



Trolling For Love (Monster Match season two)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Looking for love isn't easy when you're an antisocial troll.

Gunnar has existed near the border of the monster world in the wilds of Iceland for centuries only straying into the human world occasionally out of boredom. He finds many of their belongings they've dropped while exploring. One of those items was a phone and after attempting to figure out how it works, Gunnar finds an app that intrigues him, Monster Match.

Flynn Davies has worked in the lumber industry since he was old enough to apply, but working in the woods can be lonely, and he spends more and more time scrolling the mysterious app he's heard so much about. When he begins to chat with a mysterious creature, he wonders if there could be a perfect match for him that's not human.

The past decade has been lonely for Gunnar, and he longs for someone to share his life with, even if that means changing his life. When he arrives at Elder Ridge, he quickly realizes how different life is here, but maybe the annoying human he's been chatting with can help him learn more about this strange new world.

Total Pages (Source): 30

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 6:57 am

GUNNAR

I stared at the expanse of open land before me and tried to remember a time when trees covered this area. But that time was long gone. Living at the edge of what the humans called the monster realm was not all that different to my homeland, Iceland. It was all cold and barren but at least in the human world there were humans.

I opened the discarded backpack I'd found that was probably from a human who, once he saw what was waiting for any human in this realm, dropped everything to get out of here in a hurry. Or possibly they became a meal for whatever monster found them.

"What is this?" I grumbled as I took out a few pieces of clothing, a jug of water, a package of nuts that I promptly ate, and a strange device that I'd seen other humans holding in their hand or talking into, in the human world.

I pushed my thumb on it the way I'd seen them do and the screen lit up startling me. "It has to be some sort of magic." When nothing happened, I poked at it a little more and pressed a button on the side making it light up. I resisted the urge to throw it and tried to understand what I was seeing. There were rows of symbols, but I had no idea what any of them meant. Through the years I'd learned many languages listening to and learning from the humans and other creatures I encountered. But modern technology wasn't something I had any understanding of.

"That's a phone," Einar said, and he lumbered up beside me and glanced at the other items I'd found. He was older even than me and rarely returned to Iceland, mostly wandered in the monster realm and avoiding humans unless they were unlucky

enough to cross his path.

“I’ve seen them speaking into it or looking at it, but I don’t know what the symbols mean,” I said and handed it to him.

He glanced at it and shrugged before handing it back. “I have no knowledge of this either. But I do have news of the human world you might find interesting.”

“What news?”

“It seems they decided a while back to allow monsters to enter their world as long as they abide by their laws.” He plopped down on the ground to further investigate the backpack.

“Why would they do that?” In all my existence, humans did not fare well when they met with any monster. It just didn’t seem like a good idea to encourage them to be together.

“They want to encourage monsters that have not found a mate to know there are humans out there that are open to being mated with a monster. It’s also a time when we could be working together rather than fighting—or eating—each other.” He let out a growl of laughter before meeting my eyes. “Maybe you could find you a mate in their world.”

“Why would I do that?”

“I know you’re lonely, old friend, and I also know there are not many trolls left in the wild that are willing to live as you do,” he said.

“I long to see the forests of old. When men came and cut down all the trees, I killed and ate them, but they sent more. It was a never-ending battle until they cut the last

tree.” Their destruction had fueled my anger and hate for years. But I realized there was nothing that could be done, and I was better off avoiding humans rather than trying to make them all pay for what their ancient ancestors had done.

“There are vast forests in the human world, and one of the places where humans and monsters live together is near one.”

That got my attention. I dreamt of walking through the forest again, but I knew that would never happen in Iceland. There were some trees, but not many, and its harsh environment made it hard for there to be a noticeable change. “Where is this place?”

“I could show you the way. It’s near a wild area of the monster realm that is far different than where we are now. There’s a portal there to the human world but it is well guarded, and they’ll want to make sure you know the rules and the ways of the human world. These are their laws now,” he said.

I considered his words a moment before my mind was made up. “I have nothing here anymore. Please show me where this portal is so I can see for myself.”

“If you’re sure, we can leave now. It’s a long journey, and once you go it may not be easy for you to return,” he said and waited for me to reply.

“I’m sure. There’s nothing for me here anymore.” There were other trolls I was related to, and still others that I knew of and avoided, but none of them would even miss me and I wouldn’t miss them either. “Let’s go.”

He stood and scooped everything back into the backpack and handed it to me. “This might be of use to you there.”

I took it from him and looped my arm through the straps as we made our way through the desolate area and into a lush jungle. I’d been here before, but the creatures were

strange and foreign to me, and the jungle was filled with plants and trees I was unfamiliar with. None of it felt welcoming and as we walked through, my nerves were on high alert. We continued to walk, only stopping when we were hungry or thirsty. We never tired of walking, and it took us far less time than it would a human.

“Do not fear, Gunnar. No monster will harm us here,” Einar said.

We continued through the thick vines and greenery until ahead there was a bright light that I knew wasn't the sun. We were near a water realm where aquatic creatures ruled beneath the edges of many waterfalls and streams. The jungle here was filled with creatures I didn't trust and didn't want to know any better than I already did.

“You can enter their world here, and the humans will guide you,” Einar said, and pointed to an area where a door appeared to be part of the jungle. I stepped forward and without looking back, I entered.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 6:57 am

FLYNN DAVIES

I hiked through the woods and walked up to a big ancient tree and tried to guess how old it was. This part of the forest was heavy with old growth and had been here longer than the town had been. Even before humans were here, and I wasn't about to let it be cut down. I marked it with the red tag that told the loggers to ignore this tree and marked a few that were not healthy nearby.

"Leaving the big one?" one of the loggers asked.

"Yeah, it's healthy. Better to take out those smaller unhealthy ones and let it keep growing," I explained and moved onto the next tree. I had worked in this forest for years, and after college I'd become the one that got to choose which trees were cut down and which we saved. Apparently, a forestry degree said I knew more now than in all the years I'd worked in the forest. Either way, I liked that I was the one now deciding which trees were logged.

"Davies, can I have a word?" the foreman said as he walked around the area.

"Sure," I said, and made sure the tag was still attached to the big tree. I didn't want any mistakes, especially mistakes that meant cutting down an ancient tree. "What's going on?"

"You know about the research facility on the edge of town?"

Of course, I knew about it, everyone knew about it. It was the second such research facility where monsters were taught how to behave in the human world before they

were allowed to live in the human world or even work if they wanted to. “Yes, I know about it,” I said, and he pulled me farther away from the crew that were busy getting ready to start cutting the trees I’d indicated.

“Well, we’ve hired a troll who has been studying to work in the forest. He’s still new to it all but I want to give him a chance,” Frank said and waited for my reaction with his arms crossed.

“A troll?” I said, not knowing what else to say.

“Yes. Do you have a problem with that?”

“No, why would I have a problem? I’ve seen some of the monsters around town, hell there’s a few I talk to regularly. I guess I didn’t expect one of them would want to work out here.”

“He’s originally from Iceland. Now, I’m not sure you realize it or not, but Iceland has very few trees. It means a lot to him to be able to work in the forest.” His eyes pleaded with me for understanding but I was still confused. “I met my wife after she completed her time at the facility,” he said.

“Your married to a—” I wasn’t sure what the right thing to say was. I didn’t want to sound like I didn’t support monster and human relationships, because I didn’t judge anyone by who they loved.

“A gorgon. We met through the Monster Match app after she finished school.”

“What’s a gorgon?” I asked.

“Have you heard of Medusa?” he asked and smiled.

“Yes. Whoa, that’s pretty cool. Can she turn you to stone? I have so many questions,” I said making him laugh.

“She could if she wanted to, but she won’t. That’s part of the deal. Monsters cannot harm humans. She keeps her snakes under control and there’s no issue.”

“Can I meet her sometime?” I asked, finding everything about them fascinating.

“Sure, but first. I want you to make this guy feel welcome. Don’t be intimidated by the way he looks. I’ve met him and he is a decent . . . being. He won’t hurt anyone so ignore what you’ve heard about trolls.”

“What about trolls?” I asked because obviously I was way behind on all things monster. When I said I spoke to some of them regularly I wasn’t lying. A few were always at the coffee shop when I stopped by, but I didn’t know them well enough to ask about their monster ways, or anything to do with being a monster, and it wasn’t that I didn’t want to know. I was curious, but I didn’t want to pry or make them feel uncomfortable.

“They eat people, and they’re very ill-tempered. But I’ve been spending time with Gunnar and he’s trying.”

“Trying not to eat people?” I asked and it came out as a squeak.

He bent over laughing at that. “Sorry, but they can’t be here if they’ve harmed a human. He gave up human a long time ago,” he said still smiling.

“I think I need to learn more about monsters. I mean they’re here to stay,” I said.

“I hope so. I think it would be a sad thing if we lost them, now that we’ve found them.” He was quiet for a moment as he stared down at the ground, and I didn’t think

he meant all monsters, but mainly the one he was married to. Clearing his throat he continued. “He’ll be joining us shortly, just please, give him a chance.”

“Of course. I have no reason not to, and if he’s willing to learn the job, I’ll help him.” He stepped closer again, not that anyone was close enough to us to hear.

“There are some townsfolk who don’t agree with giving them a chance so just be careful. Now get to work marking what they’re cutting so they don’t get bored and start cutting down the nearest tree.”

“You could be right about that.” After discussing a little more detail about what we’d be working on this week he left, and I got back to tagging trees. One of the guys on the crew walked over to speak to me.

“Hey, Flynn, what did Frank want? He usually stays away from the worksite,” Don Blair asked.

“We’re getting a new crewman shortly. I’m not sure if that means today or later in the week. He’s new and he’s going to need some help figuring out the job,” I explained. “Just so you’re not surprised, he’s also a troll.”

His eyes widened before he spoke. “A troll?”

“Yes, is that a problem?” I met his eyes and hoped he understood this wasn’t up for discussion no matter how he felt about it.

“No, I was just a little shocked. I don’t have any problem with more help at all. I’ll get back to work, boss.” I nodded to him and watched as another truck drove up.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 6:57 am

GUNNAR

I rode in the back of the human vehicle as it bumped along the dirt road that led deeper into the forest. Taking a deep breath, I savored the scents that surrounded me. Never had I smelled anything so amazing. Ignoring the scents of beasts, and men, I focused on the fresh pine and moist soil. There were so many amazing things here that I had never experienced before.

The vehicle stopped and I stood as the humans that were in the front got out. “Come on, Gunnar, let’s go meet your new boss,” one of them said. I hopped out of the truck and they both stepped back. No matter how I tried to control my movements and not be threatening, my size made it impossible for humans to not be intimidated. One of them led me to where the human Frank was waiting.

“Hey, Gunnar, are you ready?”

“Yes,” I said. I was not accustomed to speaking to anyone, so I kept my words to a minimum. Something that those who had been teaching me the ways of humans for the past year had found frustrating. But my life as a troll had been a solitary one, and I did not feel the need to fill the space with words that did not matter. We walked through the forest, and I breathed in the smell of pine that I didn’t think I would ever get used to. I also wasn’t sure I could get used to wearing shoes and the confining clothes that humans seemed to find normal.

“Gunnar, this is Flynn Davies. He’s going to be your supervisor and he’ll be showing you the ropes,” the man said that had led me here.

“Where is the rope?” I asked and glanced around. The human, Flynn Davies, grinned and coughed to cover a laugh and the sound made a smile tug at my lips. His dark hair was messy under the hard hat he wore. But I found it hard to look away from his brown eyes.

“It’s a saying. It just means I’ll be training you,” he said and held out his hand. I looked at it before remembering what I’d been taught and shaking it. Not too hard though. I knew exactly how easily an arm could be removed.

“I’m Gunnar,” I said, again as I’d been trained to.

“Have you ever done any kind of forest work?” he asked. He was a small human. Well, smaller than most. I noticed a patch on his coat that grabbed my attention, but I reminded myself not to stare.

“No, there are no trees in Iceland,” I said and glanced around at the many trees we were surrounded by. I could feel their strength and their happiness at living in such a vital area. There was much wildlife in this area too, but I had been told that eating anything that wasn’t human food would be forbidden.

“No trees? That’s a damn shame,” he said with a far off look in his eyes. “Come on, I’ll show you what we’re doing. Today you watch, tomorrow you get to work,” he said. The guy that had brought me here waved as he walked back to the vehicle. I watched him a moment before I remembered it was expected I wave in return. My hand went up and I noticed Flynn Davies grin at me before he turned and walked over to where some of the humans were getting ready to cut down a tree.

“Why do you cut them down?” I asked. There were many, but once Iceland had many trees too.

“We cut them, then they’re taken to a mill outside of town where they’re processed

into either lumber to build houses, or pulp which is used for paper,” Flynn Davies explained. He watched as one of the other men picked up a machine and pulled a string to start it. It roared to life, and I forced myself not to cover my ears.

The tree he walked to was small and I was glad they didn’t seem to target the larger and far older trees. I watched as it fell to the ground barely disturbing the other trees around it. He walked over and started cutting the branches off. Another man gathered those branches and set them in a pile. “Why do you gather the parts you cut off?” I asked.

“We don’t want to leave too much fuel on the forest floor. If there were ever a fire all that dry cut stuff would feed it,” Flynn Davies said before he walked over to where more trees were. “Come on, Gunnar, I’ll show you what I do.”

I looked at the men cutting the branches off and ignored the looks they gave me. Most were worried about me, but one hated my kind. I stared at his back a moment before walking over to where Flynn Davies waited.

“Everything okay?” he asked.

“Yes, Flynn Davies.”

“Call me Flynn,” he said before walking deeper into the woods.

“Flynn,” I said before following behind him.

“So, I’m the one who chooses which tree to cut. I try to choose the ones that are not healthy because we want to preserve the ones that will continue to grow and keep the forest strong,” he explained before walking up to a very old, very large tree. “This one has been here a long time.”

I walked up to the massive tree and put my hand to it the way he had. The tree's strength pulsed from its roots up to the very top branches. Closing my eyes I listened. It told of all the time it had been here. How it had weathered extreme heat, and storms it thought would destroy it. But it lived and continued to grow. "It fears you," I said.

"Me?" Fynn asked.

"The men that want to cut it down," I said and stepped away from it.

"I'm trying to make sure that doesn't happen. Wait, you can communicate with trees?"

"I can hear all things in nature if I listen."

"Wow," he whispered, and for a moment he looked at me not like I was a troll, but like that didn't matter. At that moment, I wanted him to look at me like that again. Even if I didn't fully understand why that was. "Why is that?"

"I was born of the natural world when my country was being formed of fire and ice. I will always be connected to that world."

"I don't want to harm the trees. Quite the opposite. I want to make sure they stay healthy, and we give them plenty of room to grow. But we're in the lumber business, so we do need to harvest some."

"The trees understand. They've survived worse than being cut down."

"I'm always careful to not take too many and wary of the location so we don't cause erosion."

He gave me that look again and this time I walked away. Nature was easy to

understand, humans were far more complicated.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 6:57 am

FLYNN

Gunnar was fascinating, and I wondered why I hadn't taken more time to talk to some of the other monsters who now lived here. I wanted to know more about where he'd come from because I didn't think Iceland had trolls that lived there, but maybe they did. "You said you were from Iceland, are there other trolls there?" I asked as we walked from tree to tree.

"There are a few, but most live in the monster realm now. The human world is not a good place for us, or for humans if we're there."

"What do you mean?"

"I stopped eating humans because there were many other things to eat, and I hated that they were always so terrified of me."

"I can't imagine them being terrified of you." I lied, and he rolled his eyes at me.

"If you saw me tear apart your workers before drinking down their blood and eating them whole, then how would you feel?" he said, and something in him changed. His friendly manner disappeared, and all that was left was a monster. His horns and fangs seemed to grow and become even more threatening while he seemed to loom over me.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to insult you," I said, not really sure what else to say.

He smiled then, showing his white teeth and sharp fangs. "You didn't. I just wanted

you to understand I am a monster. There was never a time I've lived as a civilized creature before now, and only after going through the training they offered me at the center."

"Are you all alone? I mean you said there were other trolls. Did you have a mate?" I hoped that was the right term.

"There were more of us but none of us were mates. Trolls can take a mate, but not many do."

"Why is that?" I asked and stopped walking to face him.

"Most trolls do not like to share. Having a mate means sharing food, shelter, and everything else."

"What about companionship?" I asked. I didn't mind being alone, but I wouldn't mind someone to spend time with.

He glanced at the ground and seemed to gather his thoughts before he spoke. Then he met my eyes. "I want to find a companion. I've grown tired of being alone."

His expression showed me he was sincere, and the loneliness in his eyes explained exactly why. "There's an app that helps monsters find their match. Sort of like a dating app."

He wrinkled his nose at me before answering and where he'd only a moment before looked fierce and threatening, now he looked adorably awkward. "They showed us this during training, but I was never brave enough to try it."

"I'm on it," I admitted. "I wasn't looking for anything serious, but I was curious about the app."

“Have you used it?”

“No, I made a profile and scrolled some of the other profiles, but I haven’t tried to match with anyone. How about you?”

“I also made a profile, but I haven’t tried to match. I was afraid I’d end up with another troll,” he said and faked a shiver.

I laughed unable to hold it back and I would have sworn he smiled a little too. “Hey, maybe you’d meet a nice troll that wants the same things you do.”

“No trolls!” he grumbled and stomped off ahead of me.

I laughed again before jogging to catch up. “So, tell me who your perfect match would be,” I said, unable to stop myself and almost forgetting we were at work.

“Someone durable,” he growled and put his hand to his chin. “Someone who likes the outdoors.”

“Durable? Why dur—” I stopped when he gave me a look like I wasn’t getting what he was saying. “Oh, okay. Don’t need to know about that. So, someone who likes the outdoors. That’s good. What else?”

“I don’t really know. I suppose someone who is patient enough to teach me how to be in a relationship. How to share and be less selfish.”

“I’ve tried to fill out surveys about what I want in a relationship and it’s hard. But I think you’ve got it figured out pretty well,” I said and moved to another tree before marking it for cutting.

“This tree will be cut?” Gunnar asked.

“Yes, it’s not as healthy as the surrounding trees. The others will be stronger when it’s gone.” He stood back to look up at the top of the tree and I couldn’t stop myself from looking at his fangs and his ears that were slightly pointed. His skin had a slight grey tinge, and he was massive. Making me question where he’d found the flannel shirt, jeans, and work boots he wore because he was far bigger than anyone I’d ever met.

