



MARS QUINN



OPERATION:
OGRE

OPERATION: OGRE

CREEPIN U: SEASON 2

Mars Quinn



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Editor: Adie Hart

Cover art: Hamabee_art

Cover Design: Kota Quinn

ASIN: B0H34SSKXB

ISBN: 978-1-961972-20-9

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CONTENT NOTES

The following is a list of what you can expect in my book. Some of these are triggers that may bother certain readers, and some might be considered spoilers. If you have no triggers, please feel free to continue. If any of the following bother you, please skip this book. Your mental health is of the utmost importance.

****Please note that I am human. I tried to list everything, but if you're concerned about a particular topic or trigger, please DM me.**

- Explicit sex scenes (all consensual)
- Monster genitalia
- Swearing
- Underaged drinking
- Mentions of drug use
- Biting
- Undiagnosed anxiety
- Panic attacks
- Unhealthy working out/diet culture

- I want to talk a bit more about this. Diet/workout culture associated with sports can be/often is unhealthy. Christopher does engage in unhealthy working out and is often obsessed with diet/working off calories. It is portrayed as bad and is noticed by other characters. I don't discuss this unhealthy dynamic much in the book, nor is it resolved at the conclusion. This particular topic can be upsetting to certain readers. Please use caution and protect your mental health before reading this book.

Happy reading, Martians!

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About two decades ago, a spontaneous anomaly affected the world.

Approximately thirty-three percent of the human population was permanently transformed into different beings of various classifications, soon labeled as “monsters.” Some individuals shift into and out of their secondary form. Others were permanently changed and have no shifting abilities. An additional subset of previously deceased beings was resurrected; while most of these undead individuals are harmless automatons, a rare few have sentience.

Monsters walk among us and deserve our respect. Like all humans, they live, learn, work, eat, play, and, of course, love.

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CHAPTER ONE

Jaxon

I stepped onto the campus of Creelin U with a massive sigh and sagging shoulders. Even with the creaking gate and slightly creepy gothic architecture—not to mention the gargoyles (some of which were alive and protected the campus)—it was so nice to be back. Being a freshman last year had been overwhelming, to say the least, especially as I had roomed with a human—the first year humans had been admitted to the school. But having Christopher as my roommate had actually turned out to be a blessing in disguise. He was friendly, kind, social, and had easily become my best friend.

He should already be here, as he was on the soccer team; second-string, though I had no idea what that meant besides that he sat on the bench most of the time, which he was determined to change this year. He wanted to play more, I guessed. I didn't get it, but supported him nonetheless. But being on the soccer team meant he was here, as athletes arrived earlier for training, though he'd had a training camp over the summer as well.

I carried my hulking suitcases with ease and winced at the bright sun. Not a single cloud in the sky to protect me from the overpowering rays that seemed to want to stab my eyes out. It wasn't that I hated the sun, per se, but I didn't love it either.

As an ogre, in a family of ogres, we lived in a fully-finished cave, deep in the mountains where I didn't have to deal with the bright light or people. It was the dream.

A werewolf, who I also believed was on the football team, rushed past me, shouting at their friend in an enthusiastic greeting. The pair clasped in a tight hug, then did the bro-back-slapping thing that I'd truly never understood. Though I didn't really enjoy most people touching me, so perhaps that was why I didn't "get" it.

Another plus about the cave in the middle of nowhere. Very few people. I didn't dislike people, per se, but I was perfectly content not being around them all the time. I was happy with my own company and didn't require other people. Well, except Chris. I would be upset not to see him, though he usually came with me when I went home.

I jerked to a stop, blinking. What the actual fuck?

A naked man. Like, a legit naked man was streaking across the campus. His ass jiggled, his cow tail swayed, his back like bark and his skin a lovely green, as he bolted in front of me and roared in drunk-sounding laughter, drawing my attention for a moment. People shrieked, whistled, and clapped. I rolled my eyes. Probably a stupid frat prank. Yet another reason to not be around people.

However, ogres being alone or on the outskirts of society didn't help all the misinformation about us, like us eating babies and children. Disgusting. Boogle and Witchipedia were determined to keep those damn legends, though. Who could say why? People did have a love of the macabre. But I wasn't a cannibal (no ogre was), thank you very much. Hell, I didn't even eat meat or animal products of any kind. One look into the soulful brown eyes of a cow as a child, and I was done with all animal-based products. Nope. Cruelty-free life for me.

I nodded and grunted at the few people I actually knew, or more accurately wanted to speak to, on my way to my dorm. Chris and I had been lucky enough to secure a private room with our own bathroom—even if it was still in Poe Hall, filled with mostly freshmen—so it was just the two of us, which made everything so much easier. No communal shower or suite crowded with people for us.

"Jaxon," a cheerful voice called out, and I turned toward it moments before a much smaller frame collided into me. "Aw, I missed you so much."

"Samantha," I sighed by way of greeting. Samantha, or Sam depending on her mood, was Chris's younger sister. She was a house cat shifter—his whole family was—and she was starting at Creelin U this year.

“Why didn’t you come see us this summer?” she demanded, sticking out her bottom lip. Her black hair hung around her long face, but a few strands draped in front of her monolid eyes.

“Because Chris was with my family for most of the summer,” I commented.

She waved her hand as if that hardly mattered, and I just stared at her. Chris spent more than half the summer with my family—who loved him—then went back home not long before he had to return to school. The only time he’d left was for his training camp. It had been the same with school holidays last year as well.

Mr. and Mrs. Kim traveled a lot for work, not to mention going to South Korea to visit Mr. Kim’s parents, and weren’t always home for different holidays. They tried to be here for Christmas, but they always spent Chuseok in South Korea with family. It was during the school year anyway—the end of September this year—and at Christmastime they were always inundated with new clients, so they didn’t always succeed.

“Still,” she said, “you could’ve come with Christopher when he finally decided to show up.”

“Why?” I was seriously curious. I knew she didn’t have a crush on me—she was a lesbian—so why would she care if I was around?

“We’re friends.”

We were? That was news to me. I didn’t know Sam all that well. Also, I tended to not assume anyone was friends with me. It worked out better. Most of the monster community was rather accepting of people, no matter what type of monster you were, but I did bother some people. Ogres were huge, and we did have that nasty reputation and all.

Before I was forced to respond to her comment, another body collided into me.

“Jaxon,” Carter shouted, wrapping his arms around me. Chris’s older brother.

I swore the whole Kim family was like this. They would all hug, cling, and smile. It wasn’t that my parents were standoffish—they weren’t—but we weren’t all sunshine. Maybe it was because, much like their shifted forms, the Kims did love to nap and bask in the sunlight. They must have absorbed the sun somehow.

Perhaps the phenomenon should be studied. If I were better at talking to people, I would approach one of the science majors.

“Hey, Carter,” I said, trying and failing to pat his back in a “bro-hug.” I was holding too many suitcases to manage the feat.

He slapped my back and tousled his sister’s hair, earning a swipe and a hiss in return. Carter ignored both. “Great to see you, man. Why didn’t you come this summer?”

A chuckle rumbled from deep within me, sounding more like gravel in a coffee grinder than laughter, but I couldn’t help it. My voice was much deeper than humans’ and most monsters’.

Carter lifted his eyebrow, silently demanding an answer. He was a true older brother. All protective, annoyed, and commanding rolled into one person. He had adopted me into the fold last year, which was rather nice as I didn’t have siblings.

If I did, I wondered, would we have looked alike? The Kim siblings did. Carter had the same long face, black hair, brown eyes, and pointed chin as his siblings, though if I was being completely fair, Carter was the prettiest in his family, with delicate features, a svelte frame, and short stature—even Samantha was taller than he was.

When I couldn’t take the silence any longer, I gave the same answer I’d given to Samantha. Carter reacted much the same. My mind wandered as he went on and on about how I should’ve come to their home over the summer and that he and his parents had missed me, which was astonishing as they’d only met me briefly on move-in day last year. I fought a sigh. I could already imagine being in my dorm room and unpacking all my stuff. Hopefully, Chris would be there. We could go to Mummy Mocha together.

Ugh. A blended linen mocha with pea milk sounded so good right about now, though Seth, the proprietor and a student here, would always make jokes even though I never answered, but at least he stocked pea milk for me. It was more environmentally conscious than soy or oat milk. Also, it was nice he stocked plant-based chocolate for his vegan customers.

I blinked when Carter slapped my back, then raced off to greet other people with more bodyslam-hugs. Sam had also disappeared, no doubt to meet more people. I’d been too lost in thought to notice, apparently. I shrugged it off. I would see them soon, no doubt when they were next crashing into me in signs of affection.

Finally, I was able to walk across campus and into my dorm. I shoved open the door, and yet another person smacked into me. This time, I grinned. Dropping my bags, I wrapped my arms around Chris’s lean body

and easily lifted him off the ground. He laughed and only squeezed me tighter.

Slapping my back in a move reminiscent of his older brother, but which didn't quite feel like a "bro-hug," Chris said, "It's so good to see you. I missed you so damn much."

"It's only been a couple weeks," I mumbled, wiggling and feeling rather flushed—and I wasn't sure why.

"Doesn't matter. I *missed* you." Chris grunted dramatically as he squeezed me again, then dropped to the ground gracefully.

He often reminded me of a cat, like his family, but he was the only human among them. When the Halloween Wave came (some sort of magical wave that transformed regular humans into monsters, or in some cases, like the ancient pharaoh Seth, woke monsters up) and changed his parents and older brother, Mrs. Kim had been in labor with Chris. He'd been born a human, though. However, he'd inherited or learned the same agile movements, even if he wasn't as fast and didn't possess the same enhanced senses as his shifter family.

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My eyes couldn't help but track down his body. His shiny black hair seemed longer, but it was pulled up into a messy knot on the top of his head, so I couldn't really tell. Otherwise, he looked much the same, with his golden brown skin, lean muscles, and soft smile. Chris had the best smile. It wasn't overly bright like his siblings, but it was so authentic and joyous it always made me grin too.

"Brought enough bags?" he teased, looking at the mound of suitcases in our doorway.

I snorted. "Brought enough books?"

"Ugh." Chris rested his hand on his throat and said in an exaggerated voice, "You dare question my taste? I need my books. Books are life."

I laughed, but also stared at the towering stacks on his desk and the pile on the corner of his bed. Christopher loved to read. His Grimoyre was in a place of honor on his pillow, though he always had the e-reader on him when he left the room for emotional support, but he loved physical copies of books. Hell, I had some of his books in my room back home because he hadn't been able to fit them into his suitcase when he'd finally gone back home and had just left them on my desk with a shrug.

He only read romance novels, though. It didn't matter the genre, but it had to have romance in it or he wouldn't read it. While Chris had never dated someone he'd bothered to introduce me to, he hooked up a lot. He was known as something of an expert (or campus Casanova as he'd called himself) on dating and sex. People often asked for his help. It was quite comical and interesting to watch Christopher as he helped people; he got very into it. Apparently, he'd also slept around in high school, according to his friends Dan and Penelope, who'd both attended the same high school as Chris and were now here at Creelin U.

Sex was his thing, along with books, and I didn't care because unlike books, he never brought his conquests back to our room.

Chris threw himself onto his bed, making the pile of books bounce, and demanded, "How was the rest of your summer?"

"Good." My shoulders hunched as I began to put my clothes away. These closets were so small. I was a big guy, over seven feet tall with a hulking frame. I needed more space to fit my clothes. You'd think Creelin U would better accommodate, and they did to some extent, but I was larger than their average student and not a shifter.

"Did anything fun happen?"

My shoulders practically kissed my ears as I replied, "No."

"Uh huh."

Silence reigned for a couple moments, making me shimmy and wiggle as I systematically hung my clothes and organized them so I could find everything with ease.

"Why are you lying to me, big guy?"

If anyone else in this universe had called me that nickname, I probably would've growled at them, but I didn't mind it when Chris said it for some reason. I peeked over my shoulder at him, and he was staring at me with the damn soft smile of his, and I sighed. I literally couldn't refuse him. "No"

never seemed to come out of my lips where he was concerned. It was a problem.

“I met someone.”

“Oooooooh.” Chris sat up straight, drawing his legs to his chest, and his smile grew huge as he rested his pointed chin on his knees. “Do tell. And spare no detail. I want it all, even the spicy bits. NO! *Especiallly* the spicy bits. Don’t hold out.”

I rolled my eyes but moved over to my unmade bed and sat down. Tucking my hands between my knees, I stared at the floor and mumbled, “There’s nothing to tell.”

“What?”

“There’s nothing to tell,” I repeated louder this time.

Chris tilted his head, and some of his hair fell free to his muscular shoulder, making me want to tuck it behind one of his rather round ears or put it back up into his bun. He shifted closer to crouch in front of me and placed a hand on my arm. “What happened?”

“Nothing,” I replied with a sigh. “I didn’t even talk to him.”

“Okay, but you like him?”

I nodded.

“Does he go here?”

I nodded again, my eyes wide and pleading. Would he help me like he did with other people?

“What’s his name?” Chris asked, his voice growing a bit louder as a smile tugged on the left corner of his mouth. The left side always went up first. I didn’t know why, but it always did, and I thought it was rather adorable.

“Aaron Dodson.”

He blinked, then laughed. “Aaron Dodson? The goalie on the soccer team? *My* team?”

I nodded, feeling my cheeks heat—they were probably bright blue. I’d seen Aaron last year saving the smallest kitten ever from the river, and he had been so sweet taking care of it and finding a home for it. I’d been halfway smitten last year, but then I’d seen him a couple of times over the summer—his family lived near mine and Chris had invited him to hang out—and my smitten-ness (was that even a word?) had grown into a full-blown crush.

“Bud, you do realize he’s on my team and is a friend, right? I’m more than happy to help you get with him. I mean, the two of you would be so

cute together.”

I beamed. “Thanks, Chris.”

“Of course. Why the hell didn’t you text me or tell me this summer? I could’ve been doing research, scoping him out. Or I could have been talking you up.” He maneuvered back onto his bed and snagged a notebook before jumping up and rooting through his desk. He yanked out a pencil case full of multi-colored highlighters. “These things take planning, you know? I can’t just throw you at him at the bonfire and hope for the best.”

“You can’t?” I’d be okay being thrown at Aaron. Mostly. As long as I didn’t have to talk to him.

“Nope. We need a plan. A good one. He’s popular with his pick of the crowd. Also, pretty sure he’s bi, so lots of options.”

I stared as Chris began to make a list. All the tension in my body fled as I watched him, his hair a mess around his face, his eyebrows scrunched, and his lips pursed. It was good he was on the case to help me. I might like everything organized for school and in my environment, and I’d dated a couple of guys in high school, as well as having a friends-with-benefits situation last year, but I didn’t have the ability to make a comprehensive list like this. Nope, Chris was good at this, and I was glad he was here.

