn sing-songs.

“The reaper, here to put you in your watery grave.” Koru's voice is low and menacing, but we hear it loud and clear.

“Aww, thanks for the offer, but my schedule's booked for the day.”

Silence. We wait. Bjorn looks over his shoulder at us and winks at August. She giggles. That makes me look at her. She's smiling at him, all toothy and dreamy-

eyed. Wow.

“So, what’s the plan?” I whisper. She shrugs, her eyes never leaving her green hunk.

“Wanna try again?” Bjorn asks the door.

“Please open the door?” The voice is monotone, calmer.

“Who’s a good orc?” Bjorn asks in that same obnoxious sing-song voice as he unlocks the door and opens it.

Bjorn is big. His skin is a rich green color, and he’s ripped. Koru, though, is bigger. Taller. More muscles. And his septum ring gives him a warrior vibe that makes me weak in the knees. Without saying anything else, Koru ducks his head and steps into the apartment.

And just like that, the apartment just got a lot smaller. Like I somehow entered a room from Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland , after Alice ate the cake or drank the potion or whatever. My cheeks heat, and my armpits sweat as butterflies swoop low in my belly.

“Poppy,” Koru says, taking a step toward me. Bjorn stops him. Steps in front of him with his arms out.

“Wait. We need to talk first.”

“No time,” Koru barks at his brother.

“I need to know you’re calm.” Born says, his arms crossed and his chest puffed out. “I’m keeping Poppy safe right now. And I take that job very seriously.”

Koru runs a hand over his face. He looks ragged, like he didn't sleep. Good. Neither did I. "Bjorn, it's my job to keep her safe."

"No, it isn't!" I jump up. "It's my job, thank you very much. Both of you. Put your egos away." August's hand rests gently on my arm. It's strangely calming. Addy is the only one who has been able to calm me in recent years, and even that is hit and miss. Both orcs look at me with raised eyebrows. I sit back down, uncomfortable under their gazes. This whole enterprise is unnerving.

"Poppy, please, let me speak to you. I need to apologize." Koru's voice is softer, and my eyebrows raise at the word apology .

I nod. Just once. August stands and comes in front of me, her hands on both of my shoulders, giving me strength. "You sure? We'll be downstairs." I nod again. She grabs Bjorn by the arm and yanks him past Koru to the door. Bjorn puts the brakes on for a moment.

"I'm downstairs. If I hear any shouting or thumping, I'll be here in two seconds flat." He shoves one finger into Koru's chest. Koru looks down at the finger, then back at Bjorn with a look that only brothers must understand, because Bjorn gives a curt nod and walks away, his arm over August's shoulders.

Once the door shuts, Koru comes over slowly, hands out to show he means no harm. When he gets a couple of feet away, he kneels in front of me.

"Poppy, I owe you an apology. I—"

"Stop. Let me explain. You were right to be angry. I stole from you." Koru reaches out and places his four fingers over my mouth. I jolt back a little and raise my eyebrows at him.

Seriously?

“I know. And thieving is a pet peeve of mine. As is lying.” I begin to protest, but his fingers refuse to budge from my mouth. I point at his hand. His lip crooks, just a little, in the tiniest hint of a smile.

“Let me finish. I was a mess this morning. Couldn’t sleep, couldn’t focus on anything other than you. I was furious—at you and at me. A complete wreck. Then, a customer came in. Your stepdad.” Here he takes a breath, removes his fingers from my mouth. I lick my lips. “It was—enlightening, to say the least. And I promise you, he will never bother you again.” There shouldn’t be tears. Crying isn’t a thing I do. But the sight of him on his knees brings all sorts of emotions to the surface. The thought that he met Marcus shames me even further.

“And I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have kicked you out last night. I’m lucky Bjorn was there to take care of you. I hate that I was an asshat to you. I’m here to beg for your forgiveness.” Picking up one of my hands, he kisses it with those big fat lips of his, so surprisingly gentle. My belly flutters as his broken tusk rubs against the top of my hand.

“Marcus? Came to the brewery? Did you kill him?”

At that, Koru busts up laughing. His laugh makes me laugh. An awkward, snot-filled, unsexy laugh. Once we settle, me wiping my nose all over the sleeve of August’s sweater that I’m borrowing, he touches my chin, making sure we are eye to eye. “Listen, Poppy. I will kill him if you want me to. I ensured that he doesn’t bother you again, and that Addy gets the money she needs for university.”

Shaking my head, no to killing, but also how is any of this happening?? “I never thought I would be rid of him. Each time he said, ‘one more job,’ my hopes were dashed. I’ve become a thief because of him. I dropped out of school because of him.”

I can't control the tears that flow down my cheeks. Heaving, trying to get a breath, I've completely come apart at the seams.

Koru wraps his huge arms around me, shushing into my hair. He pulls me onto his lap on the ground, body and arms encasing me in his comfort and protection. The kind of care I haven't had in what feels like so long. His fingers caress up and down my arm. Pressure soothing the fragile parts of me. His heart beats against my body, telling me with each beat that I'm safe.

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:33 am

Koru

“It’s been three days !” I try not to shout in front of my customers. Really, I try. But Bjorn is driving me bananas.

“Three days!” Gordon shouts at me from across the room, his stein held high in his tentacled hand. I wave a hand at him, unwilling to take the time to explain that I’m not cheering. He drinks his beer and goes back to his game of cribbage with Skerr.

“Yeah, and she’s fragile. Giving her time and space is the responsible, mature thing to do.” He sips his beer like this is normal. Like we’re shooting the breeze, not deciding my mate’s fate.

“Fine, but you’re covering for me. I have something to do.” I remove my leather apron and toss it to him. Bjorn frowns.

“As long as it doesn’t involve Poppy.” He pops the p’s of her name. It’s annoying. I want to punch him, but there are too many customers. I can’t afford any bad publicity in this small town where gossip travels faster than a moose in rut.

“It doesn’t. Happy Hour doesn’t start until four, don’t start early. Remember, Gordon can’t have tonight’s special, it has fish. And Flint is allergic to green things. Oh, and no drinking on the job.” I take his truck keys from where they sit next to him on the bar top, spin them around my finger.

“Be gentle with the old girl,” Bjorn warns as I walk out. I flip him the bird in response. “Who the hell is allergic to green things? That can’t be real.” I hear him

mutter under his breath as the door shuts behind me. As long as he doesn't burn the place down, I'm sure everything will be fine.

The last ferry of the night arrives at the island at six thirty. I picked her out of the small crowd immediately. It wasn't hard to see the similarities between her and Poppy. She grunted at my "hello," and that was all the conversation we needed. Once she's in the truck, I drive straight to Bjorn's apartment.

"I appreciate you coming here for Poppy," I say. I catch her nod from the corner of my eye, but she doesn't say anything. Her set jawline shows her determination. She and Poppy look so much alike, and yet are so different. Addy smells like clean linen and resentment. She has none of the warmth and wildness that radiates out of Poppy. That's okay, she doesn't have to like me. She just needs to be safe with Poppy.