“Gunnar, do me a favor. If I ever choose the wrong tree, please don’t hesitate to tell me. I want to keep the forest strong, not make it weaker.” His strange dark eyes met mine then, and he nodded. Even though he looked fierce, and was definitely built to destroy, he had a gentleness and intelligence about him that fascinated me.

“I will do as you ask,” he said, and continued to walk tree to tree with me.

“Flynn, we’ve finished the last tree, should we start in this area?” Ben, one of the workers, asked.

“Yes, I’ve just marked one there. Gunnar, how about you work with Ben the rest of the day.” Ben’s eyes widened before he nodded and then led him off to the tree they’d be cutting down. Gunnar glanced back at me before turning and walking back to where we’d just come. I watched for a moment and then got back to work.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 6:57 am

GUNNAR

The day was pleasant. The smells and sounds were all still new to me and slightly overwhelming. But not in a bad way. It was more that I could not choose what to pay more attention to. The sound of birdsong and seeing them flying tree to tree while squirrels chattered and other small animals I could not name played and foraged throughout the forest caught my attention and made it hard for me to focus on anything else.

“Gunnar, help me gather all the branches into a pile,” Ben Jackson said.

“Yes, Ben Jackson,” I said, and I watched as he showed me exactly what to do. I picked up as many branches as I could carry and set them down where he’d indicated. He looked at the pile then looked at me. “Did I do it wrong?”

“No, you did it all,” he said and laughed. “Come on, let’s see what else we can find for you to do.” He led me closer to where the human with the chainsaw cut the fallen tree into shorter pieces. “We need to put these all in a pile. Get the other end and you and I can—” He stopped midsentence as I hefted the log on my shoulder.

“Where did you want it?” I asked. He pointed to a flat area, and I put the log down there. “Do they all go there?”

He shook his head before answering. “Yes. We need to put them all there.”

I walked back over, and he and another worker picked up one log while I hefted another over my shoulder and set it down next to the first one. “Did I hear you say

you're a troll?" asked Ben Jackson.

"Yes." I walked back to pick up another log and could feel his eyes on me the whole time. Humans were curious—when they weren't terrified.

"So, what's that like?" he asked and hurried to catch up to me.

"What do you mean?"

"What's a troll?"

"I am a troll."

"I know but I mean what are you? I watched one movie, and it said trolls help witches, then I saw another and they ate kids. Then there was another that they were giants and were asleep for years, but no one knew because they looked like rocks and mountains. So which kind of troll are you?"

"Icelandic trolls are all made of rock. It is said that a witch brought us to life, but I have never seen a witch, so I do not know if this is true. It's also said that we turn back to stone if we're out in the sun, but that's not true either. We just are. I don't know how else to better explain it."

"I think you explained it pretty well. I've always been very curious. If I ask too many questions just tell me to shut up," he rambled.

"I don't mind questions. I too tend to be curious which is what made me leave Iceland through the monster realm to get here."

"What was the monster realm like? Was it scary? Were there lots of monsters?" he rambled even faster and walked sideways to face me as I stomped over to the last log.

“I’ve only seen a small part of it. The part I lived in was very desolate and nothing but wasteland. Which is why I preferred to live at the edge of the human world there so I could go back to Iceland regularly. Even though Iceland is barren and mostly made of rock, it’s beautiful to me, and will always be my home.”

“You’re from Iceland? Wow, we gotta talk some more. I haven’t traveled outside the county line.”

“There is much to see outside this world.” He stopped walking and was frozen in thought long enough for me to worry he’d been stunned by some unseen evil.

“I can’t believe you’re from Iceland!” he finally yelled and slapped me on the base of my back. “Sorry, you’re really tall.”

“Humans are strange,” I mumbled making him laugh again.

“I know a lot of humans who think that about monsters, but I love learning more about them. You’re all so different,” he said and stared at my horns. “Are those functional?”

“What would I use them for?” I asked and tried to imagine a situation where my horns would come in handy. This human was strange, but he was friendly and very entertaining. I gripped one of them and tugged on it. “They’re not long enough to gore anyone.”

His eyes widened before he laughed. “I guess. But they’re cool as fuck.”

“Thanks, I think,” I said, making him laugh again.

“Can I touch them?” he asked but cringed away when I gave him a stern look.

“No one touches my horns,” I growled. Our horns were special, and something that made each of us stand out. They also were used in ways he did not need to know about. Ben Jackson was pleasant to speak with, but he wasn’t the human I would have as my mate.

“Sorry.” He cringed again and held his hands up. “I didn’t know. I’ll never touch them, I promise. No matter how much I want to,” he mumbled that last part making me laugh.

“You’re funny, Ben Jackson. I do enjoy talking to you.”

“Good thing, I’d rather keep my arms attached. Come on, we’re moving to the next tree,” he said changing the subject. I looked ahead and got a glimpse of Flynn Davies. He was a human I would consider to be my mate, but I wasn’t sure exactly why that was, or what made me think of it. But I decided it might be okay to spend more time with him. And Ben Jackson, because he really was funny. “Hey, where are you staying?”

“I was told there would be a place provided for me.”

“You’re probably staying at the camp then. We have a semi-permanent base camp nearby, so we don’t have to drive all the way from town. Most of us stay there during the week and go to town on the weekends.”

“I do not have a place to stay in town other than the facility.”

“I’m sure they’d let you stay here. Just talk to Flynn or Frank. They’re both great to work for.”

“Thank you, Ben Jackson.”

“You can call me Ben,” he said.

“I will consider you a friend,” I said mostly because the only other friend I had was Einar, but he was in the monster realm, and I was beginning to realize I needed friends here.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 6:57 am

FLYNN

After marking the last tree for the day, I walked back to where the crew were just stacking the logs from one of the other trees I'd marked. Or I should say Gunnar was stacking the logs. The other crew members were making themselves busy clearing the area while he hefted the massive logs on his shoulder to carry to the stack he was building on the level part of the area.

"Hey, Flynn, I was talking to Gunnar, and he doesn't have a place to stay on the weekends. Would it be okay if he stayed at camp? I know a few already do, and I wasn't sure he'd ask," Ben asked as soon as I walked over to where he and another crewman were working.

I glanced in Gunnar's direction where he had another log on his shoulder and was walking toward the stack he'd made. "Sure. We haven't had anyone from the facility here yet, so I wasn't sure how that worked. If they helped with housing or what."

"Thanks, I'll let him know," Ben said and jogged over to Gunnar who was just setting down the latest log. He listened as Ben spoke before glancing at me. I wondered what he thought of this strange world he'd decided to live in, and if he had given any more thought to the type of mate he wanted. Or if he'd be happy spending time with a human just swapping conversation.

I'd grown up in this area and I had family I could stay with in town, but I liked staying out here when we weren't working. The company didn't mind because it kept the site a little safer from the local animals, and any human that thought trashing a worksite was a fun way to spend a weekend. The old camp truck rumbled up the

rough road and all the guys on the crew dropped whatever they were doing and walked over to where it pulled to a stop as Dwayne the cook hopped out of the truck. “Anyone hungry?” he asked. Dwayne was tall and skinny with sunbaked skin and a long white beard. I wasn’t sure how old he was, but he had to be at least seventy and had more energy than most of the guys on the crew.

“Flynn, how’s it going today?” he asked with a slap to my back.

“Good, we’re on schedule.”

“Nothing wrong with that,” he said and walked around the back of the truck to open the big metal trays of food he’d prepared. “You know the rules, everyone forms a line.”

There were six men on this crew and one troll. Gunnar stood off to the side watching as the first few were handed whatever Dwayne had prepared for us today. I walked over to where he was and stood next to him for a moment before speaking. “Aren’t you hungry?”

“Yes, but I wasn’t sure the food was meant for me,” he said without looking away from Dwayne.

“You’re on this crew. It’s meant for you, come on.” I took a step then looked back to make sure he was following me. He hesitated for a moment, but then he slowly followed behind me.

“Hey, Dwayne. This is Gunnar, he’s going to be working with us now.”

Dwayne glanced at him before handing him two sandwiches instead of one and an extra helping of the stew he’d also made. “Here you go, big guy. You look like you could use a little extra.” Dwayne grinned at him before handing me my food.

“Let’s go eat over there,” I said and walked over where Ben and a few other crew members were sitting on an old log. I sat down and he sat next to me, and I ignored the way the log shifted under his bulk. He set down the sandwiches next to him and looked at the bowl of stew before picking up the spoon and taking a bite. He turned to me, his eyes wide with excitement.

“It’s good,” he said like he’d expected it to be horrible.

“What have they been feeding you?” Ben asked. “I mean Dwayne’s a good cook but it’s just stew.”

“You don’t want to know that they fed me there,” he mumbled before taking another bite then another.

“What do you usually eat?” I asked and wondered if I really wanted to know.

“Whatever I could find. Lots of fish. There’s always fish in Iceland,” he said.

“Dwayne doesn’t cook much fish, mostly just the occasional tuna sandwich or tuna casserole,” I said.

“Tuna?” Gunnar asked.

“Canned fish,” Ben said. Gunnar’s lip curled showing his fangs, but it didn’t make him look fierce, if anything it softened his features, and I couldn’t stop myself from smiling at him.

“Not a fan?” I asked.

“There are many things that have to be worse,” he said before setting his empty bowl aside and picking up one of his sandwiches.

I wondered what he was talking about, but after he mentioned eating humans earlier, I didn't want to bring it up. "When we get back to camp, I'll make sure you're set up in one of the tent cabins." I took a few more bites of stew before unwrapping my sandwich and dipping it in. The warm food felt great. It was still early in the season and the mornings and evenings were very cold. We were up high enough that snow was still possible but unlikely.

"I do not need a tent. I can sleep in the woods," Gunnar said.

"It's no problem. The tents are there for the crew," I said, and his eyes met mine. Once again, I was unable to look away and I hoped he didn't think I was rude for staring at him.

"You will not touch my horns," he said taking me by surprise.

"Dude, I said I was sorry. I didn't know," Ben said and peeked out from where he sat to meet Gunnar's eyes.

"Do I even want to know?" I asked and looked between the two of them.

"Probably not," Ben grumbled.

I turned to look at Gunnar who shrugged a shoulder before he took a bite so big it was half of the sandwich. "What about you?"

"He doesn't like anyone to touch his horns," Ben said but I kept my eyes on Gunnar who ignored us both.

"Okay then, no touching your horns." Ben nodded when I looked in his direction while the rest of the crew ignored us and ate. I wondered what his horns had to do with anything, but it wasn't my place to ask. I promised myself I'd research it when I

got to my tent later though because now, I was curious.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 6:57 am

GUNNAR

As the day wore on, I became more comfortable with the humans. Not all of them approached me, but the ones that did were curious and didn't seem to mind me being there. The work was amazing, and I struggled to remember a day when I had been able to be so close to the trees and enjoy their smell. I had worried that seeing them cut down would bother me, but Flynn Davies, or Flynn as he reminded me, made sure to only cut the ones that were not healthy and would have eventually died a slow death.

"That's enough for today. The truck should be here anytime to take us back to camp," Flynn said.

I looked at the other workers, some of them did not like me being here, but they stayed away and mostly ignored me. There were a few like Ben that were curious, but none were as curious as he was. Flynn was very curious, but also different. He didn't treat me any differently than he had the humans who worked with him.

A vehicle arrived and after they moved everyone around, we were all able to fit inside.

"We need a bigger van," Ben said from the seat in front of me making a few of the workers laugh.

"You could be right," Flynn said from the front seat.

I closed my eyes as the cool breeze blew against my face. I had to keep the window

open and lean partially outside to fit, but I managed it. The guy next to me leaned as far away as he could but it was futile.

The camp wasn't far from where we worked and in just a few minutes the dirt road widened into a large clearing. On the edge of the clearing were several of the tents they'd talked about.

"Gunnar, come with me," Flynn said. I followed him to the tent that was all the way to the end, and he pulled back the flap for me to enter. "This should work. Did you bring anything with you?"

"There was a bag with a few items the institute gave me."

"Oh yes, I think I saw it in the back of the truck you arrived in. I'll make sure you get it. Is there anything else you need?"

"I'm not sure," I said, and hoped the small bed was stronger than it looked.

"There's a latrine where you can shower and clean up near the kitchen. I'm going to go see if I can find your bag," he said and walked out of the small tent. I stood there for a moment, not sure what to do and more uncomfortable than I'd been all day. It seemed it was easier to figure out how to deal with humans when they were nearby rather than worry about what they were doing when I didn't know where they were.

Footsteps approached the tent, and Flynn stuck his head inside. "Knock knock. Sorry but I found your bag," he said before setting it on the floor by the bed. "Is everything okay?"

"Yes. Are there any tasks I need to complete in camp?" I asked, because I wasn't sure what else to do.

“No more work today. Now is when you want to clean up, eat dinner, and relax. We’ll get up early in the morning and do it all again tomorrow. There are outlets for you to plug your phone or anything else you need located at the back of the tent.” I looked where he indicated and remembered the phone they’d given me during my training.

“I do have a phone,” I said, and after setting my bag on the bed I dug it out and handed it to him. They’d taken the old phone I’d arrived with. Not wanting me to have any connection to a human who may or may not have come up missing in the monster realm.

“There you go,” he said after plugging it in. Now it was Flynn who looked nervous as he stood there clutching the leg of his jeans. “I’m going to get cleaned up before dinner.”

“I will too.” I put the phone down on the bed and followed him out of the tent. The other ones were lit from inside, but most of the men were gathered around where the same man who fed us earlier was cooking food. Flynn waved to him as we walked past and into a building made of stone blocks. Sinks were on one wall and on the other side were shower stalls. Some of the men showered while others stood at the sinks washing their faces or hands.

“Did you want to shower?” Flynn asked. I remembered humans valued cleanliness and showered far more than any troll ever thought to bathe.

“No, but I do want to wash.” One of the other workers walked past us and hit my arm with his shoulder igniting the part of me that wanted to tear that arm off. But I didn’t. I focused on the training I’d been given and calmly walked over to the sink.

“That guy’s an asshole,” Ben said when he appeared at the sink next to me. I washed my hands and splashed water on my face as Ben did the same on one side and Flynn

on the other. I looked in the mirror just as Flynn was looking intently at my horns. Ben looked at him and rolled his eyes. Humans rolled their eyes a lot, which was a strange habit.

“Let’s go get some food,” Flynn said and all three of us left and walked to where a line was forming. Everyone moved along quickly and rather than the sandwiches we’d had for lunch, the old man Dwayne put some different foods on a metal tray.

“The stew was good,” I told him as he loaded up my tray.

“Well thank you. Don’t worry, I’ll make sure you get enough to eat,” he said and winked as he handed me my tray that had twice what the others had. I nodded in thanks before following Flynn to one of the tables.

“It’ll hold you,” Ben said, and sat down on the other side.

There were wooden stumps to sit on around each table which I thought would hold me, but I still sat down carefully to avoid ending up on my backside. Once I knew the stump would indeed hold me, I looked at the food I’d been given. Even though I’d been eating human food for a while now it was still strange to me.

“How was your first day of work?” Flynn asked and his voice was like a light through the dark of this confusing world.

I took a bite of the food, not really knowing what it was, before I answered. “It was a very good day.” The words were out of my mouth before I thought about it, and it was true. I liked this part of the human world—so far.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 6:57 am

FLYNN

After dinner some of the crew sat around a fire and talked quietly about the day, but I was ready for bed. So, after saying goodnight to those at the table, I walked over to the cabin I stayed in. The tent cabins were made to be temporary housing since the number of crewmembers varied, but staff had permanent cabins.

I got ready for bed and was lying there scrolling on my phone to check the weather when a thought hit me. I opened the Monster Match app and after updating my profile, I looked for Gunnar. His was very basic and he said the same things he'd said earlier. He wanted to meet someone who liked the outdoors, and someone who was willing to be patient with him as he learned more about the human world. He also wanted a mate. A mate? I wondered what that meant. For preference he said he needed an emotional connection, and that was really all that mattered. I wasn't sure what it was that drew me to him. Maybe it was his strength or the way he was still gentle when he needed to be. His curiosity definitely drew me to him, and the way he wasn't afraid to show his interest in simple things that most people walked by and never gave a second glance. He fascinated me.

Without thinking I clicked on his profile and sent him a message.

Flynn: Gunnar, I was curious and found your profile on the app, and I admit I want to know more about you. I thought we could chat here to get to know each other better. But please know if you're not interested, I'll understand, and I would never hold that against you.

I wanted to say more, like what was it about his horns, and had he had a mate before,

and again, what did being his mate mean, but I didn't. I pressed send and went back to looking at the weather.

A few minutes later the logo for the app flashed across my screen and I immediately clicked on it.

Gunnar: Why did you start working here?

“Okay I guess we're doing this,” I mumbled before tapping out my answer.

Flynn: My dad worked in the woods and always brought me here with him. I love it. The smell of the trees, the way it's always a little cold, and how alive it is. What made you come here?

Gunnar: I was lonely.

I typed then retyped a reply. I understood loneliness far better than I was willing to admit. Working in the forest was amazing and I didn't want to change that, but it would be nice not to sleep alone every night.

Flynn: I'm lonely too.

Gunnar: I enjoyed our time in the woods today.

Flynn: Me too.

There was so much more I wanted to say and even more I wanted to ask but I closed the app and put my phone on the nightstand. At least we'll have some time together tomorrow. I hoped that his curiosity was for more than the trees because I could think of a million more questions to ask Gunnar.

The next morning after a shower and breakfast we were back at the worksite. The crew started on the trees I'd marked yesterday, and I walked farther into the forest to plot out where else needed to be thinned. This part of the forest was thick with old growth trees, but the number of fallen branches and amount of thick undergrowth on the ground made it hard to move through. I walked back to the crew to ask if Gunnar could help clear me a path.

"Gunnar, I need you to help me clear a path," I said, and directed him to pick up an ax. It looked so small in his hands, but he followed me without question.

"I liked your messages," he said making me come to a stop right in front of him and causing him to nearly run over me. He gripped my shoulder to steady me, and my eyes closed at his touch.

"I wasn't sure if you'd like me messaging you there, or if you'd even see the message," I admitted both to him and myself while enjoying the warmth of him being so close.

"They showed me how to use the app since they knew I wanted to find a mate, but you're the first to match with me." I spun around to face him. He was massive at a distance and being this close was both overwhelming and somehow comforting.