CHAPTER TWO

CHRISTOPHER

Christ on a cracker. I hated this huge lie that hung over me and had followed me to college. It was like a damn rain cloud that I couldn't quite escape.

Freshman year of high school had been brutal. I'd been short, and puberty had been smacking me around, not even mentioning that I'd been held back a year and was fucking older than everyone, so naturally I'd lied about having sex. I hadn't even thought about it, just let it out at a party, and one of the popular girls acknowledged that we'd had sex—she later turned out to be a lesbian who dated my sister and made everything all kinds of awkward. The lie had spread like a wildfire.

Cue sophomore year, I'd been taller, joined the soccer team, and read so many romance books I'd probably broken some kind of record. Armed with my second-hand, fictional knowledge, I'd bragged about my hook-ups and proclaimed myself an expert. It had followed me all through high school.

When I'd started here last year, I'd planned to leave off the whole campus Casanova shtick and start fresh, but as my shitty luck would have it, two different friends—Dan and Penelope—had come to Creelin U (or Creepin U as the townspeople and I preferred to call it), and the lie continued. The lie was a bear trap on my ankle, and I wasn't quite ready to chew my own leg off to be free of it.

Now, I was in my dorm room plotting how to get one of the most popular guys in the entire school to date my best friend with only fictional sources

to guide me. Hopefully the monster god out there loved humans and was so incredibly generous... Yeah, I was fucked. But I couldn't let Jaxon down. He was literally one of the best things in my life and I cared about him so much. He above all people deserved to be happy.

My head flopped to the notebook and I bashed it a couple of times for good measure. Stupid fucking lie. Look, I'd be more than happy to play intermediary between Jaxon and Aaron to see if Aaron would be interested in dating him. But no, as the "expert" I'd embarrassedly claimed, I had to actually get them together.

I didn't even care that I was a gold star virgin at twenty-one. It wasn't embarrassing. You had sex when you were ready, and everyone was different. In high school, I'd been mortified, but everything seemed so much more dire at fifteen. Also, I'd had to prove I'd been so much more *mature* or some shit.

It was now a massive thorn in my ass.

I didn't care about people knowing about my virgin state. It was the lie that shamed me. I didn't want anyone to know I'd been lying for years. Nope. I was going to take this to my grave. Or to wherever I ran away to when I failed to help my best friend. Like the circus. Those were still things, right? Hmm, I wasn't sure. I'd have to Boogle it later.

"Maybe you need coffee," Jaxon said, and my head popped up.

"Coffee?" I nodded so rapidly it was a miracle my eyeballs didn't pop out. "Yes. Coffee. I always need coffee."

Jaxon laughed, and something inside of me squirmed at the deep, rough sound. He grinned, standing. "You always want coffee."

That was true. Coffee and books were my kryptonite. Offer either and I was down to do pretty much anything. Like, you could literally kidnap me with either.

As Jaxon moved, I was drawn to the iridescent quality of his skin. Depending on the light and how he moved, he was either deep purple or blue. Ogres came in different colors, but all had this iridescent quality to their skin that made them seem quite magical. His white hair hung around his massive shoulders to his shoulder blades, and I kind of wished he'd let me play with it, but he never did, not seeing the point.

Like all ogres, he was huge, like over seven feet tall, making my mere six feet look puny. Jaxon had wide shoulders and a round gut that hung over his pants. His thighs were like tree trunks, and his feet were ginormous. And

his hands... Fuck, he could probably squish a watermelon with ease (oooh, Fangstagram idea. Jaxon Bolder, Watermelon Crusher. Or was that too porn-like?).

His head was overly round—I could never find a hat to fit him, and believe me, I had tried—and his golden eyes were so deep set they seemed to disappear beneath his heavy brow. His large nose and wide mouth added to the hulking, almost terrifying presence that he was.

But all it took was one look into his eyes or at the shy expression almost always plastered to his face to melt any fear I might have possessed.

From an ogre's standpoint, Jaxon was decently attractive. I personally thought he was squishable and utterly adorable. I had cute aggression when I looked at him. Like, I seriously wanted to pinch his round cheeks or bite him. No idea why. It probably didn't matter.

But Aaron Dodson... He was peak ogre hotness, and securing the nice goalie was going to be hard. However, fueled by fiction and caffeine, I'd do it.



I stepped up to the counter at Mummy Mocha, and none other than Seth, the ancient pharaoh brought to life—he was basically a more attractive zombie—and the owner of the Creepin U coffee house, greeted me. He was basically the epitome of tall, dark, and handsome. He was like everyone's friend, or boyfriend depending on your persuasion, and I wasn't mad at it.

"Chris," he called with a smile. We weren't what I would call close, but Seth was friendly with everyone. Like, everyone. I heard he was even friends with the lagoon monster, Blake, and that was impressive. "Come to get your desecration against coffee?"

"I have come to get my tasteful order," I replied, and he shook his head, chuckling. "I will have your largest mummy mocha with three extra shots of espresso, three more pumps of chocolate, a pump of white chocolate, and as much whip cream as you can possibly fit on it. Question your sanity about the amount."

"Aren't you an athlete?" Seth asked as he charged my card.

“I eat healthy with everything else, workout every day, and stay hydrated, but no one is taking my coffee from me.” It was non-negotiable. Besides, I’d never go pro; I wasn’t good enough for that. I did enjoy playing soccer, though, and that was enough for me.

And thinking about my future honestly made me struggle to breathe. Like, an actual weight would settle on my chest and my brain would start to turn fuzzy, as if full of angry bees. My future was... Fuck, it was a mystery. I hadn’t even chosen a major. I had no idea what I wanted to do. I swallowed and forced all thoughts of the future out of my skull.

Seth just laughed, which helped draw me back to the present, then looked at Jaxon, who promptly shifted to move behind me, like I could hide his hulking form. He could and did talk to people, but the second I was there, he just let me do all the talking. Being introverted and painfully shy, not to mention isolated as a kid, made navigating Creepin U hard for Jaxon at times. I was his assigned extrovert, apparently, and I was more than happy with the arrangement. Who wouldn’t be?

“My man here wants a large linen mocha, blended, with pea milk,” I replied, taking Jaxon’s card from him to pay with practiced motions.

“You know it’s no longer a linen mocha if the pea milk turns it green?” Seth joked with his eyebrows lifted.

“Haha, very funny, but you know pea milk isn’t green. Big guy here is environmentally conscious.”

“You an environmental major?” Seth asked, looking right at Jaxon, who nudged my back.

“Nope,” I answered for him. “Business.” I slapped the back of my hand against Jaxon’s chest. “He’s already created and owns a vegan protein powder company. His parents help him run it. If you ever want to make some protein-packed mixed coffee, hit me up. I’ll make sure to get you the friends’ discount.” I winked at him.

Ogres ate a lot, but they needed mostly protein, so most ate meat-heavy diets. Jaxon, as a vegan, had been struggling to get what he needed, so he’d made an all-natural, organic, cruelty-free protein powder. After college he planned to focus more on his business and hopefully grow it.

It needed a better name. Right now it was Ogre Protein. I’d seen an unfortunate meme circling about it being ground up babies. Not a good look.

“That’s awesome. I’ll keep it in mind,” Seth commented, handing me my drink, followed by Jaxon’s. “And you’re what? His liaison?”

“Something like that,” I replied.

We claimed a table in the corner, and I took a deep drink of my sugary concoction, groaning. This coffee was pure sin. Did anything get better than it? Jaxon flushed randomly, his round cheeks turning a lovely electric blue, and looked toward the windows next to the front door of the library, which made me frown. What was up with him?

I didn’t have long to think about it, because a harpy next to us caught my attention as she slowly ran her eyes over me and smiled at me with a soft tilt of her head. I returned her grin. I might have no actual experience, but I knew I went both ways, and she was super cute.

However, I was here to work. I flipped open my notebook. I’d jotted down everything I knew off-hand about Aaron, and it wasn’t too much. I liked the dude, but I didn’t really vibe with him. We’d hung out a few times, but I wouldn’t call us close friends. Also, he, like, never talked about himself. He always wanted to hear about what my home in California was like, or my hobbies, or anything related to me. Never about himself. He was a bit of an enigma, a nice one, but still... very mysterious.

Maybe he was a murderer? I shook my head. No. That was ridiculous. But was it?

“Okay. The welcome bonfire’s tonight,” I said, putting Aaron’s possible murderer status on the back burner. “We need a plan.”

Jaxon bobbed his head, his eyes wide. He was so fucking cute. The urge to squeeze him came over me, and I shoved it away. I would squish him later. I needed to focus. He was trusting me when I had no fucking clue what I was doing, though he didn’t know that. I had to use all my past experience of helping people as well as my fictional library of knowledge to get him and Aaron together.

They would be the perfect ogre couple.

I would die from their combined cuteness if it was the last thing I ever did.

“How comfortable are you going to be talking to Aaron?” I asked. This was vital information to the plan, because if he couldn’t talk to Aaron, it was going to make all of this so much harder.

“Probably not at all.”

“Not an issue,” I lied through my teeth. “We’ll just have to get you comfortable around him. You talk to Carter and Samantha just fine. In no time at all, you’ll be chatting up Aaron.”

“If you think so.”

“I do.” I did not. It had taken forever to get Jaxon to say a single word to Carter, let alone full conversations. Sam had been easier, but she hadn’t really given him a choice. She’d poked and prodded him until he answered. Also, she had stolen his number from me and texted him nonstop. Aaron wasn’t going to work that hard, or more accurately, press Jaxon when it looked like he was in agonizing pain at being talked to.

“I’ll strike up a convo with Aaron, and you’ll hand him a drink to make sure you’re included. I’ll talk you up, ask him some questions, and you can nod along, looking cool.”

He smiled.

Would that be enough? I didn’t want Aaron to think I liked him, because I had zero interest in him, as nice and as good looking as he was. I didn’t know if Jaxon being in my proximity would help get them together, and how in the hell would they date if Jaxon wouldn’t communicate with him?

“Texting,” I shouted all of a sudden, and Jaxon startled, as did most of the coffee shop, with even Seth glancing at me. I shrugged. They’d all get over me yelling. It had worked with Sam; it should work with other people.

Looking at Jaxon, I said, “I’ll ask if I can give Aaron’s number to you, and you can text him.”

“Then I can get to know him.”

I bounced in my seat as I drank more off my massive coffee. “Yes! You won’t get tongue-tied, at least not yet.” I wiggled my eyebrows, and he rolled his eyes. “But the two of you can get to know one another. Problem solved. Well, I mean, assisted. We will still need to plan, but after I find more out about Aaron, then I can better form an attack plan.”

My mind was racing in a thousand ways as I drank my coffee. I would text everyone, and I knew basically everyone, and if I didn’t, my siblings did. Kim siblings’ information highway. I giggled at the thought, then cleared my throat. I would also Boogle him and check his social media accounts.

By tomorrow, I would know everything there was to know about Aaron Dodson. That nice-guy-would-rather-listen-to-other-people’s-interests-than-

talk-about-himself routine was no match for my sleuthing. I laughed, and Jaxon stared at me but didn't comment, too used to me probably.

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CHAPTER THREE

Jaxon

After Chris crashed from his sugar high, allowing me to unpack in relative quiet—K-pop still played through his Spookify in the background—I looked over my classes.

This year was still general studies classes mixed in with a few lower-level business classes. At least in all of my general classes, Chris would be there. We'd registered for classes at the same time, to match as much as possible. He had soccer and training he'd had to work around, but for the most part, we'd succeeded. I did better in class with Chris, and he liked having a built-in study buddy, which he needed.

A loud snort sounded, and Chris shot up from his bed, pen and notebook falling to the floor with a dramatic flop. "What happened?"

I laughed. "You passed out from all that sugar."

He rolled over with a groan. "Not possible. There's no such thing as too much sugar."

I mmm'd at him, but I didn't bother to directly contradict him. We'd had that conversation more than once. Christopher was firmly on the sugar train, and his ass wouldn't be moved. He stretched, his arms going above his head, and his shirt lifted enough for me to see the base of his taut stomach and the line of black hair that vanished under the waistband of his jeans.

I ripped my gaze away, my cheeks flushing, then wondered why. I'd seen Chris naked before, so a little bit of skin shouldn't bother me. But it did, for

some reason. My eyebrows furrowed as I tried to think of when seeing Chris had started to make me... well, aware of him in a way I shouldn't be.

Heat slammed into my cheeks when the memory of him sleeping against me in my bed over the summer appeared in my thoughts. Chris had complained when he slept on the floor, then complained when I did, so we'd just shared. But every day I'd woken up to him pressed against me, nestled tightly in my embrace.

"You okay?" Chris asked. "You look like you're thinking hard."

I shook my head, then nodded, fighting the blush that wanted to rush over my cheeks. "Just dreading class."

"Already?" He playfully punched my arm, and everything returned to how it should be. "You'll be fine. I'm here."

I smiled, but that lingering memory of his warmth sleeping against me wouldn't quite leave my thoughts.

"Alright. I'm going for a run, then I'll shower, and we'll go to the bonfire, okay?"

"Sounds fine."

"Good. Dress nice." He yanked on his shoes, and wiggled his eyebrows as he said, "You have an ogre to impress."

"Right," I replied after the door closed, not feeling nearly as sure about this whole Aaron thing as I'd been ten minutes ago.



Chris had told me to dress nicely, but every outfit I looked at felt wrong. I'd kept yanking and tugging on my clothes, until Chris had returned from his run and grabbed a plain gray Henley and jeans out of my closet. His arm had brushed mine, and I'd sworn my heart sped up from the slight contact and the smell of the rich musk of his sweat.

Something was wrong with me. I had to be actually sick. There was no other explanation possible. I might even need to see the new school doctor about it.

Still, even as I sat on a log around the bonfire, waiting for Aaron to show up, my mind kept replaying the touch of Chris's skin and the sight of his

stomach. Both made my mouth perpetually dry while sending my pulse through the roof.

A nudge on my arm jolted me out of my thoughts, and my cheeks heated. I hoped anyone bothering to look would think it was from the fire. Also, the few humans around probably couldn't tell because of their poor eyesight, which meant Christopher couldn't. That fact relieved me for some reason.

The object of my thoughts landed on the log right next to me, close enough that I could feel the warmth of his body. Chris looked good in his pink tank top and short shorts, his skin extra warm from the fire.

"Okay," he whispered, the sugary scent of his root beer reaching me. "Aaron is coming tonight and should be here soon. According to my sources, he does drink, so give him a beer when I start to talk to him."

I nodded. Chris was sober, so it made sense he would find out Aaron's drinking preferences.