"Here we are," I try again as I park in front of the large brick building. No answer but the slamming of her door as she hops out of the truck. Okay. We walk to Bjorn's door in silence. I thought about asking her to give Poppy a message for me. But that can only backfire. Besides, this is all the message I can send her: that I'll do anything for her happiness and safety.

A tearful "thank you," is all she says to me as I walk away.

She waits until I'm around the corner and out of sight before she knocks. The squeals of delight are all I need to hear before I walk back down the stairs to the truck.

It feels like a lame apology, but it's all I could think of. Leaving the sisters be, I go back to the brewery to relieve Bjorn and sulk at being alone.

"I thought I told you to leave Poppy alone." Bjorn's words are a slap to the face as I walk through the door. Happy Hour is done. Most of the folks still here will eat the special, unless they're Gordon, who will just keep drinking and playing his card

game. There are a couple of glances darting at us, probably taking bets as to if tonight will end in a fistfight between brothers. “I sent a message to Grev, he should be here soon.”

“I didn’t talk to her, didn’t even see her.” Smelled her honey sweetness though, all the way outside. Joy, relief, pure happiness. I always want her to smell like that—because of me, around me. “Thanks for covering,” I say begrudgingly, as I throw his truck keys back at him.

“It was fun. I forgot how much fun it is working here. You need to make a game night and advertise. Everyone is looking longingly at Gordon and Skerr’s game. Oh! And we could do a trivia night!” He removes the same apron, shuffles around the bar, and sits on a barstool. “Barkeep, another!” Guffawing at himself for his lame joke, I roll my eyes and pour him another stein as a thank you.

“You’re not going home to August?” I try to keep the jealousy out of my voice.

“Nah. You ruined my plans for the night by adding another female to the mix. Though maybe I could invite them to join my harem.” He strokes his chin in contemplation, a stupid smile on his face. I throw a coaster at him.

When Grev arrives, he looks slightly panicked, eyes wide in his ugly green face. “Emergency?” His eyes dart around, looking for the proverbial fire.

I shake my head. Bjorn giggles. “All good. Bjorn jumped to conclusions. Again,” I say as I pour Grev a stein.

“Dude. I was in the middle of research at the library.” He slaps Bjorn on the back, hard enough it echoes, then thanks me for the beer.

“I thought Koru broke the rules.” Bjorn shrugs with his beer in hand. “Besides, it

sounds like I saved you from another boring night. You're welcome."

"There is no rule that says I can't do a grand gesture for the woman whom I'm fated to long for." Gods, why do I sound like such a sap? This is one reason love is not for me. I can't stand to be weak.

"I said not to involve her."

"More of a guideline, I'd say," shrugging him off. "Besides, you didn't say I couldn't contact Poppy's sister." I turn to help a customer while Grev whisper yells at his brother for being a dunce.

They settle in. The customers rotate through, and soon it's time to close up. Small town island life is perfect. Everyone's home and in bed before midnight...most nights.

My brothers are the last to leave, insisting they walk me out. I'm sure they think they have words of wisdom to impart, which is a total joke. Besides, I don't want to listen to anything they have to say.

Setting the final clean dishes in the drying rack, I hear the bell on the door out by the bar ring. I thought I locked it. Listening, it's just Bjorn and Grev talking still, shifting chairs onto the tables for mopping in the morning.

Hand on the swinging door that separates the kitchen from the bar to check on my brothers, I catch it. A whiff of lilac and honey. I freeze, unsure of my own senses. Is wishful thinking getting the better of me? Did I fall and crack my head and now I'm dreaming? My heart flutters as if it is made of butterflies; my stomach is in too many knots to have butterflies of its own.

There. I hear a feminine voice. Poppy . Every muscle in my body comes alive at the sound of her voice. But my feet are rooted to the spot. How is it that I, Koru, can't

walk through the door to see the woman I'm pining for?

Because I'm scared. Scared that she's angry with me for interfering. Scared that she'll say goodbye and leave with her sister forever.

Get it together. I can hear Bjorn laughing. That makes my blood boil. That gets my feet moving.

With every fiber of my being, I push through my fear and the swinging door. And there she is, in all her glory. Her warm skin, black hair, curves that travel for days. Poppy. The one my heart and soul want.

"Hi," she says, looking unsure of herself as she wiggles her fingers in a wave. Bjorn asks her something I don't hear for the ringing in my ears when he puts his hand on her arm. I'm about to rip him apart for touching her, but he steps away from her.

I step closer to her, slowly, to not scare her off. Her round eyes are luminescent, reminding me of a deer up on the mountain—always on alert, ready to run. She should never have to feel that way again. I'll never be the reason she feels that way.

"Be good," Bjorn warns me, finger pointing at me like I'm a wayward dog. Then he and Grev leave. And it's just us.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:33 am

Poppy

“I—I wanted to say thank you. Thank you for bringing Addy to me. For making sure she’s safe. It means the world to me.” I can barely hear my voice over the steady drumming of my heart in my chest. It’s going to leap out of my chest at any moment.

“You’re welcome. It’s the least I could do. You deserve every goodness in this world.” His voice is growly. Music to my heartstrings.

I shake my head no at his statement, my hair flipping left and right. “Your trophy is lost because of me. I owe a lot of people a lot of money. But August is going to help me find a job, and hopefully I can start repaying soon. I don’t know how much a golden stein is worth—”

“It’s worthless compared to you being safe and happy.”

Tears sting my eyes. Outside in the cold, I promised myself I wouldn’t cry. When he left me at Bjorn’s three days ago, I was a puffy, red-eyed mess from all my crying. His gentleness is such a juxtaposition to his size, his growliness, and from anything I’ve experienced from any male in my life. It’s incomprehensible.

“You can’t mean that. Look what I did. I stole from you. Lost it. You had to deal with my awful stepdad. Probably paid him some obscene amount of money to make him go away. And now? You’ve brought my sister from the mainland out of the goodness of your heart? I’ll never repay all of this. I don’t even know how to put a number on any of it.”

There's a sheet of paper in my pocket with a list of everyone I've stolen from for Marcus. Most everyone's name has a number, but not Koru's. Just a series of panicked question marks.

Koru sighs, his septum ring blowing in the wind of his breath. It makes me smile. "Come here," he says, opening his arms to me. I step forward and fall into them, a little too eagerly. He's so warm. His whole body is like a hot, hard board of muscles for me to get lost in.

"There's no number," he whispers into my hair. "No accounting to be kept. It's water under the bridge. Or, ice in the river." He chuckles at his own bad joke, his chest bouncing against the side of my face. I love his laugh, his stupid joke, when he smiles, and the scent of him—fire and hops and cinnamon.

"That's a bad joke," I whisper.

"I know, thanks. But seriously, you being here makes me so happy. I don't deserve you or any love you may have, but I want to be deserving of it. Will you please let me be deserving of you?"

At that, I pull away to look into his warm golden eyes. Fire, honesty, desire—his eyes tell me a story I'm not sure I know how to believe. "Say it again."

"Which part?" The edge of his lips crook up into a half smile. His tusks gleam in the light.

"The part where you say please." This time, I smile at him and wag my eyebrows.

With a swoosh of air and a thunderous thump that scares me, Koru drops to both knees in front of me. "Poppy, will you please forgive my anger? Please let me love you. Please let me spend every day, and night, trying to bring you joy?"