"I meant what I said, I want to know more about you." He smelled of clean air and freshly turned soil mixed with new rain. I wondered if it was just his scent or if it wasn't, I wanted the name of that shower gel.

"For what end?" he asked and furrowed his brow.

"What do you mean when you say you want a mate?" I asked, changing the subject and turning to walk to the area I wanted cleared.

“What do you think it means?” he asked, throwing the question back at me and once again avoiding what I wanted so desperately to know.

“Well, I guess it would mean someone you have a very close connection to that you want to spend your life with. Someone you love and who loves you back and isn’t afraid to show it.” I turned then and looked up to meet his eyes. He reached out with the hand he wasn’t carrying the ax and gently cradled my face.

“What you describe is what I’ve dreamed of, but who would want a troll as a mate? Other than another troll.” He glanced down at the ground and his dark eyes were full of longing for a feeling he wanted so badly he was willing to leave his homeland to come to a strange land in hopes of meeting someone. I settled my hand over his and was again reminded how massive he was.

“I want to see if there could be more between us than a mutual love of trees. You fascinate me. Everything about you draws me in but there’s more I need to know.”

“You are special, Flynn Davies,” he said in a low rumble, and I found myself blushing.

“Come on, big guy. Let’s get to work before someone comes looking for us,” I said with a squeeze to his hand. “We need to clear this area to make it easier for the crew to access and for me to tell which trees should be cut.”

He swung the ax and made quick work of clearing the undergrowth away enough for me to get a better idea of what we were dealing with. “That really helps, thank you.” He walked up to one of the larger trees and as he’d done before placed his hand on the tree and closed his eyes. Gunnar was amazing, and I was glad to spend more time with him.

A rustling in the brush behind me got my attention, but when I turned nothing was

there. Must have been a deer. Gunnar also looked in that direction, but his eyes narrowed as he focused on something I couldn't see. "Is there something there?" He blinked before meeting my eyes and shaking his head.

"It was nothing."

Something had happened but I had no idea what it was, so I got back to work choosing where we'd be working next. We worked well together, he cleared the area for me to access it and I marked which trees to cut and which to keep, same as always—but better.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 6:57 am

GUNNAR

Flynn had just turned to get back to work when I took one last glance. A human from the crew had been hiding nearby. When he knew I saw him he ran but I wasn't sure why or what he'd been doing. Then I remembered he was the one that ran into me as I was walking into the bathroom to clean up. Strange.

I'd dealt with humans in the past who hunted trolls for sport or glory. But the ones that I had dealt with had not accomplished what they set out to do, and they had paid with their lives.

"Gunnar? How was your tent last night?" Flynn asked as he walked slowly ahead of me.

"The bed is small," I said, making him laugh.

"I don't know if there's a bed big enough for you," he said and turned to me with a grin. Seeing him happy, out here in the woods with no one else around but the two of us, warmed my heart.

"I've slept in much worse places," I said.

"Where did you live in Iceland? I mean did you have a house?"

"I lived in a cave near the sea and on the edge of the monster realm."

"That sounds—nice," Flynn said but didn't look at me.

“It was cold and damp, but it was all I had known. That is one thing I enjoy in this world. Warmth. My world is not warm.”

“I’m glad you’re here now. If I can do anything to make your tent more comfortable let me know.”

He’d said this before, but I wasn’t used to the sorts of comfort he was, and to me it was already far more comfortable than the cave. “Thank you.”

“So, I don’t know if you had plans for the weekend, but I thought we could go into town after work on Friday and go to dinner. I mean if you wanted to. Most of the crew leave for the weekend but I usually stay here. I’d rather go hiking than spend the weekend around town.”

“Would we come back here after we eat? I don’t think I want to stay in the town if I can stay in the forest.” I had been in the town a few times just to acclimate, but I preferred the solitude of the forest, and so far, I had enjoyed the company of Flynn.

“Yes, we would come back here. We’ll need to do some shopping while we’re here. Dwayne doesn’t cook on the weekends so we’re on our own for food, and if you need to do laundry, we can do that while we’re there too.”

“I think I will learn a lot from you,” I said, because while I knew about doing laundry and shopping for food, I wasn’t great with either. Laundry was still a mystery to me after living most of my life in animal skins that didn’t need laundering. Or if they did, I never noticed, and didn’t really care. There was only me to worry about, but now things were different.

“Well, I know for a fact I have a lot to learn from you. I wish I could hear the trees speak the way you do. I make my best judgement on which ones to cut down, and I hope I never get it wrong. But it’s not foolproof the way it is for you.”

“I will tell you what the trees tell me anytime you need to know,” I said, and walked up to the one he’d tagged to be cut. “This tree is at the end of its life. It knows that its sacrifice will help the other trees grow stronger.”

“Thank you, Gunnar, I wish we lived in a world where no trees needed to be cut down at all,” Flynn said, and his eyes held a hint of sadness. “I looked up what happened to Iceland’s trees, and you weren’t kidding. They were all cut down. I can’t imagine that happening, but men do not always do what’s best for the environment.”

I imagined it as it had been. There were never as many trees as there are in this place, but it was still beautiful, and I mourned the loss of the forests in Iceland every day. But it was too late to change it. “We can only try to do better,” I said.

“Hey, guys, we saw the trees marked, we’re going to start cutting,” Ben said as he and the rest of the crew caught up to us.

“It should be a busy day today. Gunnar has cleared most of the trail, but we’ll need to put all the cuttings into a few piles so they’re out of the way and easy to remove, if necessary,” Flynn said. “Dwayne will be showing up in a couple of hours. Let’s make the most of it between now and then.”

Ben worked with me to gather up the brush and small trees I’d cleared to make a path here. After that we both helped with the trees as they had been cut down. And like yesterday I carried the big logs over to put them all in a stack. I didn’t mind. Just the opposite. I loved doing this kind of labor. Getting the sap from the trees and the sawdust on my clothes didn’t bother me nearly as much as it did some of the crew. I had just placed a log on the stack when the other logs started to move.

“Gunnar, look out,” Ben yelled, as I hurried to get out of the way. But I wasn’t fast enough, one of the logs rolled too fast for me to get out of the way and pinned me under it. I pushed as hard as I could, but I couldn’t move the log from me.

“Hold on, let me try to move it,” Ben said but the log was far too big for just him to move. Then the rest of the crew were there, and everyone helped lift the heavy log enough for me to roll out from under it.

“Are you okay?” Flynn asked.

“Yes, I am not injured. I don’t know what happened though. I’m sorry if I caused a problem,” I said, not really sure if I was in trouble or what would happen.

“It was an accident,” Flynn said. “The logs slipped, I’m just really glad you weren’t injured.” He meant it, he really did care about what happened to me. To a troll.

“It would take more than a log to hurt me,” I said as the rest of the crew wandered back to work.

“Please be careful,” Flynn murmured.

“I will.” And for once in my existence, I wanted to be careful and be safe. Not for me. I wasn’t kidding when I said it would take much more to hurt me, but I never wanted to see that look on Flynn’s face ever again.

FLYNN

I watched Gunnar go back to where the next log was ready for him to move, and before he returned, I walked around the stack to see what had happened. He was very careful when he placed them, and since they were freshly cut there was plenty of heavy bark and moss to stop them from rolling off each other. Kneeling down I traced the shape of a boot print, but all of us wore boots, and the crew had been walking all around this area.

Still, something didn't feel right. I glanced around at the crew while I knelt there. All of them were busy doing whatever task they were assigned without complaint. They were a good group of people who I never thought twice about trusting, but something was off.

The sound of Dwayne's old truck rumbling up the newly cleared path broke me out of my thoughts and all work was put aside for lunch. Frank walked over to me where I still stood by the stack of logs.

"I heard you had a little accident," he said, never one for beating around the bush.

"Yeah. Gunnar had been stacking the logs for the truck to pick up and I guess some of them worked loose and came down on him," I said, and even to my ears it sounded unsure.

He walked around the stack and pushed on it here and there before walking back to me. "What do you think happened?"

“I’m not sure, but I have a feeling it wasn’t an accident.”

“Should I start an incident report?” he asked.

“No, Gunnar wasn’t injured. He said it would take more than that to hurt him, but I just have a hunch it wasn’t just the logs shifting. He’s been very careful to stack them so nothing like that happens.”

Frank knelt and looked at the boot print closer. “That could be anyone’s print. It could even be yours,” he said.

He was right. I knew it and he knew it, but still, something didn’t feel right. “Guess we’d better go get some food before it’s all gone,” I finally said.

“Yes, and I wanted to check where you’ll be working today.”

“I can walk you over to the area. The trees grow pretty thick around here, which is great for finding plenty to cut, but bad for moving very quickly.” The two of us walked over to the end of the line and continued to speak while the line slowly moved. Once Frank and I had our share of fried chicken, potato salad, and biscuits that Dwayne made today, we both walked over to one of the fallen logs and sat down to eat.

“Gunnar, Flynn told me you’d been injured right before I got here. Did you need to have a doctor check you out?” Frank asked.

“No. There was no injury,” Gunnar said before taking a big bite of potato salad.

“If you feel you need medical attention, just tell Flynn or me. We’ll make sure you’re taken care of,” Frank said.

“I will not ever need medical attention,” Gunnar said, making me smile.

“Good to know. Thank you, Gunnar,” Frank said and started eating his lunch.

The rest of the day passed without incident and when we returned to camp, I was ready for a shower. The past two days had been very productive but also far busier since Gunnar had joined the crew. We could get more done with his help, which was why I didn’t understand how anyone would want to jeopardize his safety. Carrying my shower bag and wearing only a towel I walked into the shower block just as one of the crew walked out. There were six showerheads in one large area, and all were being used except one.

I walked over to it and was about to strip when I noticed Gunnar was at the showerhead across from me. His grey skin had helped him blend in with the color of the cement blocks, but his muscular bulk made him stand out. His head was down in the water stream with his arms spread wide against the wall. His massive shoulders and muscular back were on full display along with a multitude of scars that I was curious about, but afraid to know the truth.

“Are you showering?” one of the other guys asked while I hesitated.

“Yeah, sorry. I won’t be long,” I said and set my things down before slipping my towel off and stepping under the stream of water. The hot water felt great on my body as I contained a groan and turned under the water stream to wet my hair and let the shower pound on my shoulders. I’d never been more thankful for the fact that we had hot water out here in the middle of nowhere. As I scrubbed my scalp Gunnar turned around and I forced myself not to look. His ass was amazing, and I wanted to catch a peek at his dick, but I also wanted to give him the same respect I gave every other person on my crew.

Closing my eyes, I soaped up my body and enjoyed the feel of the water before it

became obvious, I was taking way too much time. We had hot water in abundance but still tried to use only what we needed, which is why most of us only showered every other day. As I rinsed off and opened my eyes, I realized Gunnar was already finished and had left. Turning off my spicket, I wrapped my towel around my waist, grabbed my bag, and hurried back to my cabin.

“What’s for dinner?” I asked Dwayne as I once again stood in line. He grinned and handed me a huge serving of lasagna with salad and garlic bread. “Thanks, Dwayne.” He nodded without replying and loaded the next plate. I turned and walked to where Gunnar and Ben sat. “Mind if I sit here?”

Ben waved his hand out with a grin. “Be my guest, boss,” he said making me roll my eyes and Gunnar smirk. “Can you believe this guy? A ton of logs land on him and he walks away without a scratch.” He patted Gunnar on the arm, and he froze in place with a forkful of food just in front of him and gave Ben a hard stare. “Sorry, dude, I got carried away.”

I ignored his antics and said what I’d been thinking all day. “If it had been anyone else on the crew we wouldn’t have been as lucky,” I said and leaned in a little closer to them. “Did either of you see anyone around the logs before it happened?” Ben shook his head while Gunnar met my eyes.

“Why do you ask this?”

“I think maybe it wasn’t an accident,” I whispered.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 6:57 am

GUNNAR

After that first night, Flynn and I chatted nightly just before we both went to bed. Most of our conversations were about nothing at all, but I liked that we could find out more about each other. I definitely wanted to know more about Flynn.

Flynn: Would you want to go to town with me on Friday?

Gunnar: Would we be returning to camp?

After staying at the facility for so long I didn't want to be too close to it for very long. It wasn't that it was horrible staying there, it was more that I liked being here in the forest away from all the other humans and near the trees.

Flynn: Sure. How about we go to town, do some laundry then we could eat.

I thought about it for a moment, but I couldn't think of a reason to say no and I wanted to see more of the town they called Elder Ridge.

Gunnar: I would like this.

Flynn: We're off early on Friday so everyone has a chance to get to town before dark and also give Dwayne a break from cooking for the rest of the day. We get paid on Friday too.

Gunnar: What do we do to be paid?

The more I learned about the human world the more I needed to learn. Trolls did not work for money. We hunted or built anything we needed with things we found in nature. There was no need for money.

Flynn: You don't need to do anything. Frank will pass out checks, then you can cash it when we go to town.

Gunnar: I will need help.

Flynn: I don't mind helping. We could go for a hike on Saturday if you want. Explore more of the forest.

That got my attention. Every day that we worked I held myself back from wandering deeper among the trees to hear what they had to say and just to enjoy the simple beauty of this world.

Gunnar: I would enjoy that very much.

Flynn: I should get to sleep, but I promise we'll go to town and do what we need to do then we'll come back here and relax.

Gunnar: And hike.

Flynn: And go for a very long hike.

Friday was finally here, and I was surprised to find I was looking forward to going to town. My time there had been limited to the facility or the few times I'd ventured out with a staff member. Flynn had said he had a truck he could use to drive us there and it would only be the two of us.

"Are you ready?" he asked as he walked toward me carrying a backpack.

“Do I need to bring anything?” I asked.

“Did you want to do laundry? I’d suggest it since it’ll be another week if you don’t.”

“I want to, but I wasn’t sure what I needed to do,” I admitted and rubbed at the back of my head while also wondering when I started showing a human reaction to embarrassment. Clearing my throat, I straightened up and looked Flynn in the eye. “What do I need to do?”

“Use the bag you brought with you to put your dirty clothes in then you’ll have something to carry them and anything else you buy there,” Flynn said. “You go ahead. I’ll wait here.”

I walked back into my tent and after emptying everything out of my bag I changed my clothes before putting them and the other things I’d worn this week back into it. “I’m ready,” I said as I stepped outside.

“You look nice,” Flynn said making me look at what I had on. It was a pair of jeans and a shirt, but it was different than what I’d been wearing all week.

“I like what you have on too,” I said, not sure if that was what I was supposed to say.

“Ready?” he asked again and this time we both walked away from camp to where the vehicles were parked. Flynn went to one of the old trucks they used to drive to the worksite and hopped into the driver’s side. I opened the door, but I wasn’t sure I could fit in the seat.

“I’ll ride in the back,” I said and put my bag next to where Flynn had put his.

“No need,” Flynn said, and reached across the seat to shove it back making more room. “There, that should do it.” He started the engine and waited while I crammed

myself inside and to my surprise, I was able to fit. He turned a dial, and music started playing.

Of all the things in the human world, music was almost as magical to me as the trees. Every song was so different and all of them were wonderful. I closed my eyes as he drove along the bumpy road. The window was down and the scent of the forest heavy on the breeze as Flynn hummed along to the music that played.

“We’re almost there,” Flynn said, and I realized I’d fallen asleep.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to sleep,” I said and straightened up in the seat, and barely avoided ramming my head into the top of the truck. The last thing I needed was to ram one of my horns through the metal.

“It’s okay. It’s a nice day and you’ve been working hard all week. You deserve some time to relax. Let’s go cash our checks before the bank closes.” He drove down one street and parked the truck in front of a building I hadn’t noticed before. “Bring your check,” he said before exiting the truck and getting his backpack out of the back. I picked up my own bag and followed him inside.

Somehow, they all knew who I was, and knew where I worked. After making my mark on the slip of paper I’d been given earlier, they gave me an envelope that held human money. “How did they know me?”

“The institute makes sure that monsters are welcome here, and that there isn’t a problem getting paid if you take a job. Every business in town will be aware of you, but the bank has all the monster’s information. Let’s go do laundry,” he said changing the subject, and led us back to the truck. It was all so strange, but also exciting. I never thought about needing money in this world, and right now, I was more thankful for the institute than I had been. But mostly I was thankful for Flynn.

FLYNN

We walked into the laundromat and after a quick lesson on how things worked, Gunnar and I both sat and waited for our laundry to wash. “What did you want to do for dinner?” I asked.

“I think I’d feel better if you make that choice,” Gunnar said.

“What do you like to eat?”

“I will eat anything, and I have,” he said without humor.

“Did you really used to eat humans?” He turned to face me then where we sat on the floor against a wall and took my face in his hand.

“Yes, but it was long ago before the world became what it is today. It was a time of monsters and men who battled and killed each other without reason. That time has gone.”

“I can’t imagine you ever hurting anyone let alone eating them.” I wasn’t kidding, he was so gentle, and I hadn’t seen him act aggressive or out of control. It was just the opposite; he was always very calm and avoided any conflict.

“The world was different then,” he said, and sat back against the wall.

“Can I ask you something?” I said and hoped he wouldn’t be upset.

“Why do you ask if you can ask a question? Simply ask,” he said, and his mouth pulled up in a slight grin.

“Why do you not want anyone to touch your horns? I know you said it’s only for your mate, but is there another reason?”

“For a troll our horns are used in battle, if necessary, but they are also very sensitive to touch and part of mating. I would only allow my mate to touch them if we were to be mated, not someone who just wants to test how they feel.” He turned and met my eyes then. His were so dark I could see myself reflected back but not even an ounce of threat or coldness. He looked like a monster, but he had a heart of gold.

Before I could stop myself, I leaned in and kissed him. It was just a brief press of our lips, but when I pulled back, I was met with his wide-eyed shock. “I—I’m sorry. I didn’t—” was all I got out before his lips were pressed against mine. He cradled the back of my head in his massive hand and guided my lips where he wanted them before pressing his tongue into my mouth. It was strange and different and so fucking hot I wanted to climb him like a tree and demand he fuck me right there, or possibly the town center. I wanted everyone to know that he was mine and I was his and what the fuck was I thinking?

“I like you, Flynn Davies,” he murmured against my lips. I could feel the hard press of his lower fangs and it did even more strange things to me. I was hard, and I was shocked at how easily Gunnar had taken all my control away.

“Wow,” I whispered on a long breath.