He turned to lean against me, his impossibly long legs straddling the log, and I wrapped my arm around him without thought. No one batted an eye, and even I wasn't shocked. All of the Kim siblings were cuddly like this—Carter was currently sprawled over two different people's laps right this second, one being his new roommate, who didn't look exactly comfortable with the arrangement—and Chris and I did this so much that the move was familiar.

What wasn't familiar was the feel of his much smaller body against mine. My awareness of every breath he took and every vibration from his laughter. The way his hand remained on my arm, holding onto me, and his fingertips lightly dragged through my arm hair. The coconut vanilla fragrance of his shampoo that tickled my nostrils with each inhale.

All of them were things I'd experienced before but felt so new, so raw, so different, and I didn't know what to do with these sensations. What exactly was happening? Was the doctor here? Could I get a checkup? I couldn't even say why this was all so different, or why my stomach was fluttering and my skin was tingling like electricity was coursing through my veins instead of blood.

Nothing had changed, and yet... Everything had.

I cast my gaze around. Most people I didn't know; I truly wasn't that social. I did recognize Mort Rain, mothboy from that kids' TV show years ago, though I would never have the courage to talk to him about how I'd spent my childhood watching him. I saw an older orc who hovered on the

fringes. Perhaps he was the doctor. That would fit. I blinked. Was that a gargoyle chilling near the fire? His horns and massive wings seemed to suggest it. I didn't know him—not shocking with my introverted ways.

“Ugh,” Christopher groaned. “Sam says she met Teagan Dae before me. I love him. She doesn't even like him. Why did she have to meet him first? I can't believe he's even going here. Major celebrity.”

I had no idea who that was. Apparently, Mort Rain wasn't the only famous person at Creelin U. Still, I patted Chris's arm in sympathy.

Carter practically bounced up to us, dragging a younger man behind him. His wide brown eyes and hunched shoulders spoke to his freshman state. Carter yanked the new person closer and said, “This is my new roommate, Tate. Tate, meet my younger brother, Chris, and his best friend, Jaxon.”

Tate waved, a cute blush burning his freckled cheeks.

“Hey,” Chris said. “Nice to meet you. Love your hair.”

I glanced at the brown curls that nearly brushed his eyes. I supposed they were fine. For some reason I couldn't explain, I tightened my hold on Chris. Tate smiled, revealing a dimple, and I had the strangest urge to yank Chris away before this adorable human stole him.

As Carter, Chris, and Tate all talked, I barely listened. These new feelings really didn't make sense. Yeah, I'd missed Chris during the two weeks we hadn't been together, but that didn't seem reason enough for whatever *this* was. I'd never been possessive of his attention before.

“Ooh,” Chris said, patting my thigh and getting my attention, “there he is.”

I didn't know who the ‘he’ Chris was talking about, and I didn't turn to look. No. My focus was on his smaller hand on my wide thigh. I couldn't feel the brush of his skin through my jeans, but the weight of it felt so damn right that it stole my very breath.

Something was indeed very wrong with me.

“Jaxon, come on,” Chris continued, not noticing my absentmindedness, and I finally looked up, spotting Aaron in a crowd of students. I also realized that Carter and Tate were gone. When had that happened?

Aaron was taller than me, and his massive frame was mainly bulging muscles, though he still had a huge round gut. His skin was iridescent green, which shifted to golden yellow in certain lights, and monster god, he was hot, with heavy brows, thick lips, and a crooked nose. His laugh

boomed across the clear area, and I swore it rattled the trees, or maybe it was the sole dryad student, Kovi—I couldn't tell in the darkness.

Only yesterday, I could've waxed on, in my head at least, about how his laugh made me feel—the tingles down my spine, the fluttering in my gut like I'd eaten something bad, the awareness of how close Aaron was to me—but now, it was all muddled, as if someone had stirred up the silt on the bottom of a pond.

However, I stood to follow Chris, who darted around the partygoers and sidled up to Aaron so smoothly I was almost jealous. I smoothed my plain gray shirt and secured two red Solo cups of beer—I was really going to have to speak to whomever organized these bonfires about more environmentally friendly options. Or have Christopher talk to them with my notes.

When I basically punched the cup of beer out to Aaron, he took it from me with a smile, and I grunted, though I didn't experience the normal urge to hide behind Chris or look at the ground. That was good, right? That meant I could talk directly to him eventually. Hopefully. Monster god, please.

Chris took a sip of his drink, still nursing his root beer, then said, "You know, I think you and Jaxon are the only two ogres at Creepin U right now."

Aaron nodded. "Probably right. There aren't many of us in higher education."

We generally stuck within our own communities and were relatively isolated. Humans and monsters alike could get unnerved about us, thinking we'd eat them, or they were so rude because they assumed we were of low intelligence like many of the stories portrayed us to be. We weren't. Our intelligence depended on a multitude of factors, just like anyone else's did.

"Why did you choose Creepin U?" Chris asked, sounding actually interested. Hell, he probably was. I'd never seen him *not* get along with someone.

"Scholarship," Aaron replied. "Also both my parents wanted me to go to college, like they had, well before the wave."

The Halloween Wave had transformed his mother into an ogre, but his father had remained human; Chris and I had met them both this summer.

"Same," Chris said, punching Aaron's arm, and the movement made something tight, yet fierce roll through me. The sudden urge to grab Chris

and return to our log struck me, but I pushed it away, unnerved.

Ogres definitely had instincts. Strong ones. But they usually related to protecting what was ours. We were a very territorial species, but that normally didn't involve dragging our best friends away from more attractive ogres.

"Right on," Aaron said with a friendly smile that he shared by looking in my direction.

I wanted to say something. What I didn't know. My mouth even opened, but nothing came out.

"What's your major?" Chris asked.

"Veterinary science."

"Oh, that suits you," Chris replied. "You had that kitten last year."

"You remember that?"

"Of course I do." Chris leaned closer, and I had to fight to not grab the back of his shirt and yank him back to my side. He whispered loudly, "Maybe you can help me prank Carter or Sam in some way. They both turn into house cats. Oh, maybe Wes from the football team would help us. I think he turns into a cat too."

Aaron burst into laughter, and all I felt was a sweltering heat that was anything but friendly. He clapped Chris's bicep. "Man, that would be hilarious. Maybe I could 'trap' Carter and threaten to take him to get neutered."

While the two of them laughed, I could barely crack a smile. What was wrong with me? I should be joining it, but all I wanted to do was leave. With Chris. I wouldn't be leaving this party without Chris. Nope. He was only going home with me tonight. Not anyone else.

Maybe I was jealous of Aaron's attention being on Chris? That had to be it. Ridiculous emotion. Chris was my best friend. Never ever would he betray me by getting together with the guy I was crushing on. Besides, he was hooking up with different people all the time. Why would he want a long-term relationship like I was hoping for?

"It's cool you know what you want to do," Chris said, wiping the tears of laughter from his eyes. "I have no clue. I'm still undecided on my major." Sweat suddenly bloomed on his forehead and his hand gripped the Solo cup so tight it bent. Shaking himself, he continued, "But—" He elbowed me. "Jaxon here already has a business."

“Really?” Aaron’s eyebrows went up, highlighting his deep green eyes. “What do you do?”

My mouth opened and closed, flopping around like a drowning fish, and nothing but a raspy cry came out.

“He’s invented a sustainable, cruelty-free, vegan protein powder that doesn’t taste like ass, which is super impressive,” Chris smoothly said.

“That’s awesome.”

Nothing. Literally no words came out of my mouth.

“I know,” Chris exclaimed, once again talking for me with ease.

He was the only person in my whole life, aside from my parents, who I’d never struggled to talk to. On day one of meeting him, I’d been able to chat and laugh with Chris. It had been revolutionary for me. All of my shyness had disappeared under his gentle smile. If only I could be like that with everyone else, my life would be easier. But at the same time, I didn’t really mind being shy. It was who I was. I didn’t need to “cure” or “fix” it, and the people who truly mattered stuck around long enough that I felt safe to come out of my shell.

“You know, since you two are the only ogres, and you might be a great person to try out his protein powder, can I give your number to Jaxon?” Chris asked.

It didn’t even sound weird how he was asking. How in the hell did Chris do this? His brain had to work differently than mine.

“Sure, man,” Aaron replied with a wave of his hand. “I need more beer, but I look forward to talking to you, Jaxon.” He slapped my back and headed toward the kegs, greeting people as he went.

“That wasn’t so bad,” Chris said, giving me a massive smile.

All I could do was let out another raspy breath because that weird awareness had returned with the sight of Chris’s bright smile.

CHAPTER FOUR

Jaxon

I rolled over with a groan and even my bed groaned with me. These college beds might have been designed for larger monsters, but mine was still struggling with my bulk and protested random movements. I blurrily opened my eyes, and the light from the window, even through the curtains I'd brought, annoyed me.

"Oh, you're up. Good." Chris bounced, fully dressed, into my line of vision, practically vibrating. He was pacing in the space between the bed and the door.

The sight of his black hair sticking up in all directions and his wide-eyed, bright expression made a silly little sigh rush out of my lips. I wanted to drag him into bed with me and snuggle him close. My morning wood throbbed, agreeing. I looked down, flushing. What the hell?

"Get up. Get up. Get up," Chris sang. "Come on."

"Someone visited Mummy Mocha this morning," I grunted, sitting up and bunching the blankets over my hard dick. No need to expose my very inappropriate reaction to him.

"Psh." He waved. "I worked out, then went to practice, then for a run before I had two massive coffees."

That explained it. Overloaded on sugar and caffeine. Chris was a morning person, damn him, but he was never this wired right after he woke up.

I paused in standing. "Did you say you did two different workouts and went for a run? Already? On a Sunday?"

“Of course I did. Coach is on our ass to do better this year, and you know I want off the bench, so that means putting in the hours. Besides, I was already up working on my secret project.”

I blinked. How in the hell had he been up before working out? It wasn't that late. Only like eleven thirty in the morning. “What project?”

With a huge grin, Chris waved at his pinboard on the wall. I stood, my brows furrowing, and shifted to see it clearly.

“Sweet monster god,” I whispered.

It was a serial killer board. There was literally no other way to describe it. On top, in chaotic handwriting, which I recognized as Chris's, was scribbled out “Operation: Ogre.” Beneath it was Aaron's picture, circled in red. On one side was a list of his friends and their schedules as well as Aaron's detailed schedule. His parents. His grandmother. Fuck. Her picture had a huge “DECEASED” in bright red ink. Likes. Dislikes. His car. The license plate. Also, red strings connected everything to other people or organizations that Aaron knew, was friendly with, or volunteered for. Hell, it even had all of his frat bros from Alpha Claw Omega.

Chris was standing beside it with a caffeine-fueled manic smile. If I didn't know him, I would have been fleeing in terror from this human. Even knowing him, it was a very large, very creepy red flag.

“You made this?” I whispered, scooting away from him a bit.

“Of course. I take my research seriously.”

“Clearly,” I forced out.

“So I only went back a year on all his social media accounts, but—”

“A year?” I interrupted. “You went back a whole year?”

“Duh. I needed to be sure he was good enough for you.”

I just stared at him, my chest warming. No. I was not going to be touched by this stalkerish action. Nope. It was creepy. Still, the feeling remained.

“You're my best friend. You think I would let you date just anyone? I mean, yes, I don't actually have a say, but you asked for my help, so I'm going to make sure Aaron is good for you. And yes, he's nice and hot and blah blah blah, but is he nice enough? Is he a murderer? Or is he just mysterious? How would I know unless I thoroughly run a background check on him?”

“I suppose that makes sense,” I said slowly, the warm sensation invading my whole body. It was sweet in an unsettling way, and Chris really was trying to protect me. I moved closer and pulled him into a side hug. “Thanks.”

He squeezed me back. “Of course. I would do anything for you.”

My throat closed up.

“Now, I think we should get coffee and go over this in detail, because I got a lot of information about Aaron and I mean a lot, *a lot*. Your dude does like his social media. Posts a shit ton of shirtless pics on Fangstagram if you want to check him out.”

Dropping a firm, and hopefully calming hand, onto his shoulder, I said, “You don’t need any more coffee.”

“I always need more coffee.”

“No, Chris.”

He released a long, “Fine.”

Chuckling, I darted into the bathroom to pee before I had to review all this info.



I sat in front of the pinboard with rapt attention. Chris had an old school wooden pointer, and I had zero idea where he’d found it.

He smacked Aaron’s picture, making me wince, and said, “Now according to his class schedule—”

“You have his class schedule?”

Chris rolled his eyes. “Of course I do. Who the hell do you think I am?”

“Where did you get that on a Sunday morning?”

“I asked Carter, who asked Devon, who’s friends with Aaron’s roommate’s girlfriend’s cousin. Don’t worry, it can’t be traced back to us.”

I blinked.

“Anyway, back to the important bit,” he said, punctuating it with another ear-splitting crack of the pointer. “According to his class schedule, Aaron is in our Intro to English class. While he’s a senior, he left some of his General ED until last. So we’re lucky to have him, but it’s a perfect time for you to sit next to him.”

“Next to him? Like, right next to him?”

“Yes! Right beside him. Ass in the chair right next to his, thighs smooching, which means we have to go early. The dude is popular.”

I groaned. It was already a seven-thirty class. Now, I had to get up and be there even earlier?

“Hey, do you think romance just happens?”

“Yes,” I replied with a shrug.

“Wrong,” Chris snapped, smacking the pointer into the board. “You *make* it happen.”

A smile tugged at my lips, and I tried to contain the noise bubbling up, but it burst out. I bent over in a fit of laughter. “How many times have you said that?”

Chris chuckled and plopped onto my lap as soon as I straightened. All my laughter died in a flash. I swallowed as I became very aware of his full ass pressing against me. My cock twitched, and I prayed, like actually prayed, I wouldn’t pop a boner while he was on top of me. My sweats would hide nothing. Literally, had no idea what the fuck was going on with me, but I didn’t want to make our friendship awkward. Dick poking his ass would definitely accomplish that.

“A lot. I’ve said it so many times,” he said, but his voice was sad.

I frowned. “What’s wrong?”

He shrugged.

“Chris?”

“I’ve said it to so many people. A lot of people ask for my romance advice.”

“Yeah.”

“They never ask me out. They never want to make it happen with me.”

My frown deepened. That didn’t make any sense. He was always hooking up with people, wasn’t he? He never told me their names and I’d never met any of them, but he was constantly with people. Right? He had to be.

Chris shook his head. “Whatever.” He glanced at me. “But remember, if Aaron says no, we’re done. No is no. Okay? No chasing or pleading or trying to change his mind.”

“I know.”

He smiled. “That’s because you’re a decent person.”

A warm blush burned my cheeks.