Every please out of his big, thick lips pulses pleasure through me. I clench my thighs. Him on his knees makes my skin flush with a heat I'm not used to. I nod, trying hard not to smile.

“Now I need you to say the words. Out loud.” Koru's voice takes on a deeper growl that makes me want to shed all of my clothes right here.

“Yes, Koru. Yes. I forgive you. And I want to love you back. Every day.”

“And night?” He wiggles his bushy eyebrows up and down. I've never seen an orc do that before. I laugh before I can catch myself.

“And every night. Preferably, starting with tonight.” The last word almost doesn't come out of my mouth. I've never been this forward before.

I needn't worry. Koru whoops, stands, and scoops me up into his arms before I can get my senses about me.

“I 'VE WANTED YOU SINCE the moment you walked through my door,” Koru says with such a fierceness it startles me. His voice vibrates through my bones, making my skin shiver in delight. “That moment changed everything for me. You are my home now.”

The bed is a giant, warm nest with the fire in the fireplace warming us. The first time he put me in this bed, I was half-frozen and unconscious and desperately trying to find a way to freedom. Now, every touch of his is fire to my skin, leaving behind a trail of pebbled flesh. I'm a queen and he's worshipping every inch of me. I'm safe. With him. He's peeled up my shirt, pulled down my bra cups, and now, with one finger on my nipple, sends shockwaves of delight through me, all the way down

between my legs.

His body is so large, I wrap a leg around him, trying to find friction for myself. The look he gives me is one of pure hunger. “My little flower. This is mine.” He pulls away from me, just inches, but it feels like miles, and rests his hand on my mound. Liquid heat fills me. “You are mine.”

Those words. That possessiveness. It’s something I’ve always shied away from. I promised myself once I was free from Marcus, I would be independent, my own woman. Never depending on any man.

But Koru isn’t a man, is he? He’s an orc full of strength and power. And his words are a balm to my battered heart.

“Then have me. Take me,” I whisper.

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Koru

Poppy's words unleash the restraint I've wrapped around myself since she walked into my brewery. Her lilac and honey scent, mixed with her arousal, hums a song to my heart that I never want to end. Her eyes glow in the firelight with a dark warmth that melts the cold rock that I thought was my heart.

Careful not to rip her clothes, I remove them as quickly as possible, then sit back on my haunches to admire my treasure. My love. Her warm honey skin has so much life to it, nothing like when I pulled her from the creek. My heart aches at the memory.

Soft curves that hill and valley across her call to me to bury my hands, my mouth, all of me in her. "You are beautiful. An oasis in the desert. The sun after a long, dark winter."

Her breath hitches, and it angers me that no one has told her this. That no one has lavished the praise on her that she deserves. I vow to myself to always speak the truth to her.

But first, I must taste.

Running my tongue up the inside of her thigh to the apex, where her body comes together in bliss, makes her jump. Moan. Then whisper my name.

"Say it again," I demand, mouth over her clit.

"Koru. You can't do that." At that, I raise my head high enough to look into her eyes

and see the embarrassment.

“I can, and I will. It’s my favorite dessert.” I give a toothy grin at her. She doesn’t reciprocate.

“That—no one—I don’t—” the words fail her. It’s cute.

“Poppy, listen to me. My cock aches to be inside you. But you need to be ready for me. Okay?”

She nods. “Say the words, Poppy.”

“Okay.” There’s hesitation in her voice.

“I’m going to pleasure you. Learn all the ways you love to be touched. And then, only after you’ve come and are satisfied. Only then will I enter you.” At that, she swallows hard. “Be a good girl and enjoy.” I wink, then head south for my dessert.

Each hitch of her breath, every moan and whimper, drives me on to explore more of her uncharted territory. Licking, sucking, flicking my tongue over her clit and inside her. When she’s close, her nails digging into my scalp, I insert a finger into her wetness. Gods, she’s dripping and tight. Her hips buck against me until she comes. My name on her lips.

Always. I always want my name on her lips.

“Koru, I don’t know what to say,” she breathes after a few minutes of stillness. The fire is low, so I get up and put another log on, stoke it a bit, then shed my pants.

“Come back,” she says, a slight pleading in her voice.

“You’re such a good girl. So receptive to my touch.” I hover over her in the nest of a bed. A kiss after each word. How is her skin so soft and velvety? How are her small fingers so powerful in the magic they hold over me with each touch?

My thick, heavy cock drags across her thigh as I move from belly to nipple to mouth and back again. Poppy’s eyes widen when it rests against her clit and throbs against her.

“Koru? Will you fit?”

I chuckle and nod. Then gasp when her fingers grasp my shaft. “Gods, you can’t do that. I’ll fall apart.” At that admission, she smiles. Her fingers travel root to tip, reading me like braille. “Ready?” I ask, positive I can’t hold on any longer, even though I have a thousand times more control than what I feel right now.

“Say the words,” I admonish after she nods.

“Take me, Koru.”

I pull out of her hand and notch myself at her entrance. The sweet heat of her is perfection. Her breathing increases. I thrust in. Not all the way. Enough that she’s swallowed my head. We both groan at the sensation.

“You’re so tight,” I moan.

“More,” she says, a spark in her eyes.

I oblige. Thrusting again. Between the tightness and her whimper, I almost come undone. A little more—I pull out and thrust in again, using all the momentum to make it all the way in. To the hilt. Our bodies now joined as one.

Poppy thrusts her hips at me, and my head falls back as a growl escapes my lips. That fire in her eyes is a forest blaze now. Her sweet smile turns wicked when she sees the power she holds over me.

The animal in me comes to play, thrusting again and again, holding her tight to me. When she clings to my shoulders and pants my name, I'm done. I let out a roar that threatens to rattle the windows as we come undone together.

Careful not to squish her when I collapse, all other rational thoughts have left my being. We lie together, intertwined, for seconds, minutes, decades, just reveling in the touch of our bodies. Eventually, the crackling of the fire brings me back to my senses. Poppy is curled up next to me, slightly shivering. I get up, stoke the fire, then grab a wet washcloth to clean her up.

"You're the most ravishing creature," I say, once I've finished cleaning us up and climb back into bed, spooning her.

"I bet you say that to all the ladies," Poppy whispers, half-asleep already. At that, I lean up on one elbow and turn her chin toward me so she can see my face. See my honesty.

"No, Poppy. There is only you. Your scent sings to me, since the moment you stepped into my brewery. No one else will ever do but you. You're my mate. It's fate."

Her eyes widen, and she sits up. "You're frowning," I say. The satisfied, sleepy look is gone from her eyes.

"Mmm, just thinking about how wonderful this is," she says as she scratches the side of her head.

“That’s the face of wonderful? I call bullshit.” Propping myself up to look at her clearer, there’s a space between us now, the vacuum of space in our bed.

“Fine. I was thinking about how wonderful this is. But also about my mom and how she ended up with someone like Marcus.” I stay absolutely still, not wanting to scare her off from telling me what she thinks. “I don’t want to end up like her. I promised myself I wouldn’t attach myself to anybody.”