“You make me want to do things to you I have never done with a human before, but I fear it may be more than you can take,” he said, snapping me out of my haze of attraction.

“You would never hurt me,” I said and slid closer into his side while he held me close with the same hand that had guided my lips to him.

“I would never mean to. But humans are far more breakable than you seem to understand. I would never hurt you willingly, Flynn, my Flynn,” he said, and my heart melted a little more.

“I trust you, Gunnar, with every part of me,” I said, and meant it. He’d shown me nothing but respect and a deep curiosity for learning about this new world he found himself in, and I was willing to help him all I could.

“There is so much I want to learn, so much I want to know about you and your world. Never did I think I would actually meet a human who I would want to spend any time with, but you proved me wrong. The hours we’re apart you’re always on my mind.” There was a low rumble in his chest as he spoke that I leaned in even closer to hear and feel.

“I’ll teach you anything I can, and we’ll learn together anything I can’t help with,” I promised.

“We get the whole weekend together,” he said and waggled his eyebrows shocking me and making him laugh at my reaction. “Don’t worry, little human, we can take it slow.”

“Oh, I don’t want to take it slow, I’ve just never seen you move your eyebrows like that.” He roared in laughter and slapped his leg. Laughing changed him so much I barely recognized him, but it also showed me how unhappy and unsure he’d been all week.

“You make me so happy, Flynn,” he said, and left off my last name which was apparently not easy for him.

“Good, I want you to be happy here.” I meant it, because now I was having a hard time remembering what it was like before he’d arrived at the worksite in the back of a truck. The washing machine finished and both of us shifted everything to the dryer before sitting together on the floor again. “Shouldn’t be too long now,” I said.

“I don’t mind waiting,” Gunnar said and slipped his arm around me. He was so much bigger than me and while at first that intimidated me, now it made me feel safe. He nuzzled into my hair, and I would have sworn I felt his tooth rub against my head before he took a deep breath and smelled my hair. “You smell like the trees, and fresh air.”

“Really?”

“Yes. It’s wonderful,” Gunnar said with a big exhale.

GUNNAR

After our washing was finished, we put our bags into the truck, and I crammed myself back into the front seat. “Are we going back to camp now?” I was anxious to spend time with Flynn at camp without everyone else being there. I still wasn’t sure what we’d do but I didn’t care as long as he was there.

“Not yet. We need to get some groceries and something to eat. Did you want to eat first or shop first?” he asked just as my stomach growled. “Sounds like we’re eating first.” He laughed and drove us down the street to a restaurant I had not been to before.

“What is this?” I asked. I could smell food, but I wasn’t sure what it was.

“Pizza. Have you had it before?” He parked in a space in front of a restaurant and after turning off the engine he turned to look at me.

“No, but most human food is new to me. Dwayne is a very good cook,” I said and meant it. In the short time I’d been at the camp I’d grown to look forward to every meal.

“He is, but he doesn’t cook pizza. Come on, you’re in for a treat,” he said and led me through the door. There were many humans there, and when we first walked in the noise of them speaking all went silent, but when Flynn ignored them, everyone went back to what they were doing. There were a few monsters here having dinner too. I could sense them, but they were not something that was familiar to me.

A man and a woman sat at one table speaking quietly to each other, he had blond hair and appeared far younger than I could sense he was. I wondered then if Flynn could sense who was monster and who was human in the room, but I knew from experience most humans did not know a monster was nearby until they were being made a meal. But not in this place.

“Hey, Sandy, how’s everything at the school?” Flynn asked as he stopped at their table.

“Well hello, Flynn. It’s a pretty good year so far, how are you doing working out in the middle of nowhere?” she asked, and I knew she was like Flynn. She did not judge us.

“It’s been great, Gunnar just started working on the crew this week. He’s really helped us out a lot.”

“Hello, Gunnar, I’m Sandy Bosco and this is my husband, Bo. How long have you been here?” she asked.

“I was at the facility for about a year,” I said and hoped that’s what she meant.

“What part of the other world are you from?” the male, Bo, asked.

“I’m from Iceland. I lived on the edge of the monster realm for many years.”

“This must be very different for you,” he said. “It was for me too when I first arrived here.”

“Yes, but the trees and woods make it worth it. Never have I seen so many trees,” I said, unable to hold back talking about how happy it made me.

“He’s really been a great help. Well, we’re going to order food, you two have a nice meal,” Flynn said and tugged my shirt sleeve to pull me to the front of the restaurant. “Sorry but I knew you were hungry. We can talk to them another time if you like.”

“It might be good to speak to other creatures who have also chosen to live here.”

“I agree. Now, what do you want on your pizza?” he asked and rubbed his hands together.

“Everything? I really don’t know.” I looked up at the menu but there were some words I hadn’t seen before and others I wasn’t sure were actually food. “You order. I trust you.” The realization it was true hit me hard. I didn’t trust anyone or anything. I barely trusted Einar and I’d known him for most of my existence. Trolls did not trust easily.

“Okay, you find a table and I’ll make sure we get enough food.” He stepped up to the counter but as I looked around there were too many eyes on me, and I decided to stay where I was.

“I’ll wait here,” I said, but Flynn was too busy ordering. He was given two big glasses with something to drink. He turned and nearly walked right into me.

“Sorry, I didn’t expect you there,” he said with a smile. “Let’s find a table. They’ll bring the food to us.” He led us to a table in the back where it was a little quieter and where we could see everyone in the restaurant. I liked not having anyone behind me so when I sat down, I could finally relax.

“Did you know Bo?” Flynn asked as he leaned closer to me.

“No, I’ve never seen him before, and I couldn’t tell what he was either.”

“He’s a leshy, and his wife is human,” Flynn said.

“A spirit of the forest, that’s why I did not know his kind. I’ve heard of the leshy before, they’re shapeshifters.”

“Really?” Flynn said and turned to look at him before turning back to me. “I didn’t know that. Pretty cool.”

“Pretty cool,” I repeated making him laugh.

“I wasn’t sure what to get you to drink so I just got water,” Flynn said and took a drink.

“Water is what I drank for many years. There isn’t much else in the wilds of Iceland to drink. But there is plenty of water.”

“Did you want to try something else?” he asked.

“What would I try?” I asked.

“Wait right here.”

I did as he said and looked around at everyone. At a table on the far side of the restaurant sat a man that looked familiar, but I could not imagine how that was possible. He stared at me with hate-filled eyes, and I remembered at the institute they said not all humans were happy with them allowing monsters to live with humans. The man continued to stare, and I refused to look away. Then another man walked over and sat at the table with him. This man I did know. He worked on the crew with me. Gene Redmond turned to look at me. His eyes widened with recognition.

“Try this, it’s root beer,” Flynn said, and I forced my eyes away from the two men

who were now staring at me. One with hate, and the other with—fear.

Taking a big drink, I wiped the moisture off my lip before forcing a smile. “This is good, Flynn Davies.” I forced myself not to look in their direction, but I wanted to know what made that man look at me with so much hate, and I hoped it wasn’t that I had killed someone he knew. Because in all of my existence there had been many who had died at my hands.

“I’m glad you like it. I see Gene is here too,” Flynn said with a tip to his head.

“Yes. Do you know who that human is with him?”

“That’s Vince Drummond, my uncle.” My eyes widened and I glanced at the man who was still staring.

“You’re related to him?”

“Yes. Unfortunately.” Flynn shook his head and looked down at the table.

“Why do you say that?” I asked.

“He’s always been trouble,” Flynn said and was quiet.

“What do you—”

“Here you go. ”A human came over to the table carrying a tray of food and set it on the table between us. “I’ll go get you some plates.” Everything smelled and looked delicious and for a moment I forgot about Vince Drummond. But eventually I’d find out exactly who he was.

FLYNN

Gunnar and I both loaded our plates with pizza, breadsticks, and chicken wings while I forced myself not to look at Vince. It had been a while since I'd seen him but if he was back in town, trouble wasn't far behind. He was my mother's brother and was always out of the country on some big mission. Most of which included him hunting creatures he didn't understand and saw only as a target for his hate and destruction.

"Flynn?" Gunnar asked, snapping me back to reality.

"Sorry. I was spacing out," I lied.

He glanced at Vince and Gene once again and I didn't have to look over to know they were still looking at us. "Does it have something to do with them?" he murmured.

"I'm just wondering why he's back in town, and also why Gene is hanging out with him. I didn't know they knew each other."

"Is there more to know about Vince Drummond?"

"Yes, but I'll tell you later. I don't want to talk about it here." He immediately scooted his chair back, but I covered his hand and met his eyes. "Not yet. Let's eat so they don't think anything is out of the ordinary. We can talk once we're out of here."

He nodded and picked up a piece of pizza, eating half of it in one bite. "That would be good."

“Yes. I think it would be. Gunnar, he’s dangerous. Please be careful around him.”

“What about Gene Redmond? He’s on the crew with us,” Gunnar asked.

“I’m not sure. I’d like to think he’s smart enough to know how horrible Vince is, but the fact he’s with him makes me wonder,” I said and took a bite.

“About what?”

“If he was the one that tried to flatten you yesterday.” I’d tried to make sense of it, but the more I thought about it the more I was convinced it was no accident. A low growl registered from Gunnar and his dark eyes seemed to grow even darker. “Gunnar,” I whispered and immediately his eyes were on me.

“We will speak later,” he said, his jaw tight and his fist clenched on top of the table.

“Yes. We’ll speak later. Let’s get this packed up so we can get out of here,” I said and walked over to the counter to ask for some boxes to take it in. Glancing in the direction of the table Vince had been sitting at I was relieved to see him and Gene were both gone.

“Let’s finish this when we get back to camp,” I said and packed up what we hadn’t eaten. Gunnar was silent and strung so tight I could feel the tension rolling off him. Everyone avoided him as we left the restaurant and when we got into the truck, I turned to look at him before starting it. “Are you okay?”

His lip curled before he huffed out a grunt of frustration. “Did you know there are men who once hunted us?”

“Trolls?” I asked.

“Yes. And if it did not matter to them if they killed our young or the old or injured. They only wanted to kill. This is what made us start killing and eating them. When they first arrived in our lands, we thought we could ignore them, and they’d leave us to live as we were. But we were wrong. They saw us as a threat when there was none and would not stop attacking us any chance they had.”

“I wasn’t kidding when I said I don’t know Vince very well. Part of that is because my parents always avoided him, but also like I said he was usually gone.”

“Hunting monsters,” Gunnar said.

“I’m sorry, I had no idea he’d be anywhere around here. Plus, since they allowed the facility to be built near the portal, many laws have changed. It’s not okay for humans to kill or harass monsters the same as it’s not okay for monsters to kill humans.”

“I know the law. They made sure we knew it very well at the institute. But they do not know all the destruction and death that one human caused our species. I will not hurt him, but I will not protect him either.”

“What do you mean?”

“If he hunts as you say, then I’m not the only one who would love a chance to make him pay for all he’s done,” Gunnar said.

“It can’t happen here. You understand that right?” I asked and shook his arm.

“Yes. I understand.” He seethed with anger, and it pissed me off that the one time we had to ourselves had been ruined by someone who was a horrible human and would deeply enjoy knowing he’d gotten under our skin.

I took a deep breath and decided I wasn’t going to waste any more time on the uncle I

barely knew. “Come on. Let’s go get some groceries and head back up the mountain.”

“I would like that,” Gunnar said, and settled his hand on my leg. “I am sorry for my reaction. Sometimes my emotions take control of me, and I find it hard not to fall into old habits. I’ll try to do better.” I placed my hand over his and squeezed.

“You have nothing to be sorry for. Are you ready?” I asked and when he nodded, I started the truck and drove to the grocery store.

GUNNAR

Buying supplies for the weekend was lost in a haze of worry and frustration. I found it hard to concentrate on anything other than the hunter. But I had told Flynn I wouldn't do that, so I did my best and hoped he didn't suspect how I really felt.

"What fruit do you like?" Flynn asked and picked up an apple. He was so sweet, and the more time we were together the more time I wanted to spend with him.

"I like any fruit, actually there is really no food I won't eat. All of it's better than what I have eaten in the past," I chuckled mostly because it was true and partly because of the shocked look on Flynn's face.

"You've mentioned that before, and I'm not gonna lie, I'm a little afraid to know what you mean. But please, never tell me," he said, making me laugh. "I'll just pick a variety."

"Thank you, Flynn," I said. We wandered the grocery store for a while longer before finally Flynn was happy with what we'd chosen. We got in a line and waited with other people who also had chosen food. Some gave me strange looks while others never reacted at all. A few creatures I knew were not human, but they made me feel a little less out of place in this strange world.

When we were at a long counter, Flynn put the items he'd chosen on a table that had a belt that moved while another human waved each one over a plate of glass. Flynn went to the end and started putting everything in one of the bags that were hanging there.

“Getting ready for the weekend?” the worker asked.

“Yes, we won’t get back into town again for a week,” Flynn explained while I stood there not sure what I should be doing. The worker finished and told Flynn a number which I knew was what he owed. Then I remembered I had money too. I pulled it out of my pocket and handed it to Flynn.

“Please. Use what you need,” I said. Money still had no meaning to me, but it was obvious how much you needed it in this world. Flynn took it and separated out what he needed and handed the rest back to me.

“Thanks, Gunnar,” he said and gave what he’d taken to the worker.

We walked out to the truck and after Flynn had situated everything, we were on the road and headed back to the forest. “I’m excited to return,” I said as we drove out of town and the smell of the trees became stronger.

We bumped along the rough road that led to the camp, and I was surprised how much this place already felt safe and welcoming. When Flynn pulled to a stop he once again sat there after he’d turned off the engine. “Would you like to stay at my cabin tonight?” Now it was me that turned to face him.

“I would like that very much,” I said, making him smile, and ignoring the want in my voice.

“Come on, let’s take everything inside.”

Between the two of us we carried as much as we could hold. Flynn led us to his cabin which I hadn’t been to yet. It was beyond where the tents were and past the showers in a quiet area where trees grew right up to the side of it making it look like it was a part of the forest. He opened the door, and I was surprised how much bigger it was

inside.

“Set those bags down in the kitchen and I’ll put them away,” Flynn said. “I’ll be right back with the pizza.”

He left before I could protest, and I was left alone in his space. His scent was everywhere, the clean smell of fresh air and trees. I took a deep breath and absorbed the scent before I looked around at the space. Besides the small kitchen there was a sofa with a table in front of it and a chair next to the fireplace.

“I’m back.” Flynn walked back inside and set the food down on the counter. “Are you hungry? We didn’t really get to eat much. Have a seat and I’ll put all this away.”

I walked over to the sofa and hoped it would be stronger than it looked. When I sat down it didn’t even creak, it was deceptively strong. “Yes, I am hungry,” I said and watched as he put everything away before bringing the food from the restaurant over to the small table in front of the couch.

“Here, go ahead and eat,” he said. “Oh, I almost forgot.” He handed me a plate before jumping up and getting something out of the refrigerator. “I got this for you when we were shopping.”

He handed me a bottle and after taking the lid off I took a drink. It was the same as we’d had at the restaurant. “Thank you, Flynn,” I said. Never had someone been so considerate to me. Everything he did showed me more than he would ever be able to say.

“I had fun in town, I’m sorry Vince was there and put a damper on things. I’ve never known anyone else who can literally walk into a room and make everyone miserable,” Flynn said and took a bite of pizza.

“I had fun too, especially the kissing,” I said making him smile.

“I liked the kissing too,” he said and set down his plate before taking mine from me and setting it back on the small table. “Know what I really wanted to do?”

I shook my head, and the temperature in the room seemed to go up a few degrees as I waited to see what he’d do. He leaned in and his eyes met mine before he kissed me. But this kiss wasn’t the tentative kiss of earlier. It was filled with heat and want and so much passion. He made me want so much more than a kiss, and when he climbed onto my lap and straddled me, I pulled him close and kissed him hard, forgetting for a moment that he was human and fragile. I was about to pull back when he gripped the back of my hair and pulled me back to him.

“Fuck me, Gunnar,” he groaned, and for a moment I thought I’d heard him wrong, but when he ground down on me and rubbed his already hard cock against mine, I knew without a doubt he meant it. He stood then and I ignored his bulge while he held out his hand and led me to his bedroom. The bed was larger than the one in my tent and when he led me to it, I sat down as he stood in front of me. “Do you mind?” He tugged at my shirt which I pulled over my head making him gasp.

“Is anything wrong?” I asked and brushed at my chest.

“No, you’re absolutely perfect,” he said and glided his hand across my shoulder and down my arm. “I love your body.”

“You can touch my horns,” I said, and hoped he meant what he said because once he touched me there fucking would be all I would think of. Claiming him as my own. My mate. He reached his hand out, but I stopped him. “Touching them will make me want to mate with you.”

“I know,” he said and gently brushed his finger along one.

FLYNN

S omehow, I knew once we did this, I would be tied to Gunnar forever, but no matter how much I wanted to resist and stop myself, I couldn't. His horn was smooth with slight ridges that my finger caught on as I lightly touched it before gripping it in my hand making him gasp. My other hand moved over his muscular chest until my finger grazed something metallic. "You have a piercing?" I asked. "Always full of surprises." I knelt in front of him, and he leaned down to kiss me and any doubt I had faded away.

"My Flynn," he whispered. We kissed until we were both panting and if I touched my cock, it would be over all too soon. He pulled my shirt over my head and touched me in a way that made me feel adored and worshiped all at once.

"Please, Gunnar," I pleaded. "Fuck me." His lip lifted and he pushed me back enough to stand and after taking off his boots he stripped off his jeans, which was all he had on. His generous cock was right in front of me, and I reached for it without asking.

"What are you waiting for?" he growled never taking his eyes off me.

I gripped him and stroked his hard cock as his hips moved and his head tipped back. He was magnificent. Solid muscle with a pierced nipple and more abs than I'd ever seen before. His uncut cock was the biggest I'd ever seen, and I couldn't wait to see how much I could take. I stroked him a few more times before he met my eyes.

"Take your clothes off," he demanded, and I didn't think I could get any harder, but in that moment, I was proven wrong. He watched as I kicked off my boots and

stripped off my pants and underwear. As soon as I stood, he yanked me to him. “I’m going to fuck you so hard, mate.”

I melted against him before he spun me around and leaned over me. “Touch me,” I whispered. His hands were everywhere as he gripped me and fondled and probed my ass just enough to make me want more but not enough to give me release. I gripped his horn tightly and pulled him down for a kiss. My cock was against his and I couldn’t stop myself from trying to grind against him. He growled and gripped me, making me arch off the bed. When I was able to think again, I flung the lube—which I’d stashed under my pillow with hopes of this happening—at him.