“We need to get there early and scope it out. You have to get a seat next to him. Oh!” He turned to face me, and I automatically supported his back. However, having his face so close to mine made me swallow again. Was it just me or did he have really soft-looking lips? Chris continued, “Text Aaron and ask if he wants a sample of your protein powder.”

I flushed yet again. “That sounds like a euphemism.”

“Wow, it does,” he rejoined, laughing. “Ohmygod, tell him you want to give him a nice load of protein! No, a protein shot! Or—”

“Okay,” I shoved him off my lap, and he fell with a squawk. “I’m not saying any of that.”

“Nonono! Bro-tein! You just want to supply him with some of your potent bro-tein!” Chris curled up, giggling at his own joke. “Hey, bro, you want to try some of my... bro-tein. It’s packed with nutrients and vitality.”

“You’re a moron.” I shook my head, but I was smiling at his antics. Ignoring Chris’s increasingly ridiculous “bro-tein” jokes, I snagged my phone and sent Aaron a text.

Jaxon

Hey, this is Jaxon

Aar

Hey!

Jaxon

Thanks for letting Chris share your number

Aar

Of course, man

Jaxon

If you want to try my protein powder, I can give you some. I’m not trying to sell you on anything.

Aar

That’d be awesome. Thanks

Jaxon

Cool

A picture of Aaron’s class schedule popped up, and my eyes widened and my mouth dropped open. Chris hadn’t needed to find it in a roundabout (or disturbing, depending on your opinion) way; Aaron had just handed it to me with no prompting.

Jaxon

I have the same English class

Aar

Really?!

Jaxon

Me and Chris are taking it

I'll bring a sample to class

Aar

Awesome! Thx

I smiled as I stared at the messages. I hadn't struggled once. Apparently, not seeing people really helped my ability to talk to them. My gaze shifted to Chris, and I laughed.

He was sprawled on his back, starfished, snoring softly. The caffeine and sugar must have worn off.

He really was ridiculous, but the longer I stared at him, the more my chest warmed and the more I never wanted to look away.

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CHAPTER FIVE

CHRISTOPHER

I'd had to basically drag Jaxon out of bed; he didn't do well in morning classes. I, of course, had already been up for hours, running around the pitch, practicing shooting, and then working out, all before my seven-thirty am class.

My muscles were burning and everything hurt. But no rest for the weary. Nope. I would do it all again tomorrow. Push. Push. Push. All until my ass was off the bench. It wouldn't be easy. I was competing against monsters who were faster and stronger than the average human, and humans who were more skilled than I was. But I wouldn't give up, even if it killed me.

Now Jaxon and I were parked outside of the auditorium classroom, with a massive coffee for me, and a moderate-sized coffee and a vegan werebear claw for him. As he ate the pastry in slow bites, I glared at him. I loved werebear claws, vegan or not. I wanted one so damn bad, but I was eating clean. I was working out hard. I was going to make it off the bench this year. *Off the bench*, I kept repeating in my head like a mantra.

I might not know where I would be in five years, and I blatantly refused to think about it, but I knew where I'd be this year: actually playing soccer.

People were slowly filing into the lecture hall. As this was a required General ED class, it was huge—one of the biggest classes in school. I had yet to see Aaron, but I wasn't shocked. According to Witchipedia, ogres weren't morning monsters, and I could confirm that. Of course, Witchipedia

also said ogres craved human flesh—the younger the better—and that was completely false, so I took what the site said with a healthy grain of salt.

Finally, Aaron swept into view, and the second he did, Jaxon pressed against me, like he was trying to slide behind me and out of view. As big as Jaxon was, Aaron was even larger. His deep brown hair was done in three French braids hanging down his back and fully caught my attention.

From what little I knew, ogres had a lot of hair and it grew magically fast. They could cut it short and only a few days later, it would be long again. Most wore them in different braids, usually some Nordic or Celtic looking updo. But Jaxon never bothered, and I couldn't help but think he would look hot with his hair braided back. However, he was hot already, so it probably didn't matter.

“Hey,” Aaron called, smiling.

Jaxon pressed even more into me. I elbowed him, whispering, “The protein powder.”

He scrambled to open his backpack, nearly spilling his coffee, so I took it from him. Jaxon held out a green bag with his boring logo—just plain black with Ogre Protein on it. He really needed to revamp. I was going to convince him one of these days. Or just do it for him. It would depend entirely on my mood.

“Here,” he muttered to Aaron, and I nearly shouted in victory. After a single day, Jaxon was talking; I was a miracle worker.

“Awesome! Thanks, man.” Aaron shoved it into his bag. “See you in there.”

As soon as the door closed, I threw my arms around Jaxon and squeezed him as tight as possible. “You did so good, big guy.”

“Thanks,” he mumbled, his large hand pressing against the small of my back.

I looked up at his face, and my eyebrows drew together. He was looking anywhere but me, and I swore his cheeks had lightened, like he was starting to blush. What was going on? He couldn't be embarrassed that I was hugging him, right? I did that and more all the time. It had to have been Aaron. Just leftover attraction and all that. I pushed the thought of Jaxon having any sort of reaction to me hugging him out of my mind, though my pulse picked up and a worm of awareness wiggled in my heart.

Mentally, I squished that big, juicy worm with a rock. Not today, Satan.

Jaxon couldn't be attracted to me. We were friends—best friends. It wasn't possible. Besides, he was into Aaron. Yep. All sorted. No worm. No nothing. All good.

"Come on," I said and pulled away from him, fighting the urge to clap his arm or tug him along with me. Maybe he just didn't want me touching him in public anymore. "We need to get seats next to Aaron."

"Yep," he whispered, still not looking at me.

Tension pulled taut between us, and I wasn't even sure why. We both refused to look at each other as we headed into class. My eyes swept the full room, searching for Aaron among the moving masses and the copious number of seats.

There!

Finally, I saw him near the middle of the class, but he was positively surrounded by people. There was no way we were going to be able to muscle our way through the crowd of adoring fans, let alone claim a seat beside him. I studied those standing closest to him to see if I knew anyone well enough to ask them to move.

Shianne in her shifted troll shape was right next to Aaron. I knew her okay, but not well enough to ask her to move, especially as she was making heart eyes at Aaron. On his other side was a werewolf I didn't know more than by sight, but he was also gazing fondly at Aaron.

Shit.

"We'll just sit here," Jaxon said, taking my hand. Our fingers automatically laced together as if we'd been doing this for years.

A shock darted up my arm, searing me, and I stared at him, not fighting as Jaxon led me to a pair of seats far away from Aaron and his admirers. My heart thumped hard in my chest at the sturdy feel of his grasp. It was safe. Everything about Jaxon made me feel so damn safe. Like nothing truly bad could happen if he was right beside me.

What was with my reaction? I'd grabbed Jaxon's hand before, although I'd never held it like this. We were touching all the time. This little hand hold shouldn't bother me, right? And it wasn't. We were friends. I loved being Jaxon's best friend, and I never wanted to lose him. I couldn't lose him.

The angry bees returned to my ears as did the pressing weight. I couldn't handle... Fuck, I couldn't handle the mystery that was my entire future without Jaxon. It was too much. I couldn't...

My breath began to shorten and sweat started to gather between my shoulder blades. The voices around me were beginning to turn to white noise as the room spun.

“Chris?”

I panted. What the hell was I going to do? I was twenty-one fucking years old. I should know, right? I should have something I want to do. I should have dreams. Everyone had dreams... Why didn't I?

“Christopher?”

My breath harsh, I looked up into golden eyes that started to make me relax. A gentle hand cupped my cheek, and I took a deep inhale of an earthen scent that made my stomach slowly begin to uncoil. Everything would be alright. I just needed to not think about it. Put it in a box and ship it off.

“Are you okay?” Jaxon asked.

I nodded, unable to get a single word out.

His forehead crinkled. “Are you sure?”

I nodded again.

When we sat down, I took a deep breath and tried to get control of my spiraling panic. I wasn't going to lose Jaxon. I didn't need to think about the future. Everything was fine.

I forced myself to look at Aaron and not Jaxon, whose thick thigh was pressing against me. It wasn't his fault. He barely fit into these chairs. They really should be bigger; not all monsters were human-shaped or shifted. Didn't matter that this was a lecture hall where they tried to pack in as many students as physically possible.

“You have a lot of competition,” I commented, pulling out a notebook. I hated taking electronic notes. If I did, I would inevitably get distracted by something on my computer. So I hand-wrote everything. It helped to keep me focused.

Jaxon grunted.

I peeked at him, then wanted to smack myself. Why was I being shy with him? It was weird. I silently ordered myself to knock it off, then truly studied my best friend. He looked as out of sorts as I felt. He couldn't have possibly experienced that same jolt of attraction when we held hands, right? And there was no way in hell he was freaked out by my future as I was. That wasn't possible. I doubted he even thought of my future enough to be worried about it.

“We’ll have to think of something more drastic to keep his attention,” I said. “Make sure to keep texting him.”

All Jaxon did was nod, and I couldn’t say much more anyway, because the teacher walked, or more accurately flew in. Mrs Crimpton—or the Crypt Keeper as many students called her—was a pixie. She was about six inches and bright glowing pink.

Before the Halloween Wave, she had been ancient, over ninety, then during the Wave she’d been transformed into a pixie, a monster that lived much longer than humans. Now, she was an old woman in a young pixie’s body.

Mrs. Crimpton landed on the podium that had a microphone set up for her and began to speak in her clipped, squeaky voice, “You should all have access to the syllabus on that new-fangled internet hellscape management is trying to make me use.” She laughed, and it was like listening to a squeaker toy. “Never going to happen.

“If you have complaints, take them to someone who cares, not me. Alright, twenty-five percent of your grade is made up by two tests—the midterm and final—which will be on the lectures. Ten percent is made up by attendance, and fifteen percent by pop quizzes.” A round of groans sounded, which she ignored. “Fifty percent of your grade, and the thing you should care the most about, is the term paper. You should put all of what you’ve learned about writing and English into your paper on one of Shakespeare’s plays, which you will choose. Now, I doubt that you’ll have learned much, but we can hope, or pray in most of your cases.

“You will have to write this paper with a partner,” she said, and people immediately began to whisper, trying to find one.

“Text Aaron,” I told Jaxon. “Perfect opportunity.”

“And no, you’re not going to pick your partner,” Mrs. Crimpton yelled.

“Why?” Someone near the front asked what we were all thinking.

“First, raise your hand if you wish to speak in my class. Second, because I’m a mean, spiteful old bat and I said so. Also, it’s good to work with different people.”

I glanced at Jaxon, and he was shockingly pale. He wouldn’t do well on this project working with someone he didn’t know. My stomach quaking in an unfamiliar sensation, I snagged his hand, and he gripped mine in return. I would help him no matter who he got paired up with, even if I had to go to every meeting and do all his talking for him.

“Because I’m not a complete monster—” she laughed at her own joke “—I’ll allow you to work with the person next to you.”

Jaxon immediately latched on to me, curling his arm around my shoulders and practically yanking me onto his lap. That same spark burned through me, sending little pulses through my veins. I forced myself to ignore it and give him a bright smile. We had done projects together, and we did awesome, like we were made for each other, obviously.

Mrs. Crimpton had someone pass around a paper to list the partners, and I peeked at Aaron’s. He was working with Shianne. That could work to our advantage. I wasn’t close with her, but I had her number and could get better acquainted with her. I wrote down my and Jaxon’s names, then passed the paper down the line.



When class was over, I asked Jaxon to meet me at Mummy Mocha later, then bolted out. The rest of my classes were a blur of faces and piles of soon-to-be homework that I barely paid attention to. All I could do was toss around the Aaron and Jaxon problem, while completely and utterly not thinking about the weird sensation I was having every time I touched Jaxon. Nope. Not at all. Not even a tiny amount. It went in my never-to-think-about box along with my fucking future.

As soon as I was done for the day, I rushed to the coffee shop and claimed one of the free tables, grinning at a pack (or was it a flock? Mental note to Boogle later) of harpies, who’d been trying to get it first. They hissed, and I just wiggled my fingers and winked, making a couple giggle. One even tossed her hair at me. I waited, my foot tapping, for Jaxon. His last class ended at the same time as mine today. We did that on purpose, as we both preferred to spend the day together.

Every time someone walked by, I would perk up, and every time, I was disappointed. Steve, the nøkk who I knew a little bit, walked in, holding hands with his boyfriend, Brandon, who I knew better. They were roommates who’d gotten together last year, which was utterly adorable. I mean, Steve was basically the picture of cuteness, in either form, with his shy manner and sweet disposition (he was in his monster form currently,

with gray skin with a mossy texture, shaggy black hair, and large black eyes). Brandon was just hot, and also on the water polo team. He had a nice ass too, which was always a positive.

Ooooh, water polo. Maybe I could market Jaxon's protein powder to them, the baseball team, the football team, and the soccer team. That might increase his sales, and I doubted they would be put off by his poor branding.

While I watched them get coffee, another idea began to grow. If they were roommates who'd gotten together, why couldn't that work for us? Not really, obviously. Jaxon and I were not interested in each other. At all. Not even a little. But so many human and monster couples had happened last year, like so many, that it might work in our favor.

What was a more powerful motivator than jealousy? Practically every romance book mentioned it.

Finally, Jaxon came into the library, then walked straight to Mummy Mocha and dropped his stuff next to mine. I gave him a greeting before leaping up to grab another cup of coffee. Jaxon wouldn't drink any more this late in the day, but I sure as hell could. Besides, I needed a second to mull over how to convince him that my plan was a good one. This was like a standard romance novel plan, except it would work out just like I planned: Jaxon and Aaron dating, being the cutest ogre couple in existence.

I plopped onto the chair next to Jaxon and said, "I have a plan."

"From your tone of voice, I don't know if I should be concerned or not," he replied.

I waved a hand. "Concerned? Why would you be?"

Jaxon just stared at me.

Yes, I'd had bad plans, usually involving making him leave our room more than he'd like, but most turned out just fine. And the ones that didn't... Well, we laughed about those later.

"Do you trust me?" My voice wavered, and I hated it. I had to know, though. I had to know that even with this weird whatever between us, he trusted me. That we were still friends. That he wasn't going to leave me to the slow-growing pit in my gut I refused to think about.

"Yes." No hesitation. None. And it soothed me.

"Then it will be fine."

"Alright, so what's the plan?"

"Fake dating."

"Excuse me?"

“Fake dating,” I repeated. “You and I pretend to be a couple to make Aaron jealous.”

“And this is supposed to work? We don’t even know if he likes me.”