“Do you think that I am like Marcus?” She shakes her head adamantly no. Her eyes don’t meet mine. “Look at me, Poppy.” I wait until she does. Gorgeous eyes that speak of all the hurts she’s endured. All the betrayal by someone who was supposed to love her and take care of her. The anger of a thousand suns fills my chest as I think of that creature—less than a man—and how I let him walk out of my brewery on his own two legs.

“I love you. That piece of scum will never bother you again. And I promise you that hurting you is the last thing I want to do. Betrayal is a serious offense in our world. And if you need to go slower, we can go slower. You set the pace. I’m happy to be with you—wherever you are.”

“I love you, too, Koru. Thank you.” The crystalline tears on her cheeks break me, make me vow to hunt Marcus down and make sure he never hurts anyone ever again.

Kissing each tear away, she breathes easier, slipping back into that sleepy state. Arms wrapped around each other, we lie there; me listening to her breathing and calculating all the ways I can love her and keep her safe.

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Poppy

“P oppy, you can’t be serious that you’re staying here! Doesn’t matter that he helped you be free from Marcus. You don’t owe him. And you’re in the middle of nowhere. You’re trapped on an island!” My sister’s voice is low but intense as she berates me over pastries and coffee at Moonlit Grounds Café and Bakery.

Looking around, I make sure we aren’t being overheard. No one seems to be watching us, except maybe Ravena, who is methodically wiping the counter and stealing glances at us. She’s nice enough, but there’s something about her that sets me on edge.

“Addy, don’t worry about me. I’m a big girl. You go get an education. Make a life for yourself away from our former stepdad. And come visit me in summer when it’s warm.” I smile big before taking a sip of my latte.

“You’re just going to attach yourself to this orc ?” Now her voice is loud. Two monsters, a minotaur and a demon, in the corner look at us, snorting their displeasure at my too loud sister. I smile and wiggle my fingers in a wave at them, then shush Addy.

“Uh, yeah. He’s strong. Protective. He cares about me. Addy, I love him.” I whisper the last words, almost unbelieving them myself. But it’s true. He’s wrapped himself around my heart like a vine and climbed directly into my soul. Making me feel complete in a way I never thought was possible.

“Okay. That’s bizarre. But that aside, what are you going to do? Be his beer wench?”

I set my mug down, slowly, carefully, unbelieving that she's really this cruel. I know she has my best intentions at heart, but her words sting.

"No. I'm going to get a job. Maybe take classes at the community college next semester. Find my footing. You don't have to understand. But it would be great if you could be respectful."

"What do you think?" Addy turns and asks Ravena, the owner, as she walks by with a tray of delicious looking pastries. "Do you think it's completely acceptable for her to suddenly be in love with this orc, Koru, and move in with him? She barely knows him!"

Ravena purses her lips as she sets her tray down on our table, giving us each a little saucer with a cream puff topped with minced pistachios on top. "Well, honeybunch, that's a big question. You make me miss my own sisters—not something I say very often." She chuckles a little, a faraway look in her eyes before she turns back to Addy. All whimsy gone. "Let me answer your question with one of my own. Is your sister happy? Is she safe? Because when she first walked in, her eyes were shifty and her posture hunched. Now, she looks vibrant. I think that speaks volumes."

Addy huffs out hard, making the foam on her coffee shift like the Red Sea parting. "Yeah, you're right. She is happy and safe. But how much of that happiness is just the newness? How fast will it wear off? And then will she be stuck on this island where she doesn't know anybody?" Addy's voice reaches a new pitch. Both Ravena and I arch an eyebrow at her.

"She knows me! We're a surprisingly friendly bunch—happens in small towns. And we are quick to look after our own. She's one of us now. And not in a creepy way." Ravena rests a hand on my shoulder and gives me a twinkly eyed smile. "Now, I'll say, islands aren't for everyone. Sounds like that might be the case for you. And that is okay. Just like love isn't for everybody. Just look at me! Love was blotted out of

my life's future a long time ago." She sighs, wistful and angry, and I really want to ask her for that story.

But before I can open my mouth to ask, Addy grabs my hand, pulling my attention back to her. Ravena, who is wise beyond her years, takes this as her cue to pick up her tray and leave us in peace...or at least silence. Addy's mouth opens and shuts twice, then she shoves a pastry in her mouth with her other hand. As long as we have each other, we're going to be okay. Even if we don't agree with each other.

Looking at the dregs of the coffee and milk foam in my mug, I hear voices I recognize. August and Bjorn. They come in, loudly laughing, and order. August comes to say hi to us, while Bjorn heads over to the monsters in the corner—the ones who snorted at us—and fist bumps them. Now I see it, SAR logos on their shirts. Great. I'm sure our conversation will be repeated and eventually get back to Koru. The game of telephone is strong in this town.

"Look at you two! Like locals!" August gushes at us, even though she's been here only slightly longer than me. I smile at her, but there's no warmth. Addy's chilled something inside of me. I need to think.

Addy rambles to August about her plans for classes. And I notice as I half-heartedly listen, that her excitement is fake. There's a worry in the crease of her eyebrows I hadn't noticed before.

"You know you don't have to leave right away, right? I'm not trying to get rid of you," I smile at Addy, taking her hand in mine after August has skipped off to sit with Bjorn and the other SAR orcs. Addy's eyes widen in surprise at my words and her cheeks tinge pink.

"What are you talking about? I—I'm fine. Excited for new opportunities." She fiddles with the spoon in her cup, not making eye contact with me as she speaks.

“You forget that I know all your tells. All your ins and outs. As exciting as it may be, it’s also scary and new. And lonely. You always have a home with me, even if my home is a little unconventional.” I shrug and smile, lean forward to wipe her tears.

“I see the way Koru looks at you. Touches you—all those little touches add up. He’s totally smitten. And so protective. I—I guess I think you’ll forget about me with your new happy, sexy orc life.”

“Oh Addy,” I reach over our table and hug her. “No one can ever replace you. I will never forget about you. We’re all we’ve got. I promised mom I’d take care of you. That doesn’t change. We’re in this together, okay?” Forehead to forehead, we promise each other daily phone calls and lots of visits and love.

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Koru

One Month Later

“Koru? Have you seen my library books? I need to return them before Betty has a cow.” Poppy sounds slightly panicked as she looks under every surface of the apartment. “She’s going to fire me for being a delinquent!”

“No, she’s not. I’m pretty sure late library books are not a fireable offense. Besides, she loves you. Keeps telling everyone how much life you’ve brought to our little library. I know, because then everyone comes and tells me.” I roll my eyes in a mock gesture, but really, I’m smiling, pleased as a dog stretched out in the sunshine that Poppy is making a life for herself here. Making an impact on the community. Making friends.

We’re still getting used to the new place. It felt like a fresh start for us together to not live on top of the brewery. We have plans to rent it out for short-term rentals. Poppy thinks there’s a market for summer hikers and also winter cross-country skiers. Who knows, but I’m willing to try if she is. This place, though, not far from the brewery and the library, is perfect for the two of us. Except for all the boxes and piles of things (all mine) everywhere. We’ll get it sorted.

I watch her look under more papers and pillows and boxes. Move some stacks for her, then put my coat on.