“I will make you mine,” he snarled, but not out of anger, out of possession and passion and everything I never knew I wanted or needed. He squirted lube on his hand and gripped me again before pushing my leg up and fingering my ass, never giving me time to adjust or prepare, but I was so turned on by then none of it mattered except getting more and more from him.

He slowly started to press into me, and I forced myself to relax when every part of me screamed he was too much, but the side of me that was filled with lust screamed for him to hurry up already. Gripping both of his horns I pulled myself up enough to work him into me. His eyes slid shut and I started to ride that huge dick that filled me like no one else ever had. “Fuck me. Fuck me hard,” I begged.

“Mate, you do not know what you ask,” he said and wrapped his arm under me lifting me up as I continued to writhe on him. He adjusted and lifted me off the bed as he pressed one knee against the bed and kept the other on the floor. “You drive me to insanity.”

“You make me want you more than I’ve ever wanted anyone. My mate,” I murmured, repeating back to him what he’d said to me. “Fuck me.” He held me as his hips started to move and I let go of one of his horns to grip his shoulder. I gasped at the

sensation as wave after wave of sensation washed over me. He was not gentle and started to pound into me so hard I worried if I'd survive it and hoped it wouldn't end.

"My mate," he growled before kissing me and fucking me even harder.

"Gunnar." I knew without him even touching me I was close. His cock filled me and the harder I gripped his horns the harder he fucked me. My release hit me without warning, and I sprayed all over my chest just before he pulled out of me and stroked himself. He shot all over my chest as he roared out his release. We panted heavily as once again his eyes met mine before he leaned down and licked me clean from the mess, we'd both made.

"You are mine," he said but now his words were full of something else besides possession, and as I released his horn, I felt the loss of that connection immediately.

"I'll always be yours," I whispered. He lifted me into his arms like I was a child and sat back against the bed.

"We are connected now in a way that no man will ever be able to break. You are my love, and everything I need in this world," he said surprising me.

"I want to be honest. I've never been in love before, and I don't know if I love you. But what I feel for you feels stronger than a simple emotion and I don't think I could survive if you left." I knew it sounded a little wishy washy, and also a little dramatic. But the words failed me for the emotions he made me feel and until I understood them, I wasn't willing to tell him I loved him if that wasn't how I felt.

"Mate, I will always want you to speak the truth to me. You may not love me, but our bond is strong. I can feel it in every touch." He ran his hand gently down my arm.

"I'll never lie to you," I said, and meant every word. I'd been in relationships filled

with lies and I was more than happy to never deal with that shit again. Gunnar was intense, and while I didn't truly understand what it meant to be his mate, I was more than happy to try.

"Never did I believe I could meet my mate in the human world," he whispered.

"Never did I imagine myself getting fucked by a troll and wanting more," I said. He froze for a moment before I laughed. "I'm not kidding."

"About getting fucked by a troll. Or wanting more?" he asked.

"Both. But I do want you to fuck me again, maybe this time you can fuck me from behind, or I could ride you," I said, and my cock took notice just at the mention. "I don't think I'll ever get enough of you."

"I'll never tell you no. I want to take you outside against a tree and fuck you so hard while your hard cock rubs against the trunk of the tree. Or I could make you lean forward with your delectable ass arched out enough that nothing touches you, and I'd fuck you until you scream your release like you did tonight."

I gripped his face in both my hands and forced him to meet my eyes. "Fuck me now," I demanded and before he could answer I took his nipple ring in my mouth and tugged it.

GUNNAR

My beautiful mate was more than I ever imagined him to be. He had me fuck him again and this time I shoved him face down on the bed before burrowing my face in his ass. The smell of our sex hung heavy in the air and when I slid into him this time I didn't hold back. He groaned and writhed on me and when I reached under him and gripped his cock he spilled almost instantly.

"We should shower," he said as he lay next to me.

"That does sound good. I've grown quite fond of the shower since I've been here."

"I have one here out back. I just prefer to use the one everyone else uses."

"Why is that?" I asked.

"This one is out in the open and it's a little cold even with the hot water."

"I want to try it," I said instantly intrigued.

After a cold shower and sucking Flynn's dick because I couldn't see him naked and not touch him, we were finally inside and eating, both of us wrapped only in a towel. "Good thing it's not winter, or we'd be freezing," Flynn said around a mouthful of pizza.

"It's refreshing," I said, making him laugh.

“Something tells me nothing is too cold for you.”

“Have you never been to Iceland? My homeland is not known for its warm weather,” I said and for a moment I was nostalgic for my old life, but that life wasn’t mine anymore, and it didn’t include Flynn.

“I haven’t traveled more than the next county to go to college,” Flynn said. “But I have everything here I’d ever need.”

“Someday I’ll take you there and show you the lights as they dance across the sky on the long nights, and all the natural beauty there.”

“I’d like that,” he said. We finished eating and both of us slept in his bed. He fit so perfectly with me and that night I slept like I’d never slept before. Sated and my heart full of love for my mate.

I awoke a few hours later to him sucking on my nipple. His tongue flicked and swirled while his teeth tugged on my ring. “Mate, you make me want you again,” I whispered and slid down enough to take his cock in my mouth. His taste overwhelmed my senses, and I gripped my own hardness.

“You’re all I can think of,” he breathed out as I sucked him all the way down. “Gunnar.” My name on his lips ignited the fire again and I gripped his ass to pull him even closer. It didn’t take long for him to shoot down my throat, and as soon as he was done, I moved up his body to shoot my release on his chest while he helped grip me.

We lay there panting and sweaty all over again, but Flynn was quick to get a damp towel and clean us up and once again we slept.

“Are you ready to go for a hike?” Flynn whispered in my ear.

“Yes,” I said, instantly awake. For a moment I’d forgotten we’d planned to go explore the forest and now I couldn’t wait.

“Let’s get dressed and eat something then we’ll go exploring.”

“Thank you, mate,” I said and was cleaned up, dressed, and ready to go before Flynn was dressed.

“Are we a little anxious?” he teased.

“Yes, I cannot wait to spend the day with you in the woods.” We left his cabin after he insisted we ate something before we left, and after he packed a few things to take with us. Which was probably good since I would have just walked out into the woods and not worried about bringing anything. Humans needed to think about food and water far more than I did and I told myself I would need to remember that.

We hiked for a while in silence with only the sound of birds and animals around us. The forest was alive with so many creatures of all shapes and sizes. Some that were hidden from us, and others that did not care if we knew they were there or not. The longer we walked the older the forest was, and the trees became larger while the undergrowth was denser making it harder to walk without finding an easier path.

“What do you think so far?” Flynn asked as he stood on a rocky outcropping looking out at the forest below.

“I think this is the most amazing place I’ve ever been,” I said but then movement to my right caught my attention. A white wolf. No, it was—more. I watched as it transformed into the same man we’d seen at the restaurant last night. “What do you want?” I yelled and shoved Flynn behind me.

“I mean you no harm,” he said, and held his hands out in front of him as he stood

there naked, his white hair blowing in the breeze. “I came to warn you.”

“Warn me? Why would a leshy take the time to warn a troll.”

“Both of you,” he said. “Flynn, I know you know your uncle is dangerous. But you don’t know that he’s been going out on missions to find any creature outside the boundaries of the town to destroy. He’s also gathered a few locals to work with him.”

“What? How can that be? He knows it’s not legal,” Flynn said.

“He does, but he doesn’t care. So far, the institute does not know what he does. But soon they will, and when they do, they’ll make sure he doesn’t harm any other monster around here,” he said.

“I hoped he’d given up on hunting monsters. But yesterday was the first time I’ve seen him in a long time,” Flynn said.

“One of his followers works in your camp. Be careful,” the leshy said before he transformed into a deer and disappeared into the woods.

“Sounds like we were right about Gene,” Flynn said. “What happens now?” He was worried, and as his eyes scanned the area, I knew our perfect day had been ruined.

“Now we protect each other.”

FLYNN

The weekend had started so wonderfully but ended with us deciding we needed to be careful who knew about us. The next few weeks dragged by in a haze of suspicion and the never-ending urge to fuck Gunnar. He'd destroyed me for ever being with anyone else, and if I didn't believe he was my mate at first, after a few weeks I knew for sure it was true.

"Ben is trustworthy," I told Gunnar, and he nodded as we once again drove to town.

"He has been a good friend, but for now I will not risk you now that I have you. It would be far easier to kill you than it would me, and if they know you are my mate they would go after you."

"Let's not spend much time in Elder Ridge this week. I have a bad feeling. We'll cash our checks then get groceries. We can go through a drive thru on the way back and do laundry next week."

"We will do as you wish. I do not want to take any chances," Gunnar said, but he'd been quiet the past few days and I wondered if he was worried too.

"Bo wouldn't have come all the way out here to warn us if he didn't think we were really in danger," Flynn said.

"Gene Redmond had many chances this week to do something, but he didn't. I think they have a plan already and they're waiting. We need to be ready. You need to be ready," Gunnar said. It was obvious there was more he wanted to say but he didn't,

and I was too afraid to know what it was.

“Should you go to the institute and tell them what we suspect?”

Gunnar thought for a moment before he looked at me as I drove along the bumpy road almost to where we’d turn to town. “It might be a good idea, but I won’t leave you alone as long as we don’t know where your uncle is.”

“I could go with you. I don’t know if they’d let me in, but I think you’re right, we’re safer together.” He agreed, and we drove through town and right up to the gate that led to the strange research institute I knew nothing about other than helping monsters integrate into the human world.

“You will go as far as they allow. Security is very high there, and I’m not sure it would be allowed. But I won’t leave you defenseless,” Gunnar said.

I followed his directions to the large facility that at first, I thought was a secret military base, and maybe it was. All I really knew for sure was that monsters were helped to integrate into our world here. I parked in the lot across from the massive gate and turned off the engine. We got out of the truck, and he held my hand as we walked up to the guards that stood at the gate.

“I need to speak to Doctor Ryan,” Gunnar said as he spoke to one of them.

“I need to see your ID,” he said and held out his hand. Gunnar took out a small pack from his back pocket and took out the ID they’d requested. “You too,” he said, and waited for me to take mine out of my wallet. The guard walked into a small guardhouse and tapped at the computer before making a phone call. “What’s this about?” He asked as he returned our ID’s.

“There is a human who wants to kill me and my mate,” Gunnar said, blunt as always.

The guard's eyes widened before he went back and was on the phone again.

"Doctor Ryan said he'll meet you in the reception area," the guard said and pressed a button that opened the gate.

"Is it okay I'm with you?" I asked Gunnar.

"If it wasn't they would not have allowed it. There are many rules here," he said, and led us up to the nearest building. "Do not leave me." I nodded and gripped his hand.

We entered through a door that looked more like the side entrance to a warehouse rather than the entrance to a medical or biomedical facility. I still wasn't sure exactly what it was or what to call it. Inside was a large open area with a desk to the left and a seating area to the right. The guard at the desk ignored us and another man wearing a lab coat entered from a side door hadn't noticed. He looked to be in his forties with greying blond hair and black framed glasses.

"Gunnar how are you doing?" he asked before shaking his hand.

"I am well, since I left the facility there have been many changes in my life. I have found my mate," Gunnar said and tugged me forward.

"Excellent, and what is your name?"

"I'm Flynn Davies, I work for the same lumber company Gunnar does," I said and shook his hand.

"Oh yes, nice to meet you," he said before focusing back on Gunnar. "I'm a bit surprised to see you so soon. Is everything okay?" He seemed in a hurry, and in a rush to find out what was wrong which annoyed me. Gunnar wouldn't have come here if he didn't think it was necessary.

“Something has happened, and I wasn’t sure how to handle it. I remembered you said if we ever felt unsafe or that there could be a conflict with humans we should contact the facility. So that’s what I did.”

“Come this way,” he said and led us back through the door he’d entered from. Inside was a small waiting room but it was empty. We sat down while Gunnar explained everything that had happened since he’d first arrived. “Has Vince Drummond approached either of you?”

“Not yet, but I can feel he’s planning something, and I know the lesby wouldn’t have approached me if there wasn’t a reason for doing so,” Gunnar said.

“I’m not sure what to think. It is strange that he would suddenly come back to town but I’m not sure it’s an indication that he means to harm either of you.”

“What about the logs that fell on Gunnar at work?” I asked.

“Do you have proof that another worker was involved?” he asked.

“No. We don’t,” I said, and realized how weak our evidence was.

“Look, I’m not telling you something isn’t happening. For all we know your uncle could still be hunting monsters but he’s not doing it here and that’s our main focus at this time. I’m not saying to ignore it. Be careful, be vigilant and if anything, else happens please contact me,” he said.

“If he threatens my mate . . .”

“I understand, Gunnar. But until we have more proof other than the word of a lesby and a worksite accident there’s not much we can do.” We spoke for a moment longer before Gunnar stood and after a rushed goodbye, we were out the door and walking

back to the truck.

“What do we do now?” I asked Gunnar.

“We protect ourselves,” he said, and I worried about what that meant.

GUNNAR

As we drove back to the camp all those old instincts I'd worked hard to bury deep started to come to life. Every movement and sound were magnified a hundred-fold, and my senses were on high alert. Something was coming but I wasn't sure what or when.

"Did you know there's another portal in the woods?" Flynn said.

"No, I only know about the main one at the facility. There are many portals through both our worlds though." I didn't know where they all were but there were many ways to cross into each world if a being wanted to make the effort. "It is said there was a map that showed all the portals but I'm not sure it exists. The portals are not always stable."

"Frank told me about it the other day. I guess he discovered it when he was out exploring where we'd be working next. It is guarded but it's not nearly as secure as the main portal in town. Could there be other portals that no one has discovered yet?" he asked.

"It is possible. Especially if it was remote," I said, and wondered if this was why Vince Drummond had been gone for months and then suddenly appeared.

"Why don't we explore the woods around camp and see if we find anything. We could even pack enough to stay the night so we can spend a little more time out there," Flynn said.

“I wonder if your uncle has been using the portals to keep hunting monsters without the facility knowing what he’s doing,” I admitted.

“As long as I can remember he’d always be gone for months and then he’d show up out of the blue. He’d never say where he was or what he was doing and never talked about it. He’s always been horrible to anyone unlucky enough to cross his path, but he always had a group of a few members of the community that seemed to flock to him. I could never understand why.”

“I trust the word of the leshy. He would not have come out here to warn us if there was no need. He has nothing to gain and everything to lose by this,” I said. “Monsters do not as a rule help other monsters.”

“I’ve known Bo and his wife for a while before I knew he wasn’t human. He wouldn’t lie, and he wouldn’t warn us if there wasn’t a threat,” he said, agreeing with me.

“Let’s go into the woods tonight and see what we find there,” I said.

As soon as we returned to the camp both of us packed a bag with everything we’d need to stay in the woods until the end of the weekend. Flynn was very careful to make sure we had enough supplies, bedding, shelter, and anything else he could think of. My mate was smart, and didn’t go into any situation without planning. I, on the other hand, usually burst in unprepared and ready to tear apart anything that stood in my way. I was learning there were other ways to deal with problems.

“This is nice,” Flynn said as we walked through the dense forest going past where we’d met the leshy the last time we’d come out here.

“It is. I only wish we were here for other reasons,” I said and cleared a path for Flynn through the thick underbrush.

“We can still have fun while we’re out here exploring,” Flynn said. “I’ve missed you this week.” We had decided it was better that we didn’t spend any time alone during the week. Flynn didn’t want the crew to think he was favoring me in any way, and I didn’t want anyone to know he was my mate that could use it against him.

I turned to face him and cupped his face in my hand. “I have missed your touch, mate. You are all I think of and working next to you is not enough,” I whispered before kissing him. One touch and I wanted more. It was all I could do not to tear his clothes off and fuck him against the nearest tree, but right now we needed to find out all we could about any possible threats. “Later, my love. I promise I will remind you exactly who your mate is once we know we’re safe.”

“Okay,” he said, his eyes glazed over and still in a daze. “We should keep walking. Let’s see how far out we can get before dark.”

“As you wish.” We continued to walk but I wasn’t sure what we expected to see. If there was a portal, how would we know when we’d found it? In all the time I’d spent wandering Iceland the only portal I had found there was the one that Einar had guided me through. I had been to the edges of the monster realm many times, but before that day I had no reason to want to travel away from my homeland. Now I felt no reason to return, because my home was where Flynn was.

“Let’s rest here,” he said and slipped off his pack while sitting on a rock. “I think we should set up camp before it’s too dark.”

“You are right. I forget that humans cannot keep going without rest and nourishment. Please know it’s not that I’m not concerned for you,” I said.

“I understand. This is all new to me too,” he said and took a big drink of water. “This is a good place to stay. We’ll get an early start tomorrow.” Flynn walked around the small, protected area under two ancient trees. The floor of the forest was soft here and

covered with layer after layer of pine needles. He knelt and pulled more out of his pack than I would have thought possible to fit in it, and after a short time he'd set up a simple tent and was gathering rocks to make a fire pit.

"This is nice," I said and knelt next to where he was now trying to start a fire.

"It is. I brought hot dogs and marshmallows to roast on the fire. I thought that would be the easiest out here and I didn't know if you'd ever had smores before," Flynn said without looking away from where he lit a small piece of paper he'd brought with him.

"What is a smore?" I asked.

"Ooey gooey goodness," he said. "It's a toasted marshmallow and a piece of chocolate on a graham cracker. You'll love it. They're a camping tradition," he said. We sat near the fire while he roasted hot dogs on a stick, and I watched him. I could watch Flynn all day and never tire of it.

As night fell the forest fell silent, but I knew there were many creatures about. Not all of them were from this world and most didn't want humans to know they were here. Those were the creatures I needed to speak to. They were the ones who would know more about a man that hunted monsters.

FLYNN

The two of us slept in the small tent and somehow it worked. I was warm all night and felt protected. Not that I knew what I needed protection from. The monsters who had come to call Elder Ridge home did not harm humans, and I never felt threatened by any of them. The only threat I'd ever felt here was from my uncle, but I still didn't understand why or what he wanted.

"Morning," a voice said from outside the tent. Gunnar jumped out and tore the tent apart in the process.

"Who are you and what do you want?" he shouted while shoving me behind him. I found this was his reaction to danger and while I appreciated it, I wasn't sure it was always necessary.