His words needled at the insecurity clinging to me like a cloying blanket. I hated this lie, but it was a hell of my own making. Only the truth would get me out of it, and I was terrified that Jaxon would never forgive me, not to mention all the teasing and judgement I would receive when it came out. And if he didn’t forgive me, how could we still be friends?

I soldiered on. “It’s perfect. We’ll make him see exactly what he’s missing, and he’ll be dying to get together with you.”

“But we’ll be dating.”

My heart sped up at his deep voice saying those words, and I flushed, liking the idea way more than was acceptable for friends. I forced out, “You’ll just break up with me.”

Jaxon snorted. “That’s sure to endear Aaron to me. I dump my closest friend, then date him. So much for loyalty.”

Ogres did value loyalty, so he did have a point. Besides, this “fake dating” thing didn’t usually work out in books. So maybe this wasn’t the best plan. I didn’t have another, though. Aaron and Jaxon didn’t travel in the same circles or even seem to like the same things, so I wasn’t sure how to smooch them together. Complete opposites attracting in the books I read seemed far easier.

“Are you sure you know what you’re doing?” Jaxon asked.

It was like a knife to the gut. Nope. That had to be less painful. Why did he have to prod that one little vulnerability? No. I was committed, so I was going down with the ship if this plan didn’t work out. I sure as hell couldn’t confess all this expertise had been an insecure lie. Jaxon would never forgive me.

“Of course I do. I thought you trusted me.”

“I do.”

“Then fake dating here we come,” I said with a grin.

Jaxon sighed. “This is going to end horribly.”

“Of course not,” I lied. “It will be great.”

CHAPTER SIX

Jaxon

I pulled at the hem of my shirt as I stared at Chris. He'd had an almost manic energy about him all week. We hadn't done much, except for the usual class activities and getting coffee. I'd been dreading going to this party all week, but I couldn't back down now.

Aaron and I had had some nice text conversations over the week. He was just as funny and kind as I'd thought he would be when I got to know him better than a passing acquaintance. More than that, he did love my protein powder, though he did agree with Chris about rebranding it, and had already talked it up to several of the other soccer players. They were all calling it Bro-tein because of Chris. It was ridiculous. However, I did appreciate the sales as I tried to get my company off the ground—something my parents were helping me with.

But now it was the annual party that the soccer team hosted. I was going as Chris's guest, which wasn't shocking at all—I normally did. However, I wasn't looking forward to this fake dating scheme, and it wasn't because Chris was human. Last year, I'd seen several human and monster couples, so being with a human wasn't all that odd. It was more that this was Chris. He was my best friend. I didn't want this to get weird between us; he was too important.

"Stop worrying," Chris said from right beside me, shooting me a grin. "It's going to be fun."

I wasn't so sure about that. I'd never liked parties. The social pressure to talk to people, to laugh, to fit in—I'd never been good at any of that. But Chris would be there. Everything was easier with him around. Even if he did have this ridiculous plan.

By the monster god, this was going to go horribly.

Would anyone even believe that we were *suddenly* dating? I really didn't think so.

My stomach churned and began to climb my throat in agonizing increments until it was near strangling me. I was going to spew my hastily chugged protein drink everywhere. That would be a good look. Show up to the party covered in my own vomit. Fuck, I would never live that down. I should just go back to the dorm. It was safer, more comfortable there.

"Hey," Chris said when I'd stopped in the middle of the sidewalk. He grabbed my hand, and shocks shot up my arm, making my chest squeeze. He went up on his toes and rested his palm against my cheek, giving me that soft smile I adored. His dark brown eyes looked even richer with the dark eyeliner he'd slicked on. He whispered, "It's all going to be fine."

"How do you know?" I demanded. Where the hell had this confidence come from?

His smile grew. "Because we're together. Worst case scenario, we go to a late dinner and have vegan Grendel cheese sandwiches, okay?"

I couldn't help but grin. "My favorite."

"It's like I know you, or something," he teased, then tugged on my hand. "Let's go."

Even with Chris's reassurances, I couldn't quite banish the gnawing chasm in my gut. I was sure this party wouldn't be *too* bad, but at the same time, did I really want to take that risk? Wouldn't it be easier to just go back to my dorm room? I did have homework. We had to pick a Shakespeare play. So much to do.

For some reason, Chris's manic face as he'd told me I had to make things happen reappeared in my thoughts. I was already talking to Aaron, which I wouldn't have thought was possible only a couple of months ago, so I guessed there was some truth to his words. I did have to put in the effort if I wanted any kind of real result. And Chris was right about one thing. He was going to be there, so it really couldn't be *that* bad. Nothing with him could ever be all that bad, after all.

We stepped into the crowded suite, and I was immediately wrong. This was horrible. I wanted to turn right back around and flee, but that would have meant letting go of Chris's hand, which oddly enough, fit oh-so perfectly within my much larger grasp. Somehow, I couldn't find the strength within me to release him, so I was dragged right into the crowded party.

Music thumped, booze was passed around, someone was smoking weed, and people pressed together in a way that couldn't be structurally safe for this single room. This whole room was going to crash into the floor below. This whole party spelled trouble, and I really wish I hadn't been dragged into it.

"Well, hello there," Carter called from where he was lying on several people's laps. I rolled my eyes. He always found someone to sit on; in this case, it was three harpies, who I believed were cheerleaders. None of them seemed all that upset, as they were giggling and one was petting his hair like he was in his shifted form.

"Why are you here?" Chris asked over the loud music.

He held up his drink. "It's kinda obvious."

I rolled my eyes again. Carter, much like Chris and Sam, didn't drink. None of them had ever shared the reason behind them all being sober, and it really wasn't my business—that didn't mean I wasn't curious.

Chris just shook his head and ignored his older brother. However, as we moved further into the suite, he paused again. Samantha was laughing as she pressed against a busty cheerleader. Sam gave the other woman a warm look that made me want to turn away. I really shouldn't be watching this.

"Seriously, they're everywhere," he muttered.

I nudged his shoulder. "You don't hate that, and you know it."

"Yeah, but a little space would be nice."

Space? His family? Not a chance. I chuckled. "We should sit down."

"No," he protested, pulling on my hand. "Look, there's Aaron. Go get a drink and flirt it up."

I glanced at him. "I'm supposed to be dating you. Why in the hell would I flirt with someone else? That's not very loyal."

"Fake dating. Jesus." He rolled his eyes. "Now go. We have to make him jealous."

This was such a stupid plan, and I had no idea why I was going along with it besides the fact that Chris acted so confident, and, well, it was Chris.

How the hell was I supposed to say no to him? It was a trick I'd never learned. As our hands separated, I wasn't sure I ever wanted to learn that trick because I really did enjoy making him happy.

Aaron was next to a keg, talking to another player whom I didn't recognize—the guy was wearing his uniform, making it obvious that he was someone close enough to Aaron—and laughing in his deep, gut-rolling laugh. For some reason, I couldn't keep my eyes on Aaron. Instead, I kept looking over my shoulder and tracking Chris's movements through the crowd. The way his hips moved to the music. The way he smiled and laughed. The bare skin of his midriff. The bop of his space buns. The way his full ass looked in his tiny shorts. The way he wound almost sensuously around people, as if it were a dance. Perhaps he should've taken up dance over soccer. He was very graceful.

"Jaxon!" Aaron greeted me, making me jump.

I'd forgotten about him. "Hey, Aaron," I greeted, but my eyes were drawn back toward Chris, who was laughing at something a werewolf was saying. I wondered what was so funny. The gnawing hole in my gut swelled as I watched him smile at someone else. Why was he so happy with that werewolf? Had they slept together before?

"Don't worry, man." Aaron socked me in the shoulder. "Chris is fine. This is his element right here."

I knew that. I just didn't... like it. It would clearly be better if Chris were right here beside me.

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"Coach liked your Bro-tein," Aaron said. "He wants to buy it for the team."

I groaned. Yes, a huge sale, but seriously? "Can you please not call it that?"

He guffawed, his stomach jiggling. "Why? It's hilarious."

"It really isn't."

“Yeah, it is.”

I shook my head with a smile. This had to be a “bro” thing I didn’t get. My eyes flicked back to Chris. He wasn’t looking at me, though. He was solely focused on the built werewolf. Was that his type? I’d never seen Chris with anyone, but I knew he was pan. Did he like that muscle-bound jock? Were they more than a one-night stand?

“Hey.” Aaron rested a hand on my shoulder, gently shaking me. “Trust me, Evander isn’t interested in Chris.”

“He’s not?” I asked, finally looking at Aaron again.

He grinned. “Nope. Chris is fine, but you can go back to him if you want. I get it. Instincts and all that. Ogre stuff.” He slapped my shoulder.

I had no idea what he was talking about, but I didn’t have a chance to ask because Chris playfully shoved the jock. When Evander touched Chris in return, my eyes narrowed onto the offending hand. “Yeah, talk to you later, Aaron,” I muttered, not paying attention to the chuckles that followed me.

I practically shoved people out of the way as I moved toward Chris. Soon enough, people got the memo and moved out of my fucking way. My pulse pounded in my throat, and my vision was completely locked on Chris touching that other man. When I reached Chris’s side, he grinned up at me and slid his hand into my grasp like it belonged there. My shoulders sagged as all of the tension rushed out of me, leaving me practically floating on air.

What had been my problem? Chris was fine. Overreact much?

“Hey,” Chris said, pressing against my side without prompting. “This is Evander. He’s on the football team. I don’t think you know him.”

I nodded, my words getting stuck in my throat. I wanted to chase this werewolf away from Chris, but I couldn’t talk. Instead, I stared as menacingly as possible at him.

He didn’t appear fazed in the slightest, smiling brightly at me. “I’m going to go get a drink. See you, Chris.”

When he pushed through the crowd, out of sight, Chris faced me. “You did so good talking to Aaron. I’m proud of you, big guy.”

Shock raced through me as my eyes widened. I had talked to Aaron as easily as I did my own or Chris’s family. “I did, didn’t I?”

“Yeah.”

He wrapped his arms around me, and I couldn’t help but tug him into my embrace. A rich vanilla scent wafted off him and made a satisfied growl

rumble in my chest. I pulled him closer until he was fully pressed against me. Where he belonged. No need for a hunky werewolf to get in the way.

My cock began to stir in my briefs, and I yanked back, heat racing to my cheeks. “We should, uh, sit down or something,” I mumbled.

“Good idea. Need to let people know we’re together. Let Aaron stew.”

Chris threaded his fingers through mine and tugged me toward the couch. But it was still occupied by the cheerleaders and his older brother, so he shoved me toward the overstuffed chair opposite, and I sat, thankful for the reprieve from whatever was going on between us. I put my arm out, fully expecting him to perch on the arm of the chair, but he didn’t.

He plopped onto my lap and snuggled close.

My pulse tripled in speed as I fought my twitching cock. His firm ass was so perfect in my lap. I had never thought about it before, but I was sure as hell thinking about it now. My arms slid around him, and one of my hands sprawled over his stomach. Most of my palm was contained to his shirt, but not all. One offending digit rested on the warmth of his skin. My pinky slid along the silk of him.

A shiver went through Chris, and I did it again and again, just sliding my fingertip over his exposed skin. He didn’t move away, but rather leaned back into me, allowing more of his shirt to rise and letting more of my hand rest on him. I could see the vein in his neck throbbing, and electricity raced between us in a way he had to feel.

Gently, I tucked my hand under his shirt, so the whole of my palm was flat against his tight abs. A small moan came out of Chris’s mouth. It was music to my ears. I would give anything to see his face right now, but I didn’t want to shatter this moment. I had zero idea what was going on. I really didn’t. I liked it, though. A lot.

Carter caught my eye, and he narrowed his gaze at me, his eyes shifting from my face to my hand like he was warning me away. I swallowed but refused to move my hand from where it was plastered to Chris’s skin. I wasn’t doing anything wrong, and Chris clearly had no issue, because he hadn’t moved or said anything. In fact, he was arching into my touch and pressing his head into my shoulder.

Samantha traipsed closer, then froze, her eyebrows nearly kissing her hairline. “What the hell?” she started to ask, but Aaron was close behind her, bumping into her smaller frame and knocking her clean over.

Chris stood, and I frowned at the loss of his warmth. But it made sense he wanted to check on his younger sister. Aaron was fussing over Sam, who appeared perfectly uninjured. However, instead of going to her, Chris climbed back onto my lap, this time straddling my thighs. His cheeks were dark red, and his white teeth were sunk into his full bottom lip. A slight tremble was going through him.

“You okay?” I asked, smoothing my hands over his bare thighs. My fingers teased the hem of his shorts, just daring to slide under the material.

He nodded, not saying a word. His eyes flicked to my mouth. I swallowed again, my stomach taking flight. I wanted that. I wanted his lips on mine. Why? Who the hell knew? But it wasn’t about Aaron or fake dating. It was because, somehow, I was utterly desperate to feel Chris’s mouth on mine. To know if his lips were as soft as they appeared.

“Chris,” I whispered like a plea, a prayer, a fucking breath, then crashed my mouth to his.

Chris started, and I almost pulled away to apologize, but he laced his fingers in my hair and moaned into the kiss. His lips were soft and tentative against mine. I slid my hands to his waist, easily spanning the distance, and claimed his mouth for my own.

Somehow, somehow, this felt right. This moment, with Chris on my lap and his mouth on mine, was perfect.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CHRISTOPHER

Holy fuck, my first kiss. And it wasn't just with anyone—it was with Jaxon. Like, what the hell was happening? One second, I was on his lap, trying to make Aaron jealous, not because it annoyed me that Jaxon was paying attention to someone other than me or anything like that, and then we were kissing. I wasn't complaining, not at all. His mouth was warm and commanding as it moved across mine. While shy in life, it seemed that didn't translate into how Jaxon basically attacked me.

A moan rushed out of me, and he swallowed the sound, as if it belonged to him. That thought alone was enough to have my dick chubbing up. I should've instantly wanted to pull away and spare myself some embarrassment, but I didn't. Rather, I leaned closer, winding my arms around his neck to bury my fingers in his hair.

He groaned, low and needy against my mouth, and I pressed my chest against his, going up on my knees to get even closer to him before sliding one of my hands down to rest over his throbbing heart. Need and want were drowning me. I'd never felt like this before. I instantly got why people wanted to suck each other's faces off. The feel of Jaxon against me, his warmth, his solidness, and the rush I got from his thick lips moving against my own was addictive. I was never going to be the same again.

One of his hands moved from my waist to the swell of my ass, and all the noises of the party vanished. All I could sense was him. The way he claimed me. And he *was* claiming me. Fuck, his large hand gripped me like he

owned me, and his mouth never ceased moving. It was like all of my brain cells were slipping out and flopping on the floor, dying. I didn't need brain cells. I *did* need Jaxon's mouth on mine, though by the time we were done making out, I would probably be a zombie, not fit to do much.