“Sorry, Babe. You’ll have to kiss Betty’s ass. I need to get back to the brewery. Time to rack the newest ale.” Quick as light, Poppy runs toward me, throwing herself at

me. Oof.

“Gee. That never gets old,” she says as she grins that sparkling smile up at me. Her breasts squished against my chest are one of my favorite feelings. Gods, how did I get so lucky?

“What never gets old?” I tuck her hair away from her eyes and behind her ears.

“Running into you. Jumping on you and having you catch me. You being strong enough to hold me without complaint of my volume or size.” Poppy shrugs, a little flushed in the cheeks as she talks, then tucks her head against my chest in a hug.

“Who complains about your size? I’ll pummel their ass. You, Pop, are a delightful creature. Perfect in every way. Never change.” I crook a finger under her chin to make her look up at me. My flower. “You have brought me happiness, joy, and light. I love you.”

“I love you, too. But I’m going to be late!” The satisfied, cozy smile falls off her face at the realization that she’s going to be late for work. “Gah! I still need to find those books!”

Laughing, I help her look. “They can’t have gone far.”

They’re in the oven.

“Are they at least—cookbooks?” I ask, a little concerned at what else she is storing in weird places.

“No,” she says as she shoves them in her Orcs do it Best tote bag. The library made them as a fundraiser. They didn’t make a lot of money, but Poppy now owns five tote bags. “I was cooking while reading, and the sauce was splattering. It was the driest,

cleanest place I could think of to put them. But then you walked through the door soaked to the bone, and—you know—I got distracted.” She grins, winks at me, a hand on the doorknob. “See ya tonight.” A blown kiss and she’s out the door, a veritable flower tornado.

Rack the ale. Clean the tanks. Update the spreadsheet. Schedule kegging and bottling. I go through the motions, but my mind is completely elsewhere—on Poppy. It’s hard to believe it’s only been a month. But what a heartening month it’s been. I never thought love was something that was in my life path. My job was to take care of my brothers and my town.

But Poppy has flipped all of that on its head. My job now is to take care of her. Love her and accept love from her. It’s the best job I’ve ever had.

When Grev comes in, he startles me out of thought. He looks broody. “Your smile is annoying,” he says by way of greeting.

“Good to see you, too. What’s up? You’re early.”

“Do I need to have an appointment to see my brother?” His words are sharp, clearly aggrieved by something, or someone.

“Bjorn?” I ask, not bothering to stop cleaning down the bar and tables for today’s foot traffic.

“He’s so fucking proud of himself. And loud. And stupid. I’ve been prepping the garden for ages. I mean, it’s all frozen, but I’m marking things out. Sketchbooks on what I’m farming this year. And the asshat had to come over and use my sketches as napkins. Then tromp all over the garden spaces with his stupid giant boots. Just undid all the work I did in the fall.”

“Here,” I pass him a bowl of chowder and newly kegged IPA. “This is the newest. Has coriander and peppercorn in it.”

“What is it with you and fucking peppers?”

I shrug, amused at his extra grumpy mood. “I just like spice. This was Poppy’s idea. She’s got a good tongue for flavors.”

“Oh gods. Do NOT talk to me about her tongue.”

At that, I throw my bar towel at him. “Don’t worry. I won’t.”

Grev settles after that, dunking big chunks of dark rye bread into his chowder and drinking his beer. Grev’s the quiet one, which means sometimes he gets forgotten about. I make a mental note to ask Poppy if we can have him over for a meal once a week. I mean, we eat here at the brewery most nights. But I can see, just as with Poppy’s sister Addy, that sometimes we need to make more of an effort. I’ll talk to Bjorn, too...the asshat.

The first real customers of the day wander in about the time Grev is making motions to leave. “Thanks, Koru, for letting me vent. And for feeding me. That was delicious. I’m off to rewrite all my notes for the season.”

“No problem, anytime. Oh, Tuesdays are slow. Why don’t we plan for dinner together here? I’ll ask Poppy to make a dessert.” She was just telling me about a spiced cake with cream cheese frosting her mom used to make. Maybe she’ll want to make that?

Grev grunts a nod and walks out, but I saw the surprise on the face, and the something like joy peeking out from behind his hairy orc face.

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Poppy

Bjorn, August, Grev, Urk, Anne, Koru, and I sit around the biggest table closest to the fire. There's no one else here. Probably helped that Koru proclaimed loudly that he was closing early tonight to everyone, for the entire weekend prior.

August roasted some winter squash, delicious. Grev brought a playlist of oddly sad folk songs. Urk brought Anne, and Anne brought cornbread muffins with a delightful, crispy edge. Bjorn and Koru roasted a leg of cow together out back. And I made my mom's famous spiced cake with brown butter cream cheese frosting. I'm weirdly nervous about everyone eating it.

"Grev. Can we please change the playlist? It's like listening to sad country music by hipsters. Pleeese." August slaps Bjorn on the arm. Bjorn's whines are funny, but also true. Grev and I haven't spoken much since I moved here, but he certainly seems to walk around with a sad thundercloud over his head, like one of those cartoon characters. Now, though, Grev shoots lasers from his eyes at Bjorn.

"Can't help it. You don't have good taste," Grev says.

"Maybe you need to buy your morning coffee from Moonlit Grounds. Pretty sure Ravena is a witch. And pretty sure she makes love potions and slips them into our drinks."

Koru and Grev groan in unison. "Not this conspiracy theory again, Bjorn. You know, you sound crazy when you talk about Ravena. Also, fated mated. "

Bjorn snorts. “There are rumors. And they are true. I will prove it to you! And weren’t you scoffing about fated mates not too long ago?” Bjorn gives Koru a pointed look. “And if nothing else, Grev will get out and socialize more. Like a puppy.” He shrugs. Grev flips him the bird.

“It’s true,” August jumps in, and we all look at her in shock. “Not about Ravena,” she waves us off, “Bjorn is on his own with that theory. But he does have the worst taste in music.”

“Ah, gee, thanks darlin’. Thanks for having my back.”

“I’ve got your back. But I also speak the truth.” August smiles, then puts a spoonful of roasted butternut squash on Bjorn’s plate. “It’s good for your cholesterol.”

“Koru. Tell August that orcs don’t have to worry about their cholesterol.” He rolls his eyes.

Koru shrugs, a tiny smile on one side of his mouth. We’ve also had this conversation recently. Must be the hint of spring in the air—August and I are excited for fresh vegetables, not things that have been stored in a fridge for months.

“I think I saw a sprig of green today on my walk,” I say, letting whatever thoughts I have in my mind wander freely. “Does spring come earlier here than on the mainland? Because of the tempering effect of the ocean? Or later, because of the tempering effect of the ocean?”

“I saw a snowdrop the other day, too!” Anne says. She seems sweet. Sweeter than her mate, Urk, who sits with his arms crossed glaring at his brothers.

I look to August for help. She just shrugs. I look at Koru, who also shrugs. “You grew up here. I feel like you should know how the weather works.” Now I look

pointedly at Grev.