"Calm down now, we mean you no harm," one of them said. He was wearing a small backpack but somehow, I knew he wasn't a tourist. "I'm Ricky Ruas and this is Ricky Ruas, I work for the park service in this area and Ricky is a scientist with the research facility. We saw the smoke from your fire and wanted to make sure it wasn't more than a campfire."

He had a scowl on his face as he looked at both of us while the one he called Ricky gave us each a friendly smile. "I'm Flynn Davies, and this is Gunnar. We work for the lumber company that's been clearing underbrush and logging nearby," I explained.

"Oh yes, Frank Madron is your boss," he said and smiled.

“Yes. We have the weekend off and Gunnar wanted to see more of the forest,” I said.

“Is that all he wanted to see?” he asked and stepped closer to us.

“Jason, I know you. I didn’t know you were working out this way.” Jason Bosco had grown up around here, the same as me, but he was older than me and while I recognized him, I didn’t know him.

“I took a job looking over the forest in this area,” he said. I knew Jason worked in the forest, but I didn’t know enough about him to know exactly what it was he did.

“I’m out here so much I’m surprised we haven’t crossed paths before. We do plan on moving the operation deeper into the forest so we might run into you more often,” I said. I might not know him well, but it would be good to know someone connected to the park service while we were working out here.

“Have you noticed any unusual monster activity nearby?” Gunnar asked surprising me.

“What do you mean unusual?” Ricky asked.

“Do you remember my uncle Vince Drummond?” I directed at Jason.

“Not really. I have heard rumors for years of him being some great monster hunter, but I thought those were all stories he made up. He doesn’t have the best reputation you know,” he said and crossed his arms.

“He’s a dick, and always has been,” I said. Something told me to trust them. “We should tell them what we know.” Gunnar narrowed his eyes before nodding.

“We have reason to believe he has it in for Gunnar.” I told them everything we knew

and even though it wasn't clear evidence, I could feel it in my gut something was wrong. "One of the leshy came out here to warn us against him. Bo, he and his wife were at the restaurant when Vince showed up."

"Bo Bosco?" Jason asked and glanced at Ricky.

"Yes, that's what made us think there was more to it than Vince just being weird and staring us down while we were there. Plus, the fact he's been gone for months then just shows up out of the blue."

"Maybe he was on vacation," Ricky said.

"We think he's been going to the monster realm and hunting monsters. He has a little band of followers in town and Gene at the camp. Gunnar hasn't hurt anyone while he's been here, but I don't trust my uncle not to try something," I said as both of them listened.

"You think he's using a portal?" Ricky asked.

"I'm not sure. I know there is one that was recently discovered in the forest, but I don't think he'd use it if it meant anyone finding out what he's doing."

"We can lead you to the portal, so you know where it is. It is being guarded but nothing like the main one in Elder Ridge," Ricky said. "We're still studying it and working on making it more stable. It is highly likely there could be another portal we don't know about since we're not sure how they're formed."

"That would be great," I said, and they waited while Gunnar and I packed everything up and made sure our fire was all the way out.

"Are you sure we can trust them?" Gunnar asked me as our backs were to them.

“We have no reason not to. We need to know if he’s been using that portal.” After our bags were packed the four of us walked along the narrow trail that they said led to the newest portal. The forest was alive, and Gunnar stopped along the way to touch the older trees now and then.

“As you can see this portal is not easy to get to. It would be hard for him to go all the way out here without eventually being detected,” Jason said.

“That wouldn’t stop him, and if he is using this portal, we have no clue how long he’s been doing it. He might have a camp nearby and only go to town for supplies,” I said and realized that made sense. “He’s always been a loner. I’m surprised he was able to get anyone to go along with him.”

“There are a few in town that do not approve of the monsters we help integrate into our society. They don’t understand them or fear them, and no matter how much outreach we do they will not be swayed,” Jason said.

“Gunnar is the first monster that I’ve taken the time to really know. Not that I didn’t want to, it’s just that I’m not in town often and we’re isolated out here. But he means no harm to anyone, he just wants to live his life in the forest.”

“With my mate,” Gunnar added making me blush.

“You two are mated?” Ricky asked.

“Yes, but we have been trying to keep it quiet at camp since we weren’t sure if it would cause any problems there, and more because we suspect Gene after the log incident,” I said.

“It’s best to use caution. Trust your instincts,” Ricky said. “The portal is just through there.”

We stepped through an opening in the trees and for a moment I didn't see anything, then we rounded a corner and there it was. From a distance it appeared as a freestanding door surrounded by thick foliage. A canopy protected it from the elements and made it a little easier to see but it blended in easily with the lush forest.

"Wow," I said, unable to control my reaction. "This is how you got here?"

"The portal at the facility," Gunnar said and walked around the entrance. "Is this one unguarded?"

"There is a guard. I'm not sure why he's not here," Ricky said and glanced around. The place looked deserted. But it was obvious that someone had been here.

"Excuse me, can I help you?" A man wearing a uniform that I knew was similar with those at the facility walked over to us.

"Isn't there a guard on duty?" Ricky asked.

"That would be me, but we've been short staffed the past month," the man explained.

"I'm one of the scientists working on this portal," Ricky told him. "I haven't been out to check it for a few weeks, but I was assured there would be a guard here at all times."

"You'd have to check with the facility. I'm here by myself until Wednesday then someone else takes over," he said.

Ricky, Jason, and the man continued to speak while my mind raced. If the portal was left unguarded, anyone could slip through. Gunnar's eyes met mine and I knew he was thinking the same thing. Vince could be going into the monster realm and doing horrible things without anyone on this side knowing.

“Would it be okay if we camp nearby tonight?” I asked and the three of them stopped talking long enough to look at me.

“As long as you stay clear of the portal it shouldn’t be a problem,” the guard said.

“This portal should never be left unguarded,” Jason said.

The guard held his hands up in frustration. “Hey, I just work here, take it up with the higher ups. I do what I’m told to do then I go home. I have a camp nearby where I have a clear view of the entrance.”

A look passed between Jason and Ricky as my hand found Gunnar’s. Something wasn’t right, but I didn’t know exactly what it was.

GUNNAR

Flynn and I walked past the portal and chose a place to set up our camp. There were many scents around the portal, both human and monster, but nothing was fresh other than the guard and the two who had found us earlier. After speaking with the guard, they had left but promised to check back here in a few days. We would stay and see if there was anything strange that happened while we were here. The human and the young leshy wanted us to report anything strange to them, but until I knew what Vince Drummond was up to, I wasn't doing anything for anyone else.

"Do you think this is the portal he's been using?" Flynn asked. We'd both asked this question many times, but neither of us had an answer. As soon as we settled in Flynn once again made a ring of rocks for a small fire while I gathered wood. This part of the woods was different from where we worked. There was an energy that vibrated through everything, and I felt a closer connection to the monster realm.

"What was on the other side of the portal where you crossed?" Flynn asked.

I thought back to that day and described it as best I could. "There were many plants but nothing like what is here. They were all strange and colorful and some were more dangerous than just being poisonous. The kappa kingdom was also nearby."

"The aquatic creatures?" Flynn asked and sat back from where he'd finished the ring of rocks.

"Yes, their world is quite beautiful with crystal structures that connect the many waterfalls and pools they call home," I said as I thought back on the day I'd crossed

through the portal. “At the time I didn’t pay much attention I was so focused on crossing.”

“I’m glad you came here,” Flynn said as his eyes met mine.

“I am too. I came here to find a mate, but I never really believed it was possible. You give me so much hope, Flynn.” I sat down next to him and took his hand.

“What do you mean?”

“My world has very little hope. No hope for anything more than finding food and a place to sleep at night, but even those things aren’t for certain. You give me hope that there is more in this world than I ever thought there could be. I found my heart because of you,” I whispered, and warmth flooded through me like it did every time Flynn and I were able to spend time together and show each other love.

“You have the biggest heart of anyone I know,” Flynn said. “And I don’t mean size. You might be a little possessive, but I can feel how much you love me. I would never doubt your feelings or our bond.”

“Well, isn’t this cozy,” someone said from behind us said.

“What the—” Flynn said before he was hit from behind.

“This is between you and me.” Vince Drummond stood there holding the branch he’d just hit Flynn with, not even concerned how badly he’d been hurt.

“Flynn!” I reached for him, but he’d slumped to the side, and as soon as I moved that way the human advanced on me. “Stay back,” I roared.

“He’ll be fine. If I wanted to kill him, I would have. Too bad I can’t say the same for

you.” Drummond drew a blade I recognized and was shocked to see he had.

“Troll killer,” I growled.

“That’s right, I’m glad you recognize it.” He backed away toward the portal while holding the blade in front of him. I noticed then he wore a bag on his back. He was prepared to go through the portal. “Only now I know, it doesn’t only kill trolls.” He turned and ran before he jumped through the portal while I held Flynn.

“You will pay for hurting my mate,” I snarled even knowing he wouldn’t hear me. Then it hit me, as long as he was free, no monster would ever be safe here. Even if he didn’t kill us on this side of the portal, he could use this portal to enter our world and do whatever he wanted. We’d been right all along; he was doing exactly what we suspected but still we had no proof. “Flynn?”

His eyes fluttered as he fought for consciousness and a small amount of blood ran down his brow. “Gunnar?” he groaned. “What happened?” He struggled to open his eyes and tried to sit but he was in no shape for either.

“We were attacked. Vince Drummond has a troll killer blade,” I said, but I knew he wouldn’t know what that was.

“Did he hit me with it?”

“No, love, he hit you with a branch. He knew I would never leave you injured. He ran through the portal.”

“We need to go after him,” Flynn said, and tried again to get up.

“You can’t. You’re injured.”

“What’s a troll killer?” he asked and had yet to open his eyes.

“It’s an ancient blade forged by elves. It has the power to kill a troll instantly with a small cut but as he was entering the portal, he said it works for other creatures too,” I said and knew this was so much worse than we had imagined. “Flynn, I think he’s killing monsters in the realm. Not all monsters are fierce or can protect themselves from humans.”

“Why would he do that? There has to be something in it for him,” Flynn said as his eyes finally fluttered open. “I know my uncle well enough to know he doesn’t do anything for free.”

“Some monsters have qualities that are said to be magical or healing,” I said, and Flynn sat up.

“He had an export business years ago. I never understood it because he never had a storefront, and he never traveled. But he always had money. Maybe his exports have to do with monsters, or other things he gets from the monster realm?”

“I need to go through the portal.” I knew it was forbidden without permission, but I didn’t want to wait until something else happened.

“I should go with you,” Flynn said and tried to stand.

“No, mate. You stay here. I won’t be long, I promise.” I kissed his forehead next to his wound and hoped he’d be okay until I returned.

“Gunnar, promise me you won’t take any chances with him. If he has a blade that could kill you, I don’t want you to risk it.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll speak to the kappa and see if they know anything. I’m hoping this

portal is also near their kingdom.”

“What if you get lost?” Flynn asked, his eyes full of worry.

“I won’t. Do not worry, I swear I will return. There is nothing that could keep me from you,” I said and hoped it was true.

FLYNN

I watched as Gunnar stepped through the portal and as soon as he was gone it felt like someone had stabbed a hot blade into my chest. “Agh,” I grunted and grabbed at it with my hand. “Fuck, Gunnar, you better come back to me.” It was still early in the day and the warm sun was comforting but then a feeling of having my chest torn open hit me. “What the fuck,” I groaned and rubbed at my chest. The pain subsided from the sharpness it had been but still I could feel it. Like a piece of me had been torn out. Gunnar. I didn’t know what it meant. I hoped it was from us being separated and not that he’d been killed. He said we were now connected and part of me was happy for that connection. But I hoped the pain I felt wasn’t from his death.

I lay back down and fell into a fitful sleep, the pain in my head nothing compared to the ache in my chest.

“Flynn,” someone said and shook my shoulder.

“Wha—Gunnar?” I said and sat straight up.

“No, sorry, it’s just me.” I managed to open my eyes and was shocked to see Gene Redmond sitting in front of me.

I shoved him back and shuffled away from him. “What are you doing here?”

“I wanted to make sure you were okay. Vince told me he was going to go through the portal today, and I know you and Gunnar have been trying to figure out what he’s been up to.”

“What do you mean?” I asked in a low voice.

“I know you think I’m involved with him but I’m not.” He dug in his pocket for something, and I got ready to be shot or stabbed or what other fate he would dole out to me. “Here.”

He handed me his wallet and just inside was a badge. “What’s this?”

“I’m a special agent working with the parks service and the research institute. We know there’s been someone in Elder Ridge selling monster parts on the black market for years. I’ve been undercover for two years here trying to find enough proof to convict Vince Drummond.”

“What?” I asked because what the fuck was happening.

“I know he’s your uncle but he’s also a vindictive asshole who has no problem killing anything that he can sell for a price. Before this portal was discovered he’d been using it for many years. He’s killed countless monsters, and I’m here to stop him.” I listened as he spoke and had a hard time not believing him but still, I held back.

“You tried to hurt Gunnar,” I said.

“I needed to make Vince believe I was on his side, and I knew that wouldn’t hurt Gunnar. But it did make me feel horrible. I don’t like violence, and this assignment has been filled with so many horrible things.”

“Vince has a blade that can kill Gunnar,” I blurted out, not meaning to say anything because I still wasn’t sure I could trust him.

“A troll killer?” he asked, and I nodded.

“Those have been outlawed for years. Fuck.”

“Is Gunnar in danger?” I asked, but I already knew the answer.

“All it takes is a small cut of that blade to end him. I’m really sorry I didn’t warn you two, but I had to keep up the charade and once Vince said it was obvious how much I hated you two—well I knew I’d convinced him.”

“Gunnar said he was going to ask the kappa for information on Vince.”

“How long ago did he go?” Gene asked and looked at his watch.

“I’m not sure. Vince hit me on the head before he left, and I’ve been asleep ever since. I’d guess a few hours.”

“Flynn, I’m going to call for help and get you out of here before I go in myself. It’s best you’re not here when he comes back through,” he said but I didn’t understand why.

“I won’t leave here until Gunnar walks back through.”

“What if he doesn’t return?” he asked.

“If his heart stops beating, I’ll know,” I said. Our connection grew stronger every day, and the pain I still felt proved it.

“You’re mated?” I nodded and looked away.

“That’s good, you’re connected deeply with him. Trolls do not mate often and when they do their lives are tied together with their mate. Everything he feels, you too will feel.”

“Gunnar is smart. He didn’t survive all these years being stupid. He hasn’t told me much about his old life, but I see the scars on his body and the way he is slow to trust. But he’s trying,” I said and saying those words gave me hope. “I think he’s afraid if he doesn’t stop Vince then he’ll hurt someone in Elder Ridge.”

“He might be worried for you. Imagine the pain it would cause him if his mate were to die.” Gene said what I’d tried not to think about, and it would be just like Gunnar to put himself in danger if it helped me avoid it.

“Dammit, I’m going with you.”

“Whoa, I wouldn’t suggest it. It’s very dangerous there for humans.”

“Gene, I don’t fucking care. If Gunnar is in trouble I want to help him. Now I’m going with or without you.” I stood and had to catch my balance before I could take a step.

“Flynn, you’re in no shape to go. Stay here and I’ll go get him,” Gene said.

“I want to trust you, but I just don’t.”

“I swear to you, I’ve been undercover. I’m not the bad guy.” His eyes begged me to believe him. “I only want to help. If I’m not back within an hour go to the institute and tell them what’s happening.” He handed me a card that had his information on it and an emergency contact number. “You can call that number.”

I read and reread the card before looking up at him with a nod. “Go get him,” I said and sat back down to wait for them.

GUNNAR

As soon as I was on the other side of the portal my horns burned with fire. My mate. Our connection was strong, and I knew the pain I felt was nothing compared to what he would suffer. He carried his love for me in his heart, and I hated to imagine the pain he'd feel. I shook my head and tried to forget the pain and focus on the reason I'd crossed the portal. To destroy Vince Drummond and get the troll killer.

I forced myself to move away from the portal and farther away from Flynn. Because even though it was painful it would be worse if I didn't try to protect what was mine. I looked around hoping to see something familiar but there was nothing.

My time in the human world had made me forget all the horrors of the monster realm. Along with the beauty of the trees and the small town I realized I'd quickly grown accustomed to seeing humans. This portal was different to the other one, when I first stepped through there were many plants, but they were nothing like those on the other side. Where everything was green there, on this side it was all bright strange colors and plants that should not exist anywhere.

A short distance away I saw a village. It was not the water world I'd passed through before, but I hoped they were not monsters who would kill without reason. The closer I got the more familiar the creatures that came into view were. I was reminded of the strange wolf that had come to warn us about Vince Drummond. The leshy. While they could transform into nearly any animal shape, most were in their original form. With skull-like faces, antlers of all different sizes and bodies more like a mixture of a human and a wolf.

“Greetings, I am Gunnar of Iceland. I mean you no harm,” I said to the first leshy I saw. It was a large male who was hurrying down the street. I held my hands out to show I held no weapon.

“What do you want, troll?” he finally asked.

“A human passed through that nearby portal. Do you know of him?” His demeanor instantly grew even colder than it was.

“The human you seek comes to our lands and murders for profit.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“His name is Drummond. He comes here with his elfin blade and kills any monster he chooses only to sell their parts for profit in the human world.”

“He has threatened my mate. I will not allow him to continue to be a threat,” I said and meant every word.

“You think he cannot kill you too? He has a troll killer and has killed many monsters with barely a scratch. Why do humans allow him to destroy our kind? We have tried to live in harmony with them, some of our kind live among them. But still this monster hides with them until he kills again.”

“They did not know he was entering the monster realm. We only found out after he threatened my mate.”

“If you follow this road, you will find him. He is off to kill one of your kind. He bragged as he walked through our village. Telling everyone not to fear that his troll killer would be put to use for what it was intended.”

“There are not many of us left. Too many were sensitive to the sun and are now turned to stone. Those that were not destroyed choose to lead solitary lives,” I said.

“Except you who has chosen to live in the human world,” the leshy said.

“I wanted a mate,” I said and wasn’t going to feel bad for finding what I was searching for.

“Go, troll. Find the human who would kill us,” he said and walked away.

“Gunnar,” someone yelled my name from near the portal. I could tell it wasn’t Flynn, but when I realized who it was, I wasn’t sure how to react.

“What do you want?” I roared.