Whatever. Worth it.

Jaxon brushed the tip of his tongue along the seam of my lips, asking for entry, and I started. He froze, his fingers loosening from their iron hold on my ass. Before he could pull away, I opened my mouth and mashed it against him. Not the best technique, I admitted, but I didn't know what I was doing. All I knew was I didn't want this to end. I never wanted this moment to end.

His tongue gently teased mine with small licks and twists. Every brush sent lightning shooting down my veins, but my stomach rolled at the thought of returning the movements. What if I did something weird? Something he didn't like? But this was Jaxon. No matter what, I trusted him. Besides, I wanted to stop thinking. I wanted to completely lose myself in this moment. To just feel. Feel Jaxon. No one else.

When he tickled my tongue with his again, I gently flicked the tip of mine against it. Jaxon groaned low and gravelly into my mouth, and my dick filled up the rest of the way. Every thought or worry I possessed fell away and left me empty except for the racing heat surging through me. I gripped his hair at the nape of his neck and basically attacked him.

He met me movement for movement and brush for brush. My hard dick wasn't alone. A monster pressed into me, and I couldn't help but wiggle against it, letting it slot between my cheeks as well as it possibly could with both of us wearing clothes. Jaxon's massive hand gripped my ass so tight it almost hurt and ground me down against his erection, making me moan.

What the fuck was happening? I had no idea, but I wasn't against it. At all. I might be a virgin, but I was sure as hell ready to give up that social construct. And Jaxon just felt so damn good against me. So much so that I really wished neither of us were wearing clothes. Why couldn't we be in our dorm room, alone, and very naked? That would be all kinds of more convenient.

At that thought, I finally heard the wolf-whistles around us. I jolted back, and Jaxon chased me with a low snarl that did nothing to help my boner problem, but he paused, his lips just resting against mine. We both separated

as if shocked with electricity. Thankfully, I had the presence of mind not to get off his lap, or else both of our erections would be very visible.

Cheeks on fire, I glanced around the room, and my gaze locked onto my siblings, who were both staring at me with identical expressions: furrowed brows, deep frowns, and narrowed eyes. Yeah, I was going to have some explaining to do. No way around it. I shoved the thought away. That was future Christopher's problem. Right now, I needed to focus on the matter at hand—Aaron.

Unlike my siblings, he wasn't even looking at us. Nope. He was chatting with Evander, who was sipping a drink and nodding along with whatever Aaron was saying, then broke into a massive smile before starting to chatter away.

Relief poured through me like a cleansing rain. For some reason, I didn't like the thought of Aaron staring, being jealous, wanting Jaxon for himself. Like we'd been performing for him or something. I should want the opposite, as that had been the whole point of this, but I couldn't bring myself to care. Instead, my fingers curled even tighter around Jaxon's hair, and I leaned against his wide chest, resting my cheek on his shoulder. With my face buried in his neck, I ignored everyone around me and the burning in my cheeks.

I'd just had my first kiss, and it had been mind-blowing. Weren't they supposed to be awkward? Teeth and too much spit or something? Parts of the kiss had been... new, but not exactly awkward. Overall, though, the kiss had been the hottest experience of my life. I'd never wanted it to end. If I had my way, I would plaster my lips against his once more and pick up where we'd broken off. Hell, I would much rather just drag him to bed and see what happened.

None of those things were possible. Jaxon was my best friend. He was the single most important thing in my life, and I couldn't imagine him not being in it, at least not without spiraling into a cloud of doom. However, if we tried to be more and it failed, I didn't think our friendship would survive. Also, there was the little matter of Jaxon not liking me. He was into Aaron, not me. That thought hurt way more than it should.

After a moment, Jaxon, oblivious to my inner turmoil, started to rub my back in long, smooth strokes which basically had me purring like a cat. I arched into his addictive touch. Man, I should've been a cat shifter like my entire family instead of a measly human.

My birthday might have been the same day as the Halloween Wave, but I was as human as they came—the sole human in my immediate family. I hated it. My family never made me feel less than, but it didn't matter. I felt like that anyway. I was the odd man out. It also didn't help that school didn't come naturally to me. I'd ended up failing eighth grade and had to repeat it, making me older than everyone else in school, whereas Carter was basically a genius, and Samantha was average. Yet another thing that set me apart from my siblings. Being different from them was hard. If I'd had a choice in the matter, I would've chosen to be a shifter, like them, but I was human. It was what it was. Besides, being human wasn't so bad, and there were perks.

Like the whole blood moon that was coming up. It would affect all monsters, but shifters most of all. My siblings would probably be extra cranky, not to mention spending more time as cats than typical. I didn't have to deal with that.

Neither did Jaxon. He rested his hand on the small of my back, and I grinned. He wasn't a shifter, just an ogre through and through. He'd probably be fine.

When my dick finally got the idea that there was going to be no sex and deflated, I leaned back. Jaxon's cheeks were still a bright blue, but I didn't think he was mad at me. I mean, he'd never been mad at me before, not even once, and he'd been the one to initiate the kiss. He cupped my cheek, his touch so gentle, like I was something irreplaceable, something precious. His thumb skated over my cheek, and a shiver went down my spine.

He didn't say anything, thank the monster god. Whatever he said in this moment would probably be too much or not enough. Rather, he just continued to stare at me, holding and brushing my cheek while we ignored all the people around us. I couldn't look away from his golden eyes. I swore at that moment in time, they held all the secrets of the universe or some shit.

Eventually, I slid off his lap and wordlessly held out a hand. Jaxon interlaced our fingers and smoothly stood. We didn't say goodbye or even acknowledge the people around us. Instead, we quietly slipped out of the suite and wound outside, into the balmy night air.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Jaxon

I couldn't decide if this was the best walk back to my dorm room of my entire college career or if it was the worst ever. On one hand, I'd just had the best kiss of my life and was currently walking hand-in-hand with Chris. But on the other side of this... I'd just motherfucking kissed Chris, and we were now holding hands. What the actual fuck?

The kiss, though. Hell, it had been mind-blowingly good and oh-so-perfect. Even recalling it was enough to wake up my dick and make it throb in my pants. I wanted to steal Chris away. Maybe take him to the goblin statue on the quad and press him against it as we made out in the darkness, like it was our own private space, like we were the only two people in the entire universe. Or maybe I would take him further. Like a secluded cave where no one would ever see him again, where we could be alone and unbothered.

I almost paused in my step. That was a little too serial killer for me. No caves. Well, maybe a cave. I was an ogre after all, and we did prefer caves to get away from the oppressive sunlight. However, Chris sure as hell would need to see other people again. I couldn't hide him away for the rest of his life; that was just plain wrong, no matter what my instincts were currently demanding.

A huge part of me, though, didn't want to return to our room, because it felt as if we would go back to how we'd used to be before the kiss. And I wasn't sure if I wanted that. To just be friends, nothing more. To not be able

to draw Chris close and press my lips against his incredibly soft ones. It felt almost tragic for that to be an impossibility.

All these thoughts were utterly ridiculous. The kiss had been fake. Completely fake. Him sitting on my lap—fake. Him resting a hand over my heart like he was steadying me—fake. But... I swallowed, gripping my best friend's hand like a lifeline. It didn't feel fake at all. No. It felt as if we were standing on the precipice of a cliff, and if we just leaned over, we would either fall into something amazing or crash into utter ruin.

I wasn't sure which, and that terrified me.

Chris was single-handedly the most important person in my entire life. I couldn't, and more importantly, didn't want to imagine my life without his warm sunshine—the only sun I desired. It seemed entirely too bleak. He was the light I needed to keep moving forward.

Neither of us spoke as we wandered across the campus. People were out and about. No doubt there was another bonfire this weekend by the river. While the weather remained nice, they'd continue by the river every weekend for people to take advantage of. We could join if we wanted to, of course, but I really didn't want to, and Chris made no move toward the river.

We passed a zombie, one of the many working at Creelin U, who was cleaning up toilet paper that was strewn all over the branches of a tree, and I rolled my eyes at the juvenile act. Probably Alpha Claw Omega. Frat prank or initiation or something. I glanced at Chris, expecting him to remark or make some joke. Hell, even laugh. But nothing.

He was as silent as the grave.

A frown curled my lips downward as I studied him. Chris was staring at the ground, gaze unfocused, cheeks pink, and brow knitted. I couldn't think of a time when I'd seen his expression so serious. Not once.

Had we fucked up our friendship already? I certainly hoped not.

Our dorm building appeared before us, and I mechanically opened the door for Chris, though I steadfastly refused to relinquish his hand or to think about why. Thankfully, he didn't attempt to pull out of my grip as he moved inside and toward the stairs, always ignoring the elevator to get in more exercise.

When we finally arrived at our room, our hands naturally separated. Neither of us looked at the other. Chris moved to his bed, flopping onto his back and opened his Grimoyre as if he was about to start reading a book. I

stared at the floor, standing in the middle of the room, rubbing the back of my neck, like an idiot.

"I'm gonna take a shower," I forced out.

Chris nodded. His voice strained as he said, "Sounds good."

Closing the door to the bathroom was a relief. It was a safe haven from the tension that now pulled taut between us. Never had this happened before. Then again, I'd never kissed my best friend before. I sighed and dragged my hand over my face. This was a jumbled mess. Why had I let him talk me into this fake dating plan? Oh right. Because I couldn't say no to him.

I grumbled under my breath as I stripped out of my clothes and kicked on the shower, allowing the water to warm. I stepped under the stream and sighed. The shower was too small. The showerhead hit me in the chest, and I barely fit in the damn space. I missed my massive walk-in shower back home, where there was enough space for two of me.

Or two people, my mind unhelpfully supplied.

My dick chubbed up to smack the underside of my gut as a groan worked its way out of my throat, because instantly my mind also supplied an image of Chris smiling up at me, naked, in the shower with me. I swallowed, trying to banish it, but it wouldn't go. All I could remember was how perfect he'd felt within my hold and how soft his lips had been. The feel of his thighs. The plumpness of his ass as I squeezed him. The kiss had been so tentative at first, like Chris didn't want to mess up what we had, and some part of me found that so attractive. I didn't want to ruin our friendship, but I couldn't help but ask: what if?

Any attraction I'd had for Aaron had died in a flash the moment Chris's lips brushed mine. What was Aaron compared to Chris? Nothing. Sure, the other ogre was nice, but I hardly knew him. It was a passing interest. Now Chris... I knew him better than anyone, and I liked what I knew. Now, all I could think about was him. Maybe we could be together. He'd said you needed to make romance happen. Perhaps this was his way of making a romance happen with me...

That was hard to believe. Chris was popular, sweet, and had a million-in-one hookups that he could be in a relationship with. Why would he want me?

Because you're his best friend, a voice whispered in the back of my mind, fanning the small flicker of hope.

Gripping the base of my cock, I pumped upward, feeling every vein and ridge against my palm. Unable to help myself, I conjured the image of Chris stroking me as he grinned. Maybe he would whisper to me. I could easily imagine his chaotic, enthusiastic energy as he jerked me off. Or would he be a calmer and more collected lover? That was possible, I supposed. I'd like either. I'd like anything we did because it was Chris.

However, as I stroked myself, all I could picture was my chaotic ball of sunshine working me over frantically while he moaned and whispered to me. Him just as desperate as me for this.

I placed one of my hands on the shower wall, my head bowed. My hand worked faster and faster over my shaft. My slit was leaking a copious amount, lubricating me along with the water. Biting my bottom lip, I stifled the cries that attempted to escape. A small whimper slipped out as my hips punched forward, fucking into the cage of my fingers.

"Chris," I whispered, easily seeing his warm smile, always the left side quirking up first, and remembering the way his hand fit within mine.

My muscles tightened, my thighs shook, and my balls drew up. I panted, my hand working even faster, sliding up and down my shaft. I was so close. I could feel my orgasm barrelling down my spine. It was right there.

The door cracked open, and Chris asked loudly, "You almost done, big guy? I want to shower too."

A small cry escaped my lips as the sound of his voice triggered my release. My cock spurted ribbons of cum as waves of pleasure crashed over me.

"Jaxon? You okay?"

Sagging against the shower wall, I panted. I tried to regain my voice after that massive orgasm, but it was difficult. Swallowing, I finally was able to say, "Good."

"You sound weird."

If only he knew, I thought with a helpless chuckle. "I'm good."

"Alright. Hurry up, yeah?"

"Yep." The door snicked closed, and I groaned, "Fuck."

I'd just jerked off thinking about Chris. That was new. Very new. But I didn't regret it. There was something about Chris that was perfect, that was just right for me and only me, and I wanted to see what it was. This little flame of hope might be wholly unsupported, not to mention ridiculous, but I

couldn't extinguish it. Not without trying. Because, maybe just maybe, Chris and I could be something amazing.

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CHAPTER NINE

CHRISTOPHER

I had literally no idea what to do. Today was Sunday, my typical homework and hangout day with Jaxon, but I didn't want to be anywhere near him at this exact moment. Every look or accidental brush was fraught with meaning and layers—all shit I truly didn't want to have to deal with. Life was just too damn much right now, like there was a massive weight pressing on my shoulders or a noose that was growing tighter every day. The future was looming, and I was shaking in its shadow.

Thankfully, after he'd showered last night, I'd jumped in, and he'd been asleep by the time I'd finished. But I knew the second he woke up that I was going to have to talk to him, which sounded awful. So awful. What if I said or did the wrong thing? What if I hurt his feelings?

So like the mature adult I was, I went running. Like, really running. Fuck. I wasn't even sure where I was, to be honest, but that was probably for the best. If I was lost, I didn't have to deal with whatever the fuck that kiss meant. Instead of looking at the trees lining the desolate road to find out where I was, I focused on keeping my foot strikes perfect on the cracked asphalt. Didn't want a twisted ankle. No siree. I had first-string to make. That was all I was going to think about. Soccer. Football in other parts of the world. Weird, though oddly made sense. I mean, FOOT. BALL. Rules. Lots of rules. Yep. Maybe even kits... Didn't love the orange and green of the school colors. But what were you going to do?

Who the hell was I kidding? All I could think about was Jaxon. I'd never really considered myself attracted to him previously (even though I had thought he was, obviously, hot), but I sure as hell was now. His snow white hair, his purple skin, his round face, his squishable body—they all made me sigh like a lovestricken fool, which I was. One hundred percent was.

Crushes had never caught me previously. There were people I could say objectively were attractive or cute or whatever, but I'd never wanted to be with them. I also hadn't really wanted a relationship, except in a vague way that someday in the future it would be nice. And it wasn't as if I didn't desire sex. I did, but more things took precedence, and it really wasn't a huge concern of mine—aside from the damn lie. I could take or leave an orgasm. They were nice, relaxing, and all that, but I didn't really crave release.