“Yes, spring tends to come earlier here than the mainland. Mostly. The northern current runs down the western side of the island, so that side is significantly colder, and wind-worn. Also, the mountain is late, comparatively speaking. I’m sure Bjorn can speak to late season frosts that happen every year, causing unprepared folks to need rescuing.”

August coughs, her cheeks red. Bjorn glares at Grev, cracking his knuckles. Eventually, Grev realizes that he overstepped and tries to backpedal. “Sorry, I didn’t mean you. Wasn’t even thinking of you.”

“Clearly,” Bjorn snorts.

“And time for dessert!” I shout, standing, ready to avoid any bloodshed over dinner. While I’m in the kitchen, I can hear their friendly fire gaining heat. These orcs and their tempers. Cake in hand, I rush back out, tripping on my way to the table. The cake arcs through the air, a graceful swan of a cake. I hear gasps, an “oh shit!”, and I’m pretty sure I shriek.

Koru, my hero and lover and protector, catches the cake with both hands, like it’s a bundle of baby, and sets it down on the table with the biggest and stupidest grin on his face that I’ve ever seen. Frosting splattered all up his arms and across his chest. The temptation to lick it off him is great.

Everyone erupts in claps and cheers. I cry.

“Why are you crying?” Koru whispers, holding me close with his sticky cake fingers. No one is paying me any mind. They’re all digging into the cake now. Literally. With their hands. A cake free-for-all.

“I don’t know. Hormones? Overwhelmed with gratitude? Put to shame by your amazing reflexes.” I cough a laugh at the last one.

He kisses the top of my head, taking a moment to breathe in and out. “No need to be ashamed. We all have our own gifts. Yours? Infinite in bed. And in the kitchen. And talking to people. And thieving. Mine? Brewing beer. And beating up my brothers. And now, catching flying cake.”

We grab our forks and join the others at the table. No one bothered to scoop cake onto a plate but eat the cake communally from the middle of the table. Bjorn isn’t even using a fork, just his hand. He keeps smearing little bits on August, then licking it off.

“Get a room, you two!” Grev growls, but even he is laughing.

My heart swells at my new family. Gratitude to Koru, for loving me even though we started out so rocky. Gratitude that even with Addy getting settled in her new apartment, she’s coming to visit next month. And gratitude that I get to write my own rules from now on. I get to call my own shots. I work a job I love at the library. And I have an orc whom I adore, and who adores me. And I have friends. Camaraderie.

L ATER THAT NIGHT, TUCKED into bed after washing the dishes and the table—literally, Bjorn brought in a hose and hosed the table down—I roll over to Koru to tell him how happy I am.

He’s snoring. His septum ring moving ever so gently with each growly snore. I wonder if they make nasal strips in orc sizes?

Carefully not to wake him, I undress, then roll on top of him, licking from his hard

stomach up to his nipples, then down again. Down, down, to where his cock springs up for me. On demand. I smile.

Koru's eyes are still closed, but he's no longer snoring. Faker. I run my tongue from root to shaft of his thickset, sturdy cock, admiring the shine I give it. It's a beautiful sight to behold. One hand on his balls, one on his cock, I slide my hand up and down his shaft along with my mouth. Rolling the head with my tongue each time. It's a stretch to fit all of him in my mouth. The stretch feels good; I imagine my pussy stretching to take him as he fills me.

He groans—a rumble that I feel through all of me. His fingers tangle in my hair, guiding me. A little faster. A little harder. The hardness of him makes me wet with anticipation. Little ole' me having this kind of power over him gives me chills.

“This is the best wake-up call ever,” Koru says. “My little flower. So delicious. So good.” I smile over his cock at his words. “You take my cock so well.” I love the way my spine tingles when he praises me.

His breathing comes heavier. I feel his balls contract in my hand. I imagine him coming in my mouth, on my breasts, inside me. I can't decide which one to start with.

Luckily, I don't have to pick. His hands still me, and he lifts me up, sitting me on top of him, his cock between us. “You missed,” I say.

“I'm not sure I'm that talented. Need an extra hand to hold my cock up.” He laughs, and I feel myself blush at the image of more than two hands.

“You need my cock.” It isn't a question. I nod. He growls and I roll my eyes. You'd think I'd remember to say the words. But I still forget.

“Yes. I need your cock. Inside me. I need your cum.” His growl of pleasure ripples

through me again.

I lift my hips high so I can sit on his cock. It's a tight fit, but I get him all the way. Sitting with him all the way inside me, I'm smiling, proud.

"My good girl. You take me so well."

We sit like that, staring at each other, smiling, loving the feel of each other. Then he twitches inside me, making me gasp and shudder in pleasure. Hands on his chest, I slide up and down him. His fat fingers dig into my hips as he guides me. We move together in sync. In unison.

Faster. His neck is tense, the cords visible as he works to control himself with me. When his fingers reach up to pinch my nipple, twisting it between his thumb and forefinger, I gasp, almost coming right then. His other hand reaches around my ass, feeling my bottom. "Too much," I whisper, unsure of what I'm saying.

He twists my other nipple. That's all it takes to send me over the edge, flying, milking his cock with my pleasure. He gasps, moans my name, his cum filling me, spilling out of me.

Exhausted, I collapse onto him, where he holds me. Cleans both of us. Tucks us back into bed.

"Just like the first time, my flower." He chuckles to himself at the memory.

"So much better than the first time," I say. The first time was delicious, but this was pure magic.

"Think we'll continue to get better with age?" He's groggy already.

“Like a fine stout.” I kiss his nose, then settle into him, content and safe.

“I love you, Poppy. I want you to be mine forever.” Every time he says those words, tears prick at the edges of my eyes. I don’t know why, and I’d love to get them to stop. I hate crying.

“Koru, I love you, too. But I need you to stop saying it.” Koru startles and snorts.

“Why on earth would I stop?”

“Because I need to stop crying every time I hear the words. It’s embarrassing and frustrating.” I slam my hand down on his chest. Not hard, just an emphasis.

“Oh Poppy, you are the cutest thief I’ve ever met. I will never stop loving you. And I will never stop saying the words. You cry all you need to until you believe me, all the way down to your toes.” He kisses me, gently.

Sighing, how am I supposed to argue with that? For crying out loud. Covering my face with my hand, I try to think up some new solution to crying. The only solutions I’ve got so far are either to plug my ears any time I think he might be about to say the words, or run out of the room when he gets that swoony look in his eye. Perhaps I could just blindfold myself when we make love.

After a few minutes, Koru stirs, shifts so that he’s up on one elbow looking down at me. “Poppy?”

“Hmm?”

“Look at me.” Reluctantly, I remove my hand and blink away the tears. “I want you to marry me. Be my wife.”

“Oh Koru. Are you asking me to marry you? I can’t believe you said that! Now look at me!” Red eyed, tears pouring down my face, nose running. “I’m a big fat mess.”

“Yes, I am. Never, you are beautiful. Even on your quote unquote worst day,” he growls into my ear. “I’ll take you with tear-stained cheeks. Rosy red with laughter or embarrassment. I’ll take your runny nose and raise you—sick in bed with a cold. I want you every day, every way. Because Poppy,” he pulls my chin up so I am looking straight into his eyes, “I love you.”