“Let me explain,” Gene Redmond said and dug in his pocket for something. I braced ready for him to pull a knife or some other weapon so when he handed me his wallet, I was shocked.

“What is this?” I asked.

“I’ve been working undercover. We knew there was a human selling monster parts, but we didn’t know who it was for a long time. I was a plant, put here to befriend Vince Drummond and bring him to justice.”

“You tried to injure me,” I said.

“I just explained all this to Flynn. I had to prove myself to him to get him to trust me. He does have a few in town that help him move products, but he’s the collector. He comes here and kills monsters then sells their parts.”

“The leshy said he was going to kill a troll next.” I didn’t want to trust this human, but right now, I didn’t have many choices.

“Then we’d better hurry and stop him,” he said and hurried past me.

We walked along the road together, now an uneasy companionship with one goal. “He attacked Flynn.”

“He’s okay. When I found him, he’d been asleep for a while. The pull of his bond is bothering him more than the wound to his head. I don’t think he’s seriously injured but I gave him information to get help. He’s pretty stubborn so I completely expect him to be waiting there when we return,” Gene said. “I’m sorry for all the hurt and confusion I caused. I was just playing a part.”

“Our bond is strong,” I said, and reached for my horn before I stopped myself. “My mate was worried. He wanted to make sure everyone was safe including the crew.”

“I knew you wouldn’t be injured, and I knew it would eventually make it to town that someone had pushed a bunch of logs on top of a troll.”

“If you had injured my mate I would have torn you apart right there. It wouldn’t have mattered to me who saw or what they did to me,” I said and looked down at him in time to see him swallow hard.

“I know. And I really didn’t mean for you or anyone else to get hurt. It was all to convince Drummond he could trust me. The things he’s done to monsters are far worse than what the actual monsters do. He needs to pay for what he’s done.”

“He’ll pay, but it may not be human laws that do it,” I said and waited for him to disagree with me.

“What happens here is different than the human world, but I know you are not a troll who enjoys killing. Let the humans take care of him,” Gene said.

“I will decide when we catch up to him.”

FLYNN

Time passed so slowly as I waited for Gunnar to return, and as night began to fall, I set up the tent and kept the fire going. The pain in my chest had dulled, and there had been no movement near the portal. The guard who was supposed to be watching it hadn't come back this way. Please let Gunnar be okay.

The silence was deafening, and I tried to eat one of the sandwiches I'd packed, more out of boredom than hunger, but still the time dragged on. Night fell and once again I slept. The pain in my head had calmed down to a slow throb, but I wasn't going to leave here without Gunnar. I had considered walking through the portal myself, but I didn't want him to end up having to save me too. From everything I'd heard about the monster realm, shit was crazy there.

Warm hands brushed back my hair from my face and I knew he was nearby—I felt whole again. The hole that had been ripped in my chest was healed. “Am I dreaming?” I whispered, too out of it to open my eyes.

“No, my love, I'm here.”

“Gunnar!” I yelled and jumped into his arms. “I was so worried about you. Are you okay? Did you get hurt?”

He laughed and rubbed his forehead against my chest. “No, I was not hurt. We will never have to worry about Vince Drummond ever again.”

“Gunnar, I'll meet with you at camp tomorrow to get all the information for the

official report,” Gene said from behind Gunnar.

“Thank you, Gene. I will try not to hate you quite so much,” Gunnar said, and to my surprise Gene laughed.

“I appreciate that. Thanks again,” he said and walked off into the woods in the direction he’d probably come from hours ago.

“Tell me everything,” I said and climbed into Gunnar’s lap. He reached across and picked up the sandwich I hadn’t finished and shoved it all in his mouth.

“Sorry,” he said.

“It’s okay, come on, tell me what happened.”

“This portal is different to the other one. I walked out near a leschy village. One of them knew about Drummond and what he was doing. He’d also bragged about killing a troll, so I knew he had to be going to my homelands.”

“Oh no,” I said, and he wrapped his strong arms around me.

“The knife he had could easily kill a troll, but a troll can kill a human in more ways than one, and none of them require a weapon. He chose the wrong troll to fuck with,” Gunnar said with a chuckle.

“Was it someone you know?”

“It was Einar. He’s the troll that led me to the portal when I told him I wanted to find a mate. He’s far older than me, far stronger and has no fear of any human no matter what weapon they may yield.”

“Is he okay?”

“Einar? Oh yes, he was not injured at all. It seems Drummond had gotten quite sloppy. He had too much faith in a weapon that could kill if given the chance, but he still had to get within an arm’s length to use. Gene and I arrived just as he lunged for Einar and Einar ripped his arm off. Once his knife was lying to the side with his unattached arm, he had no defense. It makes me wonder why I was even worried about him at all,” Gunnar said and looked off into the distance as though seriously considering why he would have thought that.

“What happened to Vince?”

Gunnar looked at me then and his eyes were filled with regret and possibly a little guilt. “I know he was your uncle and I’m sorry his life ended the way it did, but if it wasn’t Einar, it would have been another monster eventually. He did not have any special power or skill beyond having a knife that would kill. Einar left with him, if I had to guess—well you know what trolls do with humans.”

“I just want to know he’ll never bother us or any other monster again. Gene told me what he was doing, and he deserved to pay for that. He was profiting off the suffering of monsters who did nothing wrong to him.”

“He was not a good person. When Gene first arrived, I did not want to trust him either, but eventually we did become friends. I know now I can trust him.”

“Wait, you were only gone a few hours.”

“Time is different in some parts of the monster realm. For me it was far longer than that.”

“I’m so happy you’re back and you’re not hurt. What happened to the knife?” I asked

because it was a dangerous weapon that should not be in any world.

“I have it, but I will turn it over to the institute so they can destroy it or lock it away where no one can be hurt by it ever again. It should never have been created, but the elves hated us for a time, and they needed a weapon since they were no match for our power.”

“You’ll have to tell me about it someday,” I said and rested my head against his chest.

“I will, mate. Now we have time to enjoy each other without worry of a troll hunter who would have me killed to sell my parts.”

I shivered at the mention of that. “It really is disgusting. The people that buy that shit should be charged too.”

“I’m sure they would be if they could catch them. But even finding Drummond took a lot of time and effort. Especially from Gene.”

“I’m glad he wasn’t really a bad guy,” I said.

“The only bad guy was Drummond. How is your injury?” he asked and once again brushed back my hair.

“It’s okay. I’m glad he didn’t hit me any harder than he did.”

“Are you sure you do not want to have someone look at it?” Gunnar asked, his voice soft with concern.

“No, I want to stay here in your arms. That’s all I need.”

GUNNAR

I lay in the small tent with my stubborn mate in my arms. My horns no longer burned the same as his chest no longer hurt. His head was more painful than he wanted to admit, but I was too happy to have him here to argue with him. My mind raced with images of what had happened while he slept. Einar had been brutal in his slaying, showing no mercy as he tore Drummond apart and ate him alive. The blade had not helped him in the least against an ancient troll who was not afraid of dying.

“I’ll take the blade and make sure it’s destroyed,” Gene had said as he reached his hand out for it. But this weapon was far too dangerous.

“No, I want to take care of it myself,” I had said.

But now I wondered if giving it to the institute was the smartest thing. It wasn’t that I didn’t trust them. No one there had made me feel unsafe or under threat. But that knife would give too much power to any human who found it. It was then I decided to hide it out here in the woods and with that decision I finally fell asleep.

“Good morning,” Flynn whispered just as the sky was starting to lighten with dawn. “I think I’d like to start back to the camp early. Would that be okay?” he asked as he rested his head in his hand to meet my eyes.

“Of course. I also want to leave early. I have decided to hide the troll killer in the woods. The trees will hide it better than any human ever could and the chance of one of them finding it would be minimal.” He thought about it a moment before leaning in to kiss me.

“Whatever you want to do, mate,” he whispered. “I trust you.”

I started to lean in to kiss him but stopped myself. “Are you in pain today?”

“Only if I touch where he hit me. Otherwise, I’m right as rain,” he said with a smile full of mischief and promise. “Let’s eat and then we can get going.”

“I want something other than food from you, but only if you are not in pain.”

“My mate, I want you to fuck me like you want to against a tree. Claim me like no one has ever claimed me before. Show me who owns my heart and my body,” Flynn whispered against my lips.

My cock swelled with his words. I pressed his hand against me, and he squeezed just enough to make me want more but not enough to satisfy the burning need I had for him. “I want you,” I growled.

“I want you too, but not yet. Let’s make it special,” he said, and I agreed with him. The trees would amplify our pleasure and push us both to a level of excitement neither of us had ever felt. I pressed the heel of my hand against my hardness and hoped for patience because I wasn’t sure I was that patient.

“As you wish,” I finally managed to say. Both of us slid out of the small tent and while I packed everything away Flynn unpacked the breakfast he’d brought. He’d wrapped it in aluminum foil and put it in the dying embers of the fire and by the time everything was packed back into our bags breakfast was ready.

“Here, it’s a breakfast burrito. I thought we might need a good meal for the hike back,” he said and handed one to me. I watched as he unwrapped the foil before taking a bite and I did the same.

“This is good. Breakfast burrito might be my new favorite food,” I said and tried not to eat it all in one bite.

“We have food at the cabin when we get back,” Flynn said. We both ate quietly and for once didn’t worry about who was watching us or what danger we might be in.

The walk back was harder for Flynn than the walk here, it was mostly uphill, and the thick undergrowth made it hard to gain much ground, but finally after a few hours we entered a perfect grove of ancient trees. This was where I would claim my mate. Slipping my bag off, I then slid his off his shoulders.

“What is it, Gunnar? Oh, this is pretty,” he said once he caught his breath and looked around.

“My love. I want to claim you here,” I said, as he walked to the middle of the small grove and looked around at all the ancient trees that surrounded us. The floor of the grove was covered in thick lush ferns and thick moss. Flynn headed back to me and pulled his shirt off as he walked. His skin was beautiful in the muted sun and when he bent over to take off his boots, I rushed to help him. Between the two of us he was quickly naked and relaxing on the ground while I pulled my own clothes off. His hand moved to his cock, and he glided his fingers across the shaft before gripping himself and slowly stroking as he watched me.

“Fuck me, Gunnar,” he growled. I knelt over him and lifted him enough to kiss him. His tongue swirled with mine as he reached up for my horn, making me gasp in his mouth. “Fuck me hard.” He wrapped his legs around me, and I stood, never breaking our kiss while he gripped both horns. “No one else can touch you like this.”

“Only you, mate,” I said and kissed him hard before spinning him around and pressing him against a tree. He gripped the trunk while I lifted his legs and spit on his asshole before working my finger in. “This is just mine. No one else can have you the

way I can,” I said, and didn’t take my eyes off my finger as it slid in and out of his ass.

His hips started to move, and he groaned before I slid my finger out and shoved my cock in. My hand trailed down his back as his muscles bunched and moved as he gripped the tree as best he could while I filled him with my hardness. “You are all I want,” I whispered, making him groan.

“Make me yours, Gunnar,” he murmured. He could not touch his cock in this position, and I wanted to fuck him until he found his release without either of us touching him. I held his legs and fucked him the way I’d wanted to since the day we’d met. Hard and fast and deep enough he’d feel it for days.

“You will remember every time you feel the burn of my cock how hard I fucked you in this moment.” Grunting with exertion and the need to come, I thrust even harder and reached under him and brushed against his straining cock making him hiss.

“Fuck, Gunnar, I need to come. Please make me come,” he begged while shoving his hips against me. We were both hungry for more even in the middle of fucking each other. There would never come a time when either of us didn’t want more of the other. Leaning closer to his ear while still thrusting into him. I said one word.

“Come.”

His body locked up immediately and he shook as he shot his load all over the ground beneath him. Feeling his ass tighten on my cock I came inside him and slid freely in my own spend making me want to fuck him again. I helped him stand before turning him to face me.

“Can we do that again?” he asked as soon as his eyes met mine. “I mean now, before we leave.”

“Yes, my love. I will never say no to fucking you.”

FLYNN

My head pounded but it was so worth the pain to get fucked as thoroughly as Gunnar had just fucked me. Afterward we lay on the ferns, and he held me close while I rested my head on his chest. “I never thought we’d feel safe ever again,” I admitted.

“I know. But you need to understand Drummond wasn’t even after us. He wanted to make sure no one found out about him selling monster parts. I’m sure he would have liked to get a chunk of me, but Einar made sure we don’t have to worry about him ever again. Will your family wonder what happened to him?” Gunnar rolled to face me and moved my head to rest on his arm.

“No, he’s always been trouble. They’ll question him not being around after a while, but then they’ll forget about him,” I said, and remembered how many times my family had made him leave family gatherings and how many times he’d arrived uninvited and started shit for everyone. “He won’t be missed.”

“I did not want to kill him. I had promised Gene to bring him back alive so he could be punished. But Einar got to him first, and he’s not a patient troll,” Gunnar said and chuckled. “He’s actually quite grouchy as trolls go.”

“Grouchier than you?” I asked.

“So much grouchier,” he said with another chuckle. “But he was a good friend. He did not have to show me where the portal was to come to this world. He knew I was lonely and wanted me to be happy. I will always be thankful to him for helping me find you.”

“Are you ready?” I asked him and he gave me a perplexed look that was even more amusing with his fangs and horns.

“For what?”

“To fuck me again,” I said, “because I wasn’t kidding when I said I wanted it again.” We spent the rest of the day together, and when we decided to head back to camp, I was so tired from everything that had happened I barely had the strength to make it on my own.

“I’ll take care of you,” Gunnar said before scooping me up and carrying me like I weighed nothing.

“You’re going to spoil me you know,” I said as my eyes slid closed. I pressed my cheek against his chest and after a few minutes I was asleep.

“We’re back at camp,” Gunnar said waking me from my nap.

“Really? It feels like I just fell asleep. You can put me down,” I said but he kept walking. “Gunnar?”

“I like carrying you,” he said with a shrug.

“Well, I’m not going to complain,” I said and thought about what we’d need to do today to be ready for work tomorrow. “Hey, how do you feel about staying in my cabin?”

“Tonight?”

“No, for the season. There’s no rule about it, and we work well together. The crew knows I don’t favor you and I’ve already talked to Frank, he doesn’t care.”

“Sleep in a comfortable bed with my mate every night? How could I say no to that?” he said and laughed when I slapped his chest. “The more time I spend with you the more time I want to spend with you. Of course I’ll move in.”

“No more hiding,” I said and guided his lips to mine.

“No more hiding.”

He let me down at the edge of the camp and we both walked to his tent. He didn’t have a lot of things, so I helped him gather what he had, and we walked to my cabin. Most of the men would stay in town and come back early in the morning so we still had the camp to ourselves except for Dwayne and a few of the guys that always came back early.

“Let me make some room for you in the closet,” I said as entered the cabin. I set my backpack down at the door and turned the lights on as I walked through to the bedroom.

“Are you sure? I do not need anything special. It’s enough to spend my nights with you,” Gunnar said.

“You deserve everything good,” I said, and helped him put his things away. We’d just finished when there was a knock at the door. “That’s odd. No one ever knocks at my door.”

“Let me,” Gunnar said and moved in front of me to open the door. “Bo?” I peeked around him and was surprised to see a creature with a skeletal face and antlers with some kind of plant growing from them. I gasped and both of them looked at me.

“Sorry, Flynn, I know you haven’t seen me in my real form before.” It was Bo’s voice only different. “You know I’m leshy. The tribe that helped you today are my

family. They wanted me to thank you. Vince Drummond has been terrorizing them for years and they're happy to know he was destroyed."

Gunnar bowed his head while I still tried to wrap my mind around the fact this was Bo from town. "I'm sorry. My family had no idea he was doing something so horrible," I said, wanting everyone to know none of us were involved.

"We know. He had a few locals that were helping him, but he was the main one," Bo said in his strange leshy voice. "What of his weapon? The blade."

"I put it where no one, human or monster, will ever find it," Gunnar said.

"You're sure?"

"Yes. It would be impossible to find. The trees will keep my secret."

"Very well. If there is ever anything any of the leshy can do for you, you need only ask. That goes for you too, Flynn."

"Thank you. I'm just glad it's over," I said and wrapped my arms around Gunnar's arm and leaned my head against him.

"Good night then," Bo said and walked away changing to a wolf as he moved toward the forest.

"Wow, that's pretty cool," I said.

"The leshy are unique, they can change to nearly any form, but they are peaceful," Gunnar said.

"As long as none of them are looking for you for spare parts, I'm happy to know any

of them,” I said and thought about how all this could have ended. “I could have lost you. The whole time I was waiting for you I worried it would be Vince that walked back through the portal instead of you.”

“I would fight anything for you. Even Einar,” Gunnar said.

“Can I meet him sometime?” I asked as he closed the door and the two of us stepped into the kitchen.

“If you really want to, but I’ll warn you. He’s very intimidating.” I opened the refrigerator and took out some leftovers to heat up.

“More intimidating than you?” I asked and Gunnar took the cold lasagna from me and took a big bite. “Want me to heat that?”

“No, it’s delicious. And yes, he’s twice as big as me and just terrifying.” Gunnar laughed at his own words. Very amused by himself.

“Guess I have to take your word for it then,” I said and took a bite of the lasagna. If it was good enough for Gunnar, it was good enough for me.

GUNNAR

The next morning the two of us went to breakfast together, and Ben walked up to me as soon as he saw me. “Hey, Gunnar. I heard something went down here over the weekend.”

“Yes, but it’s all been taken care of so you do not need to worry,” I said, and I could see by the look on his face that he wasn’t done yet.

“So, what happened? I heard there was someone working here that was a secret agent, and someone in town was selling body parts or some kind of weird shit. But that can’t be true, right?” he asked, and now a few more of the crew were listening as we stood in line.

“Do you really think there would be a secret agent working with us?” Flynn asked. “Come on, Ben, get your breakfast so we can get to work.”

“Right, boss,” Ben said and waited while Dwayne filled up his tray.

I looked at Flynn who winked at me before getting his food and waiting for me to get mine. “Here you go, big guy. I made sure you got a little extra,” Dwayne said.

“Thank you, Dwayne. I appreciate it.” He smiled and moved on to the next in line.

“So, you two are a thing now?” Ben asked.

“Yes, we’re a thing,” I said, and Flynn smiled around a big bite of eggs.

“Lucky you, no more tent sleeping,” Ben said and held his hand up which I didn’t really understand. He grabbed my hand and attempted to slap it against his, but when he couldn’t lift it, he gave up. “Good for you.”