I was sure that all put me somewhere on the asexuality spectrum, but I hadn't really thought about it, nor did I actually care. Ace? Great. If not? Also great. It was the same as being pansexual. It was more a way to explain myself to myself and other people when asked. Otherwise, I was just me.

Finally, slowing my pace to a walk, I took a deep breath and let it out at a moderate rate in an attempt to get my pulse to calm down. My thighs were throbbing and my feet ached. I'd run further than usual. Hands on my hips, I glanced around. Yep. No clue where I was. I was on a small road surrounded by trees. Nothing even close to a landmark. That was marvelous. So I was going to die here. Loved that for me. This right here was the problem with running with no plan, but I'd needed to get out of the dorm room or I would've done something stupid, like curl up in bed with Jaxon or mash my mouth to his again as I hoped for the best.

Bracing my hands on my knees and breathing deeply, I tried to focus on the immediate problem—me being lost—and yet that didn't seem as dire as the whole am-I-interested-in-my-best-friend issue. That was way more serious. I was sure I wasn't anywhere truly terrible. At most, I would die. With Jaxon, I would have to live with that weird tension, and if I did fuck up, then I would lose him as my friend, which was something I couldn't handle.

With a loud sigh, I pushed the thought of that ever happening from my mind. First things first. I grabbed my phone from my pocket. Had service. I couldn't be in *that* remote a place.

Pushing on Carter's contact, I continued to breathe nice and slow. A speeding pulse and that lingering panic that liked to consume me at the most random times weren't a good combination. His voice sounded only a few rings later.

"Why the fuck are you calling me at six in the fucking morning?"

He wasn't a morning person. Carter really did love to sleep. My whole family did. I was the sole morning person in my family, yet another thing that set me apart.

"You'd better be dying," he hissed in Korean, "or I'm gonna kill you myself."

"Can you come get me?"

Carter paused, and I could feel his worry from here. His voice was a lot more awake when he asked, "Where are you, Christopher?"

"I shared my location. I'm not actually sure where I am." I forced a laugh. "Just a lot of trees around me."

"Gods damnit." I heard the whooshing of fabric. "Stay where you are. I mean it, Chris. Don't move a fucking inch. I'm coming to get you." He hung up before I could reply.

Well, I wasn't going to stand on the asphalt in the morning sun; that was just stupid. So yeah, an inch or two would have to be sacrificed. I moved to the side of the road and found a downed tree to lie on. With an arm folded behind my head as a pillow, I closed my eyes and tried to nap, or at least, think of nothing. Fine, not nothing. But something other than my hot best friend. Yep. Anything else. Like soccer. Shakespeare. The book I was reading. Literally, anything.

That plan lasted all of thirty seconds. My mind seemed quite intent on tormenting me by replaying every interaction we'd ever had. However, my thoughts mainly circled around that mind-blowing kiss. Not all kisses could be like that. It was simply not possible. But why had the kiss with my best friend been so amazing? Like, seriously? Why?

About thirty minutes after my phone call with Carter, he rolled up in his old station wagon, creeping along like a grandma. That was my first clue that he wasn't alone. Carter drove like a madman when he didn't have passengers, but he was too protective to do the same when other people were present. Well, when at least one of two people were present.

Sam leaned out the front passenger window and said, "Get your ass in the car."

Oh joy. This was going to be a meeting of the Kim siblings. No doubt this was to be the reckoning for making out with Jaxon in public. I hadn't wanted to have this conversation so soon. Strike that—I hadn't wanted to have the conversation at all. It had always been inevitable, though. I'd known it, but there was always the foolish part of me that had hoped it wouldn't happen. But here it was.

Muttering under my breath about nosy siblings, I climbed into the back of the car rather than booting Sam to the backseat. Might as well try to keep in her good graces. I slid on my seatbelt and looked out the window. I tried to ignore Sam, who was literally staring at me, half turned around in her seat, and Carter, who kept glancing at me in the rearview mirror.

I wasn't going to be the one to start this conversation. If they had questions, then they needed to ask them. Besides, I didn't want to give them any ammunition. What if they were worried about different things than I was? What if they had exact questions that didn't bother me? Then I certainly wasn't going to offer them anything else.

"What the actual fuck, Chris?" Sam shouted.

And the first shot was fired. *Here we go.*

I crossed my arms. "I have zero idea what you're talking about."

Carter snorted.

Sam snapped, "You full-on attacked Jaxon. In public. Like actual face mauling. It was gross to watch."

"I didn't attack anyone." I really hadn't. The kiss had been mutual—well, mutually us trying to get Aaron to fall for Jaxon. Not mutual as in we both enjoyed it and wanted to do it again and it was the best kiss in the history of kisses—or kisstory. Sure, it had been fucking amazing, but it didn't mean anything. Right? Of course. I refused to have an unrequited crush on my best friend. I was just blown away because it had been my first kiss. Nothing more. That was what I settled on in that exact moment, and I was sticking with it.

"You sat on his lap and mauled him."

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I rolled my eyes at her dramatics. “I didn’t. Well, I mean, I did sit on his lap.” It had been a very nice lap. I would be sitting on it again. For comfort reasons. Obviously. “But I didn’t maul him.”

The car stopped and turned off. Carter shifted in his seat so he could see me. “What is going on?”

Shrugging, I replied, “I still have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“You’re a shit liar,” he retorted. Carter scrubbed a hand through his hair with a loud, put-upon sigh. “Are you and Jaxon dating?”

“Would be about time,” Samantha muttered, and I gaped at her. It would?

“Christopher,” Carter snapped, drawing my attention back to him.

“Nothing, alright. Jesus. The kiss was nothing. Nothing is going on.”

“It didn’t look like nothing,” he said.

I wasn’t going to get out of this without giving them something. I cleared my throat, rubbing the back of my neck and not meeting their eyes. They both knew the truth about me, about the lie, about everything. “I’m helping Jaxon.”

“By eating his face?” she asked, shaking her head. “Wow. What a dedicated friend.”

“No!” I paused. “Well, yes. He asked me to.”

“He asked you to kiss him?” Carter asked. “As in, he confessed he likes you?”

“No.” Why did that hurt so much to admit? “Jaxon likes Aaron. We’re just making him jealous.”

Sam stared at me for a second before she hissed, “What?”

“You know, making him jealous. The whole fake dating thing,” I explained, crossing my arms and glaring at both of my siblings.

“Ohmygod,” she breathed.

“You’re an idiot,” Carter said, shaking his head.

“Hey!”

“It’s the truth.” Carter stared at me, his face unexpectedly serious. “This is not going to work out how you’re planning, and I worry you and Jaxon are setting yourself up for heartbreak.”

“What?” I asked, but my pulse was pounding in my throat as sweat began to bead on my forehead. Nope. *Do not think about losing him*, I ordered myself.

“Even you know that,” Sam said. “You’ve probably read it enough times. Either he falls for you, or you fall for him. Resentment builds. Then you

break apart.”

The bottom of my stomach fell out, and I swallowed. No. I couldn't lose Jaxon. He was far too important to me. No. The cloud of dread began to swell in my chest, pushing out all oxygen. “That won't happen.”

“Right.” Carter closed his eyes and took a deep breath before meeting my gaze once more. “Look, Chris, you need to seriously think about this. I don't want you or Jaxon to get hurt. I care about you both. This whole thing is a recipe for disaster.”

“Nothing bad is going to happen.” I didn't know if I was saying that to him or myself at this point.

Sam and Carter exchanged a glance. I scowled at them. She said, “Maybe you need to think about you and Jaxon.”

“Me and Jaxon?” My eyebrows knitted together.

“Yeah. The two of you together.” When I stared at Sam blankly, she added, “You know, together, *together*, as in not-fake dating.” Then she made a circle with the fingers of one hand and then poked her other pointer finger in and out of it.

I gagged. “Please never do that again. And, no. Never. We're friends.”

Just friends, I repeated firmly in my brain.

“You started that way,” Carter said, tacking onto Sam's point, though he did smack her hands when she started to make the rude gesture again, which made me realize they'd discussed this. Assholes. They were teaming up against me. “I believe that, but I think it's changed.”

“What do you mean?” We hadn't changed. His importance hadn't changed. Nothing had.

“Last year, it was different between you two,” he said, his hand waving. “The energy, the vibe, or whatever. But sometime this summer, how you talked about him changed. Maybe even by the end of last year.”

I swallowed. Had it?

“Just think about it, okay?” Carter started the car and pulled back onto the desolate highway. “That's all I'm saying.”

Well, I would hardly think of anything else now.

CHAPTER TEN

Jaxon

When awareness finally came to me, I immediately rolled over, my eyes seeking Chris. All I saw was an empty bed in a disarray of sheets, blanket, and books. My heart dropped. I didn't know what I'd expected. To wake up with him in bed next to me? I closed my eyes as the memories from the summer plagued me. I knew exactly what it was like to awaken with him pressed against me. I knew just how well his body felt snuggled up to my chest, how perfectly he fit within my embrace, how he belonged there.

So, yes, I supposed, secretly I'd been wishing to wake up to find Chris had crawled into bed with me. If he had, I would've known he felt as I did or that he'd felt the shift in my emotions, in our relationship. But he hadn't, and he didn't. Once more, I heard Chris's voice in my mind as clear as day: "You have to make it happen." And I would have to. Then, for some reason, I heard his almost broken voice saying that no one had ever tried to make romance happen with him.

Well, I would.

All those other people were fools. But their loss was my gain.

With that thought, I rolled out of my creaky bed and moved to the bathroom to the shower. I didn't know why I was so energized to chase Chris, but I was. I'd never felt this way with anyone else, which I supposed made sense. Chris wasn't just anyone. He was him. He deserved my best because he was the best.

After a quick shower, I simply waited. Chris was probably on a run or practicing. He really was keen on not being a second-stringer. Was that even a word? Or was it just second string? I didn't know, which was a problem. I supposed I would have to learn more about soccer now that I was trying to date Chris. That was probably the most daunting thing about all of this. Sports and I didn't go well together. I swore that whenever I'd tried to learn in the past, the knowledge would just fall out of my head. It didn't want to stay there, no matter what.

But I would double—no, triple—my efforts to learn this time around. Chris had to know I was serious. That I cared. If he cared about soccer, then I cared about soccer.

As more time passed and no Chris, I stared at the door with a frown. This was either a very long run or he was still at the field, practicing. He needed breakfast, though food wouldn't be enough to tempt him inside. I grinned. Coffee would be.

I headed outside, debating about whether to get coffee first to bribe Chris to stop practicing or to tell him we could get coffee when he left. I landed on the latter and headed toward the field. I buried my hands in my sweater, the chilly early morning air nipping at my exposed skin. It would warm up soon, making me regret the extra layer, but for now, I needed my hoodie. A few zombies lumbered over the grounds as they cared for the trees and the flowerbeds. I paid them no mind and continued on, only pausing when I saw a familiar figure.

Aaron was sitting on the grass near the library, back against a tree with a cat in his massive hands. The cat looked unhappy, to be honest, but thankfully, it was neither of Chris's siblings—I recognized their shifted forms. The cat was struggling to get free of Aaron's hold, its claws digging into his jeans as it attempted to scramble away. He didn't allow it to escape as he examined a spot on the cat's leg.

"Everything okay?" I asked quietly, shuffling.

He glanced up with a smile, but I was completely unaffected. How things could change in such a short amount of time. Aaron answered, "Yeah. Mrs. Whiskers here had a thorn in her leg a couple of days ago, and I removed it. It healed up nicely. I was just checking."

The school had a few cats roaming around, all well cared for, to help naturally rid the school of vermin. That Aaron had made friends with each cat wasn't in the least shocking. He seemed to always be on the lookout for

animals, or perhaps they found him. Maybe he had a vibe that attracted animals to him. Some people were like that.

“That’s good,” I said, not sure what else to say. Part of me wanted to confess to him about what Chris and I had planned and how my feelings had changed, but it probably wasn’t needed. Besides, those embarrassing words would never be able to leave my strangled throat.

“Have you and Chris started your project yet?” he asked.

“No.” It hadn’t even been a week. We had the whole semester. All we had to do before next week was pick a play. That was easy enough.

“Me and Shianne have. I want to get it done as early as possible. With frat responsibilities and soccer, I have enough on my plate without worrying about this class.”

I knew he was a good student, but holy cow, this felt a bit extreme. He was a senior, though. I was sure his other classes were far more challenging. All I said was, “That’s a good plan.” I wasn’t stressed about it. Chris and I worked well together. We’d get the project done and on time.

“Do you and Chris want to come to the Alpha Claw Omega party next weekend?”

No, but I didn’t say that. “Yeah, sure, as long as Chris wants to. Thanks for the invite.”

He nodded.

When Aaron stayed silent, I cleared my throat, feeling some need to speak. “You and Chris... I mean, you-you don’t—” I couldn’t even get the words out of my throat. I really didn’t want Aaron as competition.

Aaron laughed. “You don’t need to worry about that. I got the message.”

“What?” Did Aaron know about our plan? How was that possible?

“You’ve marked your claim quite thoroughly. I’m happy the two of you are finally together. It makes sense. I’m shocked it took this long.”

I blinked.

“We ogres are territorial. No need to worry. I should’ve thought of it sooner. You wanting to talk to me all of a sudden when Chris was talking to me. Or this summer. You’d always sidle up to him when we were talking.” Aaron gave me a nice smile. “No need to worry. I don’t have any feelings for Chris, and he’s clearly into you.”

Chris had feelings for me? I grinned.

Aaron laughed. “See? All fixed. Instincts resolved. Now, can we be friends?”

“Of course.” We certainly could. Part of me reveled in the fact that Aaron had assumed the two of us were together even before this whole plan. We belonged together, or at least, I hoped we did.

Before Aaron even had a moment to respond, there was shouting, and just as I turned, Chris rammed into me. His arms wrapped around mine, and he was glaring at Aaron. The musky, sweet scent of dried sweat clung to him, and his clothes were rumpled. Both of his siblings were yelling at him about jumping out of a moving car. Carter was mainly focused on the safety aspect, while Samantha was just calling him a reckless idiot.

“Did you just leap out of your brother’s moving car?” I asked.

Chris’s grip tightened, and something possessive curled in my gut. If I took his actions at face value, he didn’t want me talking to Aaron any more than I wanted Chris talking to random people. He said, his eyes never leaving Aaron, “It doesn’t matter.”

“It sure as hell does,” Carter yelled from the car. “I could’ve killed you.”

Chris finally broke his one-sided staring contest with Aaron and rolled his eyes. “You were creeping along like a granny. No. I take that back. Our grandmother drives faster than you do.”