Undone. It’s the only word I have to describe the feeling inside me. All of me has come undone by this rigid, strong orc.

“If you mean it, Koru. Yes, I will marry you.”

“I mean it.”

And with that, I kiss him, tears, snot and all.

Grev

“Tea, please.” I can’t believe I’m doing this. I make perfectly good tea at home. One of Bjorn’s SAR buddies slaps me hello on the back as he passes, a wet, slimy, friendly slap with his tentacles. I should have stayed home.

“Sugar or milk?” Ravena asks in a sing-song voice, oblivious to my discomfort at being in her packed café and ordering tea instead of drinking my own at home. Alone. With no crow peering at me with beady eyes. No wind chimes jangling as the door opens and shuts. And opens and shuts. Ravena smiles and waves every time. It’s giving me a headache.

“Black.”

“That’s what I thought when you walked in. You know, it’s been a long time since you’ve graced me with your presence. Normally, if I want a glimpse of illusive Grev, I have to trek myself over to the library. Not that I mind. Betty always knows exactly what I need to scratch in my reading.” She winks at me. Winks .

She hands me a hot mug of tea in a purple mug; the fragrance swirling up to tickle my senses with its slight floral bouquet, as my mind imagines Betty behind her desk overflowing with books at the town’s library. Her smile at each patron. Pushing her glasses up her cute nose when she’s reading something. Her hips sashaying as she pushes the book cart down the aisles to re-shelve books. I take my seat in the corner, sip my tea, and watch the bustle of the café.

That’s the nice part about hanging out in the library. It’s never crowded. Or loud or

boisterous. It's perfect. Just like Betty.

By the time I've finished my tea, I've got new resolve to talk to Betty next time I'm in the library. And not just about where the architecture books are shelved, or whether N. K. Jemisin should win the National Book Award this year (she should, period).

No, I'm going to talk to her about...gods, I don't know. Somehow, I don't think asking her if she wants to be mine forever is the right place to start. Trouble is, I don't know what is. What comes between, "Hey, your book recommendations have changed my life," to, "Let's be mates, forever."

"Wasn't so bad, was it?" Ravena appears before me, one hand on her wide hip, the other holding a tray, a smile stretching all the way across her face. Her eyes crinkle in the corners. Is she getting old? I always ignore Bjorn's accusations that she's a witch and never ages, but I also don't spend any time around her or looking at her. He's right, she looks much the same as she did when we were young orcs.

"What wasn't so bad?" My voice is sharper than I intended. Interrupting my daydream about Betty having my orc babies is frankly, rude.

"Drinking tea here. Socializing," she pats me on the shoulder as she takes my cup and hands me another mug. This one is the same blue as the sky, or would be if it weren't about to snow. The scent is all off. Instead of clean and sharp, with a slight floral scent, this is mossy, muddled with a peppery spice, and violets.

Holding the mug in my hand, my skepticism about Ravena and her café blooms even more. "I didn't order this."

"I know, sweetcakes. It's on the house. I needed a tester for my new blend, and you seem like the perfect choice."

“Please don’t ever call me ‘sweetcakes.’ My name is Grev.” It takes all my power to keep my metaphorical hackles down. Her laugh fills the space with light, and it’s like everyone’s mood improves when she laughs.

“No problem. Anyway, enjoy the tea, and let me know what you think.” She takes the empty purple mug from me and walks off to chat up old Mrs. Hood.

Sighing, I look down at the offensive cup. Well, sure, let’s try the awful smelling brew and then get out of here.

It tastes just like it smells. Except, there’s something sweet in the afternotes. Against my better judgment, I take another sip. I let my mind wander to my list for the week, which will be highlighted by my trip to the library to return my books on poisonous fungus. That reminds me, I need to find another obscure topic to research so I can ask Betty to help me find books. Maybe moss. I mean, really, how many books can there be about mosses?

When I get to the last sip, I stand. There’s no way Ravena is keeping me here any longer. I’ve fulfilled my agreement with Bjorn that I would come and be social...Like a puppy, I believe he said. I’ll be happy to report that I didn’t pee on anybody’s shoe or drool on the floor.

Looking outside the window, the clouds are heavy with promised snow. These late season snowstorms are more and more frequent. I need to go help Koru re-insulate his pipes, as the fool already ripped it all off in an expectation of spring.

“Betty!” my ears perk up at her name. Heart rate racing as I look around for the familiar bun bobbing in the sea of customers. Nothing.

“I told my cousin that when he visits next week, I’ve got the perfect person to set him up with.” Ravena is bragging to someone else now, preening like a peacock at her

plan to set Betty, my Betty, up with her cousin.

Pop! Looking down at my hand, it's filled with blue pottery shards. Oops. I've squeezed all the life out of that poor blue mug. Serves Ravena right. I pick up the rest of the shards off the floor, deposit them on the table, and walk out into the promised storm. No one is going to go on a date with Betty. Not if I can help it.

I hope you loved reading Koru's and Poppy's story as much as I loved writing it.

Turn the page for a sneak peek!

Page 16

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:33 am

Maybe my shadow didn't see me.

The lobby of the hotel is full of people, monsters and humans.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:33 am

Grev

OF ALL THE FUCKING bonkers things to have happened to me. Today. It had to be this. A runaway snowplow truck hitting my favorite place in town. Threatening to take out my favorite person in town.

I've never even shaken hands with Betty Pallson, and now I'm on top of her, protecting her from the avalanche of books and wall that rained down on her.

Her body is so soft, and I'm close enough to catch a whiff of her vanilla and pear scent. Gods, her glasses are crooked on her straight nose, and the temptation to straighten them almost gets me, but my giant hand in her face might scare her.

What used to be the front window of the library is now a giant gash of emptiness and shambles. There is no blizzard. No parking lot. No adorable town. Just the weird blue-grey light that comes from giant piles of snow blocking us in. Icy air floods into the library from the missing window, extinguishing any heat that was here. But there's no way out.

The snowplow truck revs outside, the tires spinning in the slick snow. Stuck. Against the main entrance to the library. There's pounding on the door, I assume it's the plow driver.

It takes several tries to get Betty to wake up. Her breath is shallow, almost a pant. It concerns me—maybe I crushed her when I pulled her out of the way? Eventually, after almost yelling her name and shaking her, Betty groans and her eyes flutter open. Thank the gods she's awake.

“Let me help you up,” I say as I grunt and stand, crunching part of the wall and a children’s fairytale book under my boots.

Reaching out a hand, she grasps it, a marvel of small and delicate in my hand, and I pull her up. Wobbly on her legs, I guide her to her desk so she can sit, dusting off her shoulders and pulling bits of flotsam out of her hair. Her cheeks are a deep rosy color that trails down her neck. She must be colder than I thought she was.

The pounding continues. A muffled “Hello?” comes through the door. I shout back and leave her to talk to the door.

“My truck is good and stuck. Everyone okay in there?” I recognize Matt’s voice. He sounds shaken.

“Yeah. Betty and Grev. The power’s out. Can you call for help?”

“Cell tower is down. I’ll see what I can do.” I wait for more information, but he’s gone. I suppose he’s even colder out in the weather than we are in here.