The next few days went by with nothing out of the ordinary, which I was thankful for. Flynn and I had enough excitement to last a lifetime and that was how long I hoped we had together. Flynn worked hard and chose only the trees he knew were better off cut down. He was my mate, and he was as perfect as any mate could be.

When Friday rolled around, we once again bumped along the old road that would lead to Elder Ridge. “We’ll cash our checks and then go do laundry,” Flynn said.

“Can we eat at the place we ate at the first night we came here? I want to try pizza again,” I said, and my mouth watered at the memory of it.

“We can eat wherever you want,” Flynn said and reached across the seat for my hand.

“I want pizza.”

Flynn grinned. “Sounds like we’re having pizza.”

We drove to the same place as before and exchanged the paper Frank Madrone gave us for different papers that everyone accepted for food and other things. I still didn’t understand how it all worked but everyone else did and I just went along with it. After that we went to the laundromat and this time there were other people there so we couldn’t kiss like I wanted to.

“Remember that first night we came here,” Flynn whispered.

“I was just thinking how much I want to kiss you like we did that night,” I whispered back.

“You can kiss me anytime. You know that, and I promise not to touch your horns until we’re alone.” He wagged his eyebrows at me and, and I laughed. My mate could be so amusing.

“You’re a funny human,” I said and roughed up his hair. “You know my horns are only for you.”

“I’m your mate,” Flynn whispered near my ear, making me shiver.

“Yes, you are, and I am yours,” I said, and pulled him onto my lap not caring who saw. “And I want to kiss you now.” I kissed him right there and ignored the shocked gasp and the giggles that followed, and when we pulled apart from each other, and I saw the look on Flynn’s face, I didn’t care one bit.

“So, pizza first and then groceries?”

“Yes, that sounds good. I want to try that drink we had last time too,” I said. There were many foods I now knew I liked, and I was slowly learning it was okay to ask for what you wanted and say no to things you didn’t. Like cauliflower. Nothing would ever make me like it.

We walked into the pizza place and now I knew we’d place an order and find a seat, but this time I knew some of the people who were there. Bo and his wife sat at the same table as last time and waved us over after we’d finished at the counter.

“Hey, how’s everything going, Bo and Sandy?” Flynn asked as though Bo hadn’t had a skull face the last time we’d seen him.

“It’s been a pretty good week,” Sandy said.

“I heard you met our son and his boyfriend,” Bo said.

“We did?” Flynn asked.

“Yes, Jason and Ricky. They’re such good boys, always trying to take care of the woods and help anyone who needs it,” Sandy said.

“Oh yes! I didn’t realize Jason was your son. They really helped us out the other night in the woods,” I said and leaned closer so the whole room didn’t hear. Another thing I had learned was how much everyone in this town liked to listen to what everyone else talked about.

“Yes, his boyfriend is smart as anything. He’s a scientist,” Sandy said, obviously proud of them both.

“I’m sure we’ll see them around the forest when we’re out hiking. We plan to do more exploring. Right, Gunnar?” Flynn said and placed his hand on my leg.

“Yes. I love being near the trees.”

“Well, you really did pick the right place to move, didn’t you?” Bo said.

“Yes, I did. In so many ways.” I glanced at Flynn and knew it had definitely been the right choice.

FLYNN

My life had changed so much. While I'd always loved my job, now I couldn't wait to go to work. There was something magical about seeing the forest through Gunnar's eyes, and he was so excited to be there it wore off on me.

"Have you met Flynn's parents?" Sandy asked Gunnar who turned to look at me.

"Was I supposed to meet them?" Gunnar asked.

"Only if you want to," I said. "They're a lot."

"What do you mean?" Gunnar asked and Bo leaned back and crossed his arms with a very amused expression.

"My mom has been hoping for me to find a boyfriend for years. She's practically planned out my wedding." Gunnar's expression never changed.

"I want to meet your family," he said. And before he could say more, they brought our food out and thankfully, for a while everyone was busy eating.

"We can go by on the way home if you really want to," I said.

"Let's do it," Gunnar said, using some of the language he'd learned from the guys at work. He learned everything so fast, including slang and swear words. "Will they care that your mate is a troll?"

Bo stifled a laugh while Sandy just smiled in amusement and waited for me to answer.

“My mother is a psychic, and my father works in the forest as a conservationist. Believe me when I say there is nothing that would surprise either of them.”

Sandy patted my arm, and Gunnar ate a chicken wing. “You two are perfect for each other,” she said and smiled at Gunnar.

“I know.”

“You’re sure you want to meet them?” I asked. One look at his smiling happy face and I knew, he was sure; he was actually excited.

“What’s your mom’s name?”

“Stella, and my dad is Dean Davies. They’re both a little eccentric but they’re very sweet.” I knew it sounded like I was warning him, and I guess I was, but he could decide for himself soon enough.

“I can’t wait to meet Stella and Dean Davies,” he said.

We drove down the street I’d grown up on and parked in front of the last house on the right. I sat for a moment and took a deep breath while Gunnar vibrated with excitement. I finally opened my door, and Gunnar was in front of the truck way faster than I would have expected from a creature of his size. But he surprised me all the time. “Come here,” I said and held out my hand. He took it and we walked up to the house together.

As soon as we were at the door it flew open. “I knew you’d be coming by,” Mom said and looked between the two of us. “You’ve found your mate.”

“Yes, Mom, this is Gunnar.”

“You are Stella Davies,” Gunnar said and smiled at her the same way she was smiling at him.

“Is Dad around?”

“Hey, kid, I was just telling your mother you hadn’t stopped by in a while. Well, what are you waiting for? Come in,” Dad said and ushered us all inside. “I’m Dean.”

“I’m Gunnar, Dean Davies. I love your son, he’s my mate.”

Dad grinned and looked at me. “Your mom said you’d meet a special person who would be your mate. That you’d meet him at work, and he’d love trees.”

“I love trees,” Gunnar said.

“Me too,” Dad said, and both of them laughed.

“We were worried you didn’t think we’d approve of Gunnar so we’re glad to see you finally brought him around,” Mom said and set a tray of cookies on the coffee table. “Help yourself, Gunnar.”

“Actually, I was afraid you’d scare him off,” I mumbled.

“I heard that, and I completely understand,” Mom said. “You two needed time to get to know each other before you shared your relationship with the world.”

“No, I really was afraid you’d scare him off,” I said and all three of them laughed.

“I like your parents,” Gunnar said.

“See, he likes us,” Dad said and winked at me.

“Now, Gunnar, I want to hear all about how you ended up here and what it’s like where you’re from,” Mom said and for the next two hours Gunnar answered every question they had—and there were many—and the three of them got to know each other. I hated to admit but I was happy they all got along and more than happy that Mom and Dad knew we were mated, and neither of them cared.

“Tell me please,” Gunnar said, “what is a psychic?” he directed at my mother, and I forced myself not to roll my eyes.

“I can see what possibilities there are. Sometimes I can see what will happen, but other times I get an impression of what could be,” Mom explained.

“You are a mystic,” Gunnar said his eyes filled with wonder. “You must have known Flynn would find his mate.”

“I had a vision last year about his other half walking into this world and changing his world forever,” she said in the calm but somehow creepy voice she used when she spoke of her visions.

“You were right,” Gunnar whispered.

“She was,” I said and smiled at her. Being raised with a psychic I didn’t always get excited when she’d speak of her predictions. But I clearly remembered her calling to tell me what she’d seen. As usual I’d brushed it off and went to work. “That’s one of my favorite predictions.”

“I know,” she said with a smile, and went back to feeding Gunnar cookies and talking to him about everything they could think of.

GUNNAR

“ I want to visit Stella every week,” I said as we drove back to camp. Flynn’s shoulders flinched up and his face pinched in a funny expression.

“How about we start with once a month?” he asked. “I love seeing them, but I can only take so many visions and predictions.”

“I would like that. There’s something else I wanted to talk to you about.”

“You sound serious,” Flynn said and glanced at me from the driver’s seat.

“I would like to help any other monsters that cross the portal and need help adjusting to the human world. You helped me so much. But mostly you helped by not treating me any different than you did anyone on your crew. I appreciated that.” I hadn’t realized how much it meant to me until the other workers started treating me like I was one of them. The harder I worked the more they ignored the fact I was a troll.

“That would be nice. I can imagine it’s not easy for all monsters.”

“No, and it’s not only that not all humans are welcoming, it’s also that some monsters want change, but refuse to actually do it. They want to live here as they had in the monster realm and the world of man is not the world of monsters.”

“You’re a very wise troll, do you know that?” Flynn asked.

“Yes, I do,” I said and ate another cookie from the bag Stella had given me.

When I'd arrived here the weather was still cold from the last breaths of winter, now spring was fading into summer and a heat that felt like nothing I'd experienced. Work had finished early because it was just too hot to work.

"I've gotten permission for everyone to go to the lake this afternoon and cool off, how does that sound?" Frank the supervisor announced, as we all returned to camp.

"What does he mean?" I asked Flynn.

"We're all going swimming," Flynn said and pulled me to the cabin. "Do you have some shorts you could wear?"

"I don't need shorts to go to the lake," I said. We didn't have many places to swim in Iceland other than the cold sea, but I didn't mind it, and I never once wore shorts. Actually, I never wore clothes before crossing into the human world. The animal skins I draped over me were plenty.

"You do if you don't want to scare all the guys. We can cut the legs off your jeans, that one pair is pretty much done," Flynn said.

"Whatever you want, mate." Jeans did not matter to me, what mattered to me was Flynn.

We walked into the cabin, and he took out the jeans he'd mentioned. Both knees were torn, and they had pitch from the trees stuck to them in a few places. He took out a pair of scissors and cut the legs off just above the knee before he handed them to me. "There, try those on."

I took off the pants I had on and slipped on the ones he'd just cut. It was strange to feel the air on my legs, but I liked it. And by the look on Flynn's face, he did too. "I like it," I said.

“Me too.” He skimmed his hand over my shin and the electricity between us crackled to life.

“Not now, mate, later,” I said, and hated every word.

“You’re right.” He shook his head before changing his own pants and throwing a few items into his backpack. “Okay let’s go.”

They used a few of the work trucks to take us all to the lake, which it turned out was close to town. Dwayne drove the truck he used to deliver food and set up what Flynn said would be a barbecue. Whatever it was, it smelled delicious, and I was anxious to try it. “Ready to go for a swim?” Flynn asked.

Without answering, I stripped off my shirt and ran for the lake. When I got to the edge, I launched myself into the air and pulled my legs up to my chest to make a splash. The water was cool and refreshing and Flynn was right, it was perfect on this hot day. I surfaced and turned to swim back to shore. Flynn stood there soaked, frozen in place and staring at me with a look of shock. “Nice splash, babe,” he said when I swam closer to him.

“Thank you.” Flynn rolled his eyes, pulled off his wet shirt, and started walking toward me when Ben rushed past him laughing before he jumped in nearby before surfacing with a big yell.

“This is amazing,” he shouted. Just then a head popped up beside him.

“Hello,” one of the kappa with beautiful pink coloring and large eyes said to Ben.

“H-Hello,” he said.

Flynn stuck his foot in the water to test the temperature and I surprised him when I

scooped him into my arms and carried him in. “Gunnar, it could be cold,” he protested.

“My love, it feels perfect. Don’t you agree?” I asked when he realized it was too late to protest. I held him in my arms as we spun slowly in a circle. He tipped his head back, letting it dip in the water and spread his arms out. My beautiful Flynn. Floating so free in the clear, cool waters of a beautiful lake in the mountains I now called home.

The sound of laughter caught my attention, and I was surprised to see Ben holding the kappa he’d just met and spinning her around in the water.

“Young love,” Flynn said with a grin.

“Ben’s not young,” I said, making him laugh.

“They’re cute together.”

“Not as cute as us,” I said. Because we had the most perfect relationship ever. Even if Flynn did get annoyed when I didn’t put my clothes away. I loved him, and he loved me. That was all I’d ever need in this life.

FLYNN

I held on for dear life as Gunnar fucked me against one of the trees in the special grove we'd found the day he'd gone after Vince. "I love you," I panted over and over, because once I'd said the words I'd never stopped saying them. We might have been pulled together by some strange twist of fate, but it was far more than that. We loved.

"I love you too," Gunnar said. "And I'm going to fuck you so hard." That was another thing that had changed. He'd gone from no slang to lots and lots of slang and curses. But that was just him. Gunnar was who he was and no matter where he was or who he was exposed to in the human world, that was who he was.

"My mate," I grunted as he pushed me to the edge before pounding into me. We'd fucked many times, but every time was better than the last for us both, except the time I talked him into letting me top him. He was more than willing to try, but not so much, once I was in him. That was the one time my love had looked at me with fear in his eyes for what came next. Not that it mattered. I much preferred him fucking me within an inch of my life.

When we finished, we lay on the soft moss and ferns and for a while neither of us spoke. His breaths and heartbeat lulled me into a near sleep. My mind wandered and I dreamed of when we'd first met. How I was so curious about this monster who had chosen to enter this world to live among the trees. He amazed me and fascinated me then, and now, every day I was in awe of what he'd become.

"Don't forget we're going to meet Stella and Dean for dinner," Gunnar said and stood up.

“Aw, I was so comfortable,” I complained but stood too and pulled my underwear on.
“I was hoping we could stay here a while longer.”

“We can return tomorrow,” he said with a kiss.

“I’d like that.” It was the end of summer so the heat had faded to perfect days that I wanted to spend outside as much as we could before winter forced us to stay inside more.

“I asked Ben if he wanted to join us,” Gunnar said while facing away from me. Unwilling to meet my eyes because he knew I wasn’t much for meeting with a big group for dinner. Something he loved.

“Will Kailani be there?” After that day at the lake, it was official. Ben had a new girlfriend, and he was crazy in love. Something I’d never witnessed before. Ben had always been a little wild, and sometimes a whole lot annoying. But he was a good friend to Gunnar when no one else had been, and he deserved to be happy.

“Yes,” Gunnar said. “They’re meeting us there.”

“Okay, I guess there’s no getting out of it now.” I walked over to where he was and kissed his cheek. “Anyone else joining us?”

“Bo and Sandy,” he said.

“I was joking.” He turned then and laughed.

“I know, love. But this is all still new to me, and I love when all the humans sit around and talk.”

Gunnar had told me that many decades ago when trolls were still plentiful, they would all get together and share stories. They normally were not social creatures, but

all of them had a love of adventure and tales of bravery. Since most of them had been hunted and killed, those meetings had ended, and he missed it. Getting together with my family and our friends reminded him of those times that he missed. “I know, and I don’t mind it.”

“You have the heart of a troll,” he said with a big grin.

“What do you mean?” I asked as we walked back to camp.

“You’re brave beyond measure, and you’re very antisocial.” He chuckled.

“Ha ha,” I said with a load of sarcasm.

We walked into the pizza place, and I was surprised how busy it was, but there in the corner Mom and Dad sat at a table with Sandy and Bo. They’d known each other around town, but recently we’d all been gathering together to eat. Everyone got along, which given what a strange mix we were, that was quite an accomplishment.

“Hello, boys, how’s everything going at camp? Mom asked and patted Gunnar on the cheek. He loved how she was with him. Never treating him as a troll at all and always showing him the gentleness he craved.

“The weather has been great. It’s a nice break after the summer heat,” I said, as Gunnar and I sat down.

“Ricky and Jason might stop by too,” Bo said and glanced at the door just as Ben walked in with his girlfriend. Mom’s eyes lit up, always excited to meet someone new. Especially if they were something more than the average human.

Gunnar waved them over and they took seats next to us. “Well hello, Ben, we haven’t seen you in a long time,” Dad said.

“Yeah, I’ve been keeping busy at work. This is Kailani, my girlfriend,” Ben said proud as could be and introduced her to each person around the table.

“Sounds like everyone is finding their special person,” Mom said.

Ben grinned and kissed Kailani’s cheek. We hadn’t talked with her that much since Ben usually stayed at her house now. But she seemed very nice and if she could put up with Ben, she had to be very special. Mom, of course, had a million questions which she answered as best she could.

“Hey, sorry we’re late,” Jason said as he and Ricky walked over to the table. “We’re actually going out on an assignment today so we can’t stay but we wanted to stop by before we left town.”

“Anything exciting?” Bo asked him.

“We’re doing more studies on the portal in the woods. Since they fired one of the guards, things have been much smoother. Seems he wasn’t really watching the portal most of the day so we’re still trying to account for anyone who may have crossed through without going to the institute.”

“I would not have known this either if Einar had not told me,” Gunnar said.

“You never did tell us what happened that day we saw you. We know a human entered the monster realm before you did a while later, but he has never returned. Do you know what happened?” Ricky asked, but not in an accusatory way. He was a scientist and wanted to know more out of curiosity and for research purposes.

Gunnar glanced at my parents before telling them how he’d gone hunting for Vince in the monster realm and how he’d gotten help from a leshy he’d met in their village. “But before I could catch him, Einar did. He won’t be bothering anyone in either world again,” Gunnar said.

“He must have been using that portal for a while before we discovered it,” Ricky said, saying the same thing we thought at the time.

“Yes, he had quite an illegal operation going on. I don’t know where he found the blade he was using though,” Gunnar said. We’d tried a few times to find out more about the deadly blade he’d recovered that day, but neither of us were able to find out anything. As long as it was hidden away it was no danger to anyone, and we both would make sure it was lost forever.

“Humans want to use different parts of the monster world without fully understanding what they’re doing and how much risk there is. But I am glad to know that everything turned out okay,” Ricky said.

Gunnar and I nodded because we’d seen just that, and knew every word he said was true. But good things had come from monsters being allowed to enter our world and the gathering at this table was proof of it. Ricky and Jason said goodbye and left just as our food was delivered, and everyone went quiet while we ate. “I like this,” Gunnar said softly in my ear.

“The food?” I asked because he was not shy about saying if he didn’t like something.

“This,” he said and waved his big hand over the table. “Sitting here with my family and friends enjoying a good meal. This is all I ever dreamed of when I sat alone in my cave and dreamed of a life less lonely. Now my heart is full.”

My eyes prickled with emotion at his words. Gunnar was never one for speaking about feelings, but he was touched so deeply he felt the need to. “I’m happy,” I whispered. “You make me so fucking happy.”

He slipped his arm around me and pulled me close to his side. “I love you, mate.”

“I love you too.” And I always would.