Before I turn my attention to Betty, who I want to inspect for injuries and wrap her up in the thickest blankets in front of a fire, I assess our reality. Blizzard conditions outside. Power is out, as are cell phones. And it’s just the two of us in this building with a gaping hole.

“Grev, did the snowplow run through the library?” Betty asks, shivering. Her teeth chatter, the sound making my own hurt. I bring her my coat off the rack and set it over her shoulders. I don’t see hers. No wall in the library is a big problem. Bending down, I pick up the books and make stacks of them on the other side of the room, away from the snow.

“It did. Matt is hopefully going for help. Can you try the landline to see if we can call for help? How do you feel?” When she doesn’t answer me, I pause and turn to look at

her. Betty stares at me, her eyes wide behind her still crooked glasses, her pink mouth in a small o shape.

“That was a lot of words,” she finally says. Maybe she hit her head harder than I thought.

“The books will be okay,” I reassure her. Clear my throat to get rid of the grumble that I always get in the cold.

“Not the books. You. You said a lot of words.” Other than her cheeks that are still red with more than just the cold, she seems to be fine. I go back to stacking books and contemplating how to cover the hole so the snow doesn’t continue to come in.

After sliding two bookshelves through the debris and stand them in front of what used to be the window, I make my way back to Betty, who is shivering under her coat and hat. There’s a steady whistling as the wind makes its way through the bookshelves. Snow streaks across the carpet, piling up a bit where the bookshelves meet. Maybe it will pile high enough to block the wind.

“Any luck with the phone?” I ask as I clap my hands together to rid them of dust and walk back to check on her.

She shakes her head no.

“Are you injured?” I kneel before her and take her petite hands in mine. They’re ice cubes.

“No, I don’t think so. Just cold and surprised.” Her eyes shine, even in the barely there light. Deep brown pools full of knowledge. Sniffing, I don’t smell blood.

“What about your back door?” Why didn’t I think of this before? Betty blushes deeper. Coughing, I clear my throat again from the grumble. I jump up and make my

way to the emergency exit of the library. It doesn't open, but the knob turns. Throwing my weight against it, it doesn't budge.

"Windward side," Betty's voice is small behind me. There's a scent of fear on her that wasn't there a minute ago.

"What do you mean?"

"The blizzard is coming from the east. This is the east side of the building. The snow is packed against the door and windows on this side."

"Oh." I guess that explains the scent of fear. We might be stuck here. "Are there any other exits?" I feel like I know every inch of this building. But I can't say I've actually paid attention to which windows are exits.

Betty shakes her head no, the green pompom on her hat bobbing back and forth. "The building is old, as you know. There's a very long maintenance list that includes things like installing windows that open, but that is pretty far down on the list. I think the only windows that open are on the east side. The others are painted shut."

"Fascinating." Somehow, I knew she was going to say the windows were on the east side. Ironical. "Is the furnace gas, at least?" Or oil. Or wood. Or anything other than electric.

"Electric. I applied for a grant for an energy efficiency upgrade. It works great, except for in blizzards."

"And when the power is out."

"That, too." When she huffs out a breath, I see a cloud. I cringe at how cold it is already.

“You wouldn’t happen to have a surplus of blankets lying around, would you?” It’s a long shot, I know, but I need to get her warm, and fast. Who knows how long it will take someone to get us out of here.

Betty snorts a laugh, and the sound shocks me in the best way. She’s always so professional and put together. Between the snort and her loose hair fallen from her ever-present bun, she seems wilder.

There’s no denying that my main reason for frequenting the library is to see Betty. To hear her kindness when she speaks to patrons. To take in her pear and vanilla scent as if she were mine. Now with her hair wavy around her, I can’t help but think of her and her hair wrapped around me, despite the urgency of our situation.

“Oh, Grev. Of course I don’t. It’s a library, not a hostel. Even if we made our way out of here, my Civic is buried in the snow. Maybe your truck would work, but my guess is it wouldn’t get far, seeing as the town’s one snowplow is now stuck at the library.” Her voice rises in pitch as she speaks, eyes grow wide. She’s reached her limit.

Two steps and I’m in her space, my arms wrap tightly around her. I want to give her all my warmth. “We’re going to hang out and stay warm.” And with that declaration, I scoop her up into my arms and carry her through the library, as if it were our wedding day and the bookshelves were our guests celebrating us.

I take her to the back corner, farthest away from the busted window, and set her gently on her feet. The sun has set, or the storm has grown even more severe, but either way—it’s dark. It’s quieter here, away from the wind whistling its way through the gaps of the temporary shelter I made. Settling myself on the floor, as comfortable as I can be, I sigh at the irony of being trapped with thousands of books and not being able to read any because of the darkness.

Though I can’t see, I can smell Betty. Not only her pear and vanilla, but her slight nervousness and arousal. Focus, Grev, on anything but her scent. Or the feel of her in

my arms. Or her closeness. Or the little breathy gasp she made when I picked her up.

I'm completely screwed.

"That was quite a sigh," Betty says, teeth chattering between each word.

"Come here, we are going to huddle for warmth." At that statement, she snorts out a laugh again. It takes a few seconds of quiet for her to shuffle over to me. She trips over my foot, landing on top of me with an oof.

"Sorry, I'm not very graceful when I'm frozen and can't see."

"Understandable." I position her sideways on my lap and wrap my arms around her again.

We sit together like that in the dark silence. It's a comfortable silence, even though the feel and scent of her is driving me crazy.

"Do you think we'll be here all night?" There's a slight quiver in her voice.

"Yes," is all I say, because there's nothing else to say. It's dark. The snowplow is stuck and abandoned. We're safe as we are—I'll keep her safe.

It takes a while, but she finally relaxes enough to put her head on my shoulder. "That's a good girl," I say without thinking, enjoying the weight of her against me and the scent of her tickling my nose.

"Grev, I've never heard you say this many words. Ever. And I've been working here a year. Now I'm sitting in your lap and you're calling me a good girl. I don't even know what to think." She huffs half a laugh, but her head stays where it is, against my chest. I will my heart to stay steady.

“Betty, you’re the reason I love books. You’re the sun to my moody gray sky. I come to the library because of you. To be in the same room as you.”

“I’ve read a lot of romances in my day. Those are kissing words.”

And with that, she kisses me, her cold lips sizzle on my warm lips. So soft despite the cold. Her fingers grip at the sides of my shirt, holding us together as her mouth opens ever so slightly, letting me inhale her even more.

This is what I dream about at night. Not being stranded in a freezing library. But Betty. Being with Betty. With her as absorbed with me as I am with her. The entire world shut out, only us revolving around each other like stars in orbit.

When her tongue darts into my mouth, tentative and bold at the same time, fireworks erupt in my brain. A moan comes out of me and my hands grip her side and hip through her many layers of clothes, pulling her into me. She tastes like summer sunshine.

“Grev, I want this. Want you. Tell me you do, too.” Her voice rasps in the most delightful way.

“I’ve always wanted you.”

And those words are the key. Betty pulls away just enough to turn and straddle me, her thighs splayed wide around me. Then she attacks me again with another kiss. Her chest pressed against mine. Heart to heart. This time, all bold. Deep and passionate.