“You could’ve broken something, asshole,” Carter shouted. “I am not bothering Dr. Lee because you felt like being reckless.”

He didn’t bother responding, just flipped his brother off. Carter left, swearing, which Chris didn’t react to. He looked up at me, his chin on my arm. “What are you doing?”

“Looking for you.” I rested my hand on the arm that was encircling mine. “I thought we could get coffee and breakfast.”

“You are speaking my language, big guy.”

I chuckled.

“You two are very adorable, you know? Almost sickening,” Aaron teased with a wide grin.

Chris laughed, but it wasn’t his real one, and his hands gripped my arm painfully. “We are.”

Aaron shook his head. “Go be gross elsewhere.”

“Aye aye, captain.” This time, when Chris laughed, it was his true breezy one, which made me relax. He was okay.

Aaron just rolled his eyes. I grabbed Chris’s hand and started to lead him into the library, so we could get coffee.

“Hey,” Chris said, stopping me. “Can I shower first? I’m kinda gross.”

“Never,” I muttered, my cheeks burning. I honestly found his smell so attractive, though it did put the image of licking the beads of sweat off his body while we did other things, non-work out things.

He snorted. “Right.”

“I’m serious. You don’t smell bad.” I paused in my step to look at him and was rewarded with seeing color sweep across his cheeks.

“Well, then we don’t have to wait for me to shower.”

“Coffee and werebear claws?”

“Ugh, you know I have to eat clean,” he groaned dramatically.

“Fine egg white bites for you and a vegan werebear claw for me.”

“Then Bro-tein shakes?”

“Seriously?” I shook my head. “Don’t call it that.”

Chris broke into peals of laughter. “Why? Don’t you want to give me a shot of your Bro-tein? Fill me full of your vitality?”

Heat slammed into his face at the same time it did mine. I most certainly wanted to, but I didn’t think I was ready to tell him that any more than he was ready to hear that.

“C-coffee,” Chris announced, dragging me toward the library, and I nodded, unable to say a single word.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

CHRISTOPHER

“Romance? Romance?” I demanded, practically yelling. “Romeo and Juliet is not a fucking romance story.”

“Yes, it is,” Shianne snapped back. “It is hella romantic.”

“Just because there is a romance in it doesn’t make it a romance.”

She flicked her curly bottle-blond hair over her shoulder and snapped her gum loudly. “Same thing.”

“It. Is. Not.” I didn’t care that I was shouting in the middle of Mummy Mocha. Aaron had followed us in, and Shianne had already been here. Naturally, we’d started talking about our project. She, no doubt trying to seduce Aaron, had picked Romeo and Juliet.

“It is a romance, Chris.”

“Ohmygod.” I gripped my hair. “Romances have a happy ending. It is a requirement. Like an actual genre requirement. Not even damn Shakespeare had called the play a romance. It is one of his tragedies. Yes, it has a love story in it, a creepy one. Juliet is like thirteen, but that’s beside the point. It is not a romance.”

She crossed her arms, flushing, which made her ruddy skin look even redder. “Well, I find it romantic.”

“Well, good for you. It’s still a tragedy.”

Shianne stepped closer. In her human form, she wasn’t all that big, but as a troll, she was tall, powerful, and striking, but I refused to be cowed.

Practically baring her teeth, she said, “I’m going to write this paper about how Romeo and Juliet is a romance.”

“I hope you enjoy failing.”

Before she could say anything, Jaxon wrapped his arms around my waist and pulled me back into his chest. He didn’t or couldn’t say anything, but he rubbed his chin on the top of my head. Aaron placed a large hand onto Shianne’s shoulder and said, “Why don’t we all calm down? Okay? It’s just a play written by a dead white guy. Also, you’re causing a scene.”

For the first time, I looked around the coffee shop, and yeah, people were staring. A lot. Even the people coming into the library were slowing down as they passed by to look at the train wreck that was happening. Heat rushed to my face. Perhaps yelling about Shakespeare wasn’t the best plan, but come on? Romeo and Juliet was not a romance. Had she ever read a romance book? Done any sort of research into genre stipulations?

“What are you two picking?” Shianne asked, popping that damn gum of hers.

“I’ll match you tragedy for tragedy. We’re doing Hamlet.”

Jaxon started behind me. We hadn’t picked before this moment, but like hell was I backing down. Hamlet, here we come.

“How original.” Shianne smirked.

“And what, you are? With Romeo and Juliet?” I snorted.

Aaron sighed. “This is not calming down.”

Out of nowhere, Seth popped up, shoving coffee at us. “Look at that, free coffee.” He laughed, looking around at the gawking crowd, then lowered his voice as he hissed, “Please, for the love of all of the gods, stop shouting about fucking Shakespeare in my shop.”

I snagged one of the coffees, glaring at Shianne, but I took Jaxon’s hand and dragged him out of Mummy Mocha. He followed without complaint. He had also grabbed one of the coffees, but we hadn’t gotten his vegan werebear claw. Jaxon needed food, and I’d deprived him by fighting with Shianne. But seriously? A romance? Yeah, it would take a while for me to get over that one.

With my fingers still locked around Jaxon’s, I changed direction to the cafeteria. We’d just have to eat breakfast there. Thankfully, because Creepin U hosted so many different types of monsters, they had a fairly good selection of vegan options for Jaxon, though I knew he really did love those

were bear claws. I had no idea how the vegan ones tasted so good, but they did. Probably more sugar. Sugar made everything better.

“Hamlet?” he suddenly asked.

A blush burned my cheeks. “I was flustered, alright?”

“You were feeling competitive.”

“That too.”

Jaxon didn’t say anything, and the silence plucked at me. This was a joint project, and I’d just bowled right over him. I did that sometimes, especially with him. However, I didn’t want him to think that his voice didn’t count, that it didn’t matter.

“Are you mad?” I asked, stopping in front of him. I couldn’t look at him, though. My gaze remained firmly on my feet.

With our joined hands, he nudged up my chin. When our eyes met, he smiled. “No.”

“You don’t care?”

“That you yelled in Mummy Mocha? Oh, I’m embarrassed about that.”

I flushed.

“About you picking Hamlet for a project I don’t care about? Not at all.”

My shoulders sagged, and my gut uncoiled, making me feel quite weightless. “Good. Still, I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine.”

It wasn’t, but I was glad that he wasn’t mad at me. Giving him a small smile, I headed toward the cafeteria again. I was still holding his hand. I could probably let go, but... I shot Jaxon a glance, only to find that he was already looking at me. Unable to help it, I smiled brightly at him. Yeah, I didn’t need to hold his hand. I wanted to, though. I wasn’t going to think about why, because we were just friends, and instead, just kept holding him.

His hand did engulf mine rather wonderfully. His skin was warm and super soft. His grip wasn’t too tight, though it wasn’t loose either. Honestly, his hold made me feel safe and calm, like I could get through anything, do anything.

My eyes returned to Jaxon yet again. No. I really didn’t want to let his hand go.



The rest of the week passed so slowly, like a damn snail taking a Sunday walk. I'd smiled and tried to act normal, but every time Jaxon had done something nice, my heart had leaped in my chest, sending my pulse racing. It had been a very confusing week. Carter and Sam's words circled in my head continually, and all of the treats, smiles, and gentle touches were enough to have me wondering.

But I couldn't wonder. Jaxon liked Aaron. That was all there was to it.

By the time the weekend rolled around, I felt like it had been an entire year while I had aged ten. I was dragging. All I wanted to do was lie on the floor and read. That was it. Maybe cuddled up with Jaxon, not that it would happen, but that was what I wanted to do, not go to a party. Why had Jaxon agreed to go? I mean, he'd said it was up to me, but how the hell was I supposed to say no when this was an opportunity for Jaxon and Aaron to connect? Except that reason alone made me want to say no.

When we got into our room after class, I dropped my bag and collapsed to the floor with a loud groan. I starfished out and planted my face against the worn-down carpet.

"That's filthy," Jaxon commented, stepping over me.

"Fuck you," was all I said, and he laughed. The deep rumble sounded like rocks rolling down a cliff and sent an equally powerful quake through my body. I'd heard the sound hundreds of times before, and yet it was met with such an unfamiliar sensation, an awareness that I equally liked and hated.

I really couldn't deny it, could I? I mean, I *had* tried. Repeatedly. But this week had made something very clear to me. I had a crush on Jaxon.

Fuck my life.

Huge hands clasped my waist and made me gasp as I was lifted off the ground like I weighed nothing at all. I squeaked, "Jaxon, put me down. I am not travel-sized."

Another deep chuckle rumbled. "You basically are. To me at least." He sat down and plopped me onto his lap.

My cheeks lit on fire. What the fuck? Yes, we often cuddled, but he never initiated it like this.

Jaxon slid his arms around my waist, one hand spanning my waist, and rested his chin on my shoulder. "Are you sure you want to go tonight, baby?"

Nope. Now I was on fire. This was actual heat. That "baby" thing was new. He'd randomly started a couple of days ago and hadn't stopped, even when we were alone. Jaxon was giving me hope, and he really needed to stop. I couldn't hope. Not for this. Not for us. It was too much for that unnamed panic that kept clawing out of the box I'd shoved it into.

I swallowed, but my voice was far higher-pitched and strained than I would like when I said, "We have to go."

"No, we don't."

"Aaron will be there."

"So?" he asked. "Why does that matter?"

"Are you being serious right now?" I started to get off his lap, but Jaxon held tight, keeping me firmly in place. I sighed. "The plan. You can't have forgotten the plan."

"I haven't, but maybe I've decided to tweak it a bit."

I glared at him, not that he could see it. "Then you should've told me. I have this whole thing planned out." The ideas were literally on the board. I'd added more over the week, different ideas to force the two of them together. He could've added his tweak, but no. Apparently not. Jaxon was no help. Literally. Whenever we'd actually run into Aaron, Jaxon hadn't even cared. Instead of flirting, he'd been completely focused on me. So damn annoyingly attractive, but not according to the plan that was on the board, all clearly labeled.

"I don't think you're quite ready for the change I've decided to make." His fingers played with the hem of my shirt before sliding under it and teasing my skin.

Shivering, I asked, "How drastic can it be?"

Jaxon held me tight. "Fairly big."

"Well, then you should definitely include me. I'm the romance expert, the campus Casanova," I lied. I sure as hell wasn't, but he'd said he wanted my help and I didn't want to be left out, or pushed aside, like he didn't need me anymore. He did still need me, right? Aaron wouldn't take my place. He couldn't. Could he?

"You are." Jaxon snuggled me close. "This is nice."

My heart quaked. "It is."

“We should just stay like this, not be around people.” He said the last word like it was something foul.

“Oh no, by the monster god, there will be people there? How utterly horrid. Why, of course we can’t go now.”

“Asshole,” he snarked at my teasing, but his tone and tight hold let me know he wasn’t serious.

I leaned back into his embrace, melting honestly. It really was nice. He was so much bigger than I was; he swallowed me almost completely. Kept me secure. Sitting on Jaxon was better than lying on the floor and reading, quite shocking but true. Starfishing and zoning out on the floor were one of the few things that calmed me down when I was completely overwhelmed.

Taking a deep breath, I turned so I was sitting across Jaxon’s lap and could settle more firmly into his grasp. I muttered, my eyes closing, “This isn’t me conceding. I’m just resting my eyes.”

“Sure.”

“I am.”

Jaxon ran his hand over my arm, his warm skin soothing me. I snuggled in, feeling myself get heavier and more relaxed until darkness took me.



“What’s going on?” I asked, bolting straight up. Solid arms wrapped around me and settled me against a broad chest.

“Careful.”

I blinked, looking around. I was still in my dorm room, but the light had shifted, growing darker and the shadows longer across the room. I shifted slightly, and whatever I was sitting on moved as well. A flush rose to my cheeks when I realized. Well, fuck. I’d fallen asleep on Jaxon, and he’d held me. The thought of him continuing to hold me while I was napping set my heart racing. Why hadn’t he put me down or pushed me off his lap? Why would he just continue to keep me in his arms?

“Are you alright?” Jaxon asked, and I could feel his voice vibrating against me.

I nodded. Where the hell had my voice gone? Like, it had vanished like a fart in the wind.

Jaxon tightened his hold, keeping me squarely on his lap, and I rested my cheek on his shoulder, looking at him. He was focusing on his desk and writing, probably working on homework. He was studious like that. I rubbed my chin on him and closed my eyes once more as I simply breathed in his musky, earthy scent.

“What time is it? Did we miss the party?” I asked, my voice thick.

“You slept, like two hours, so no, we definitely didn’t miss the party,” he replied.

Too bad, I thought as I tucked my face against him. I didn’t want to share him, but I didn’t want to be selfish. Jaxon had always been there for me, put me first. I needed to do the same for him.

“You clearly need more sleep,” he commented.

“What?”

“You’re always up early, working out. You need to rest, baby.”

“I’m fine.”

“Are you?”

I shrugged. It was what it was. Besides, if I worked myself into exhaustion I didn’t have to think.

“Chris...” Jaxon drew out my name.

Nope. I wasn’t doing that. Also, we had a party to get to. Taking a deep breath, I pushed myself off his lap and stood. A loud groan ripped out of me as I stretched my arms above my head. A symphony of cracks and pops sounded. I’d slept hard. I needed to up my stretching game, clearly.

When I faced Jaxon, I paused, my arms still half up. He was staring at me, his teeth sunk into his full lip. Something burning in his golden eyes set something equally ablaze within me. I swallowed, quickly looking away.

“We should get ready to go,” I muttered. Nope. Not thinking anything stupid like that he might be feeling even an inkling of what I was. That was a ridiculous thought. Me and Jaxon were nothing but friends, my crush aside, and we’d stay like that for the rest of our lives. I would never lose him. Not ever.

“If you want.”

I didn’t want to go. I wanted to hoard all my time with him like it was gold. I could easily become a dragon when it came to him. Did dragons hoard gold? I would have to look that up too. But no matter. Normally, I

enjoyed spending time with people or socializing, but that meant allowing Jaxon to spend time with Aaron. I snorted. Allow. Like I had a say.

“You okay?” Jaxon asked, his fingers curling around my wrist.

Not even close, but I wasn’t going to say that. “I’m good.”

He stared at me for a moment, like he didn’t believe me, and he might not have. He knew me better than anyone, even my siblings. He probably knew my tells the same way I knew his. But maybe if I tried to say I was fine with everything enough times, I would believe it enough for both of us.

“Can I braid your hair?” I asked, as I often did, expecting the same answer as usual—the shrug of “why bother.”

“Sure.”

My eyes shot open wide. “Really?”

He shrugged. “If you want.”

“I want to,” I practically shouted. I really did. He never ever let me play with his hair, and it was so pretty. I always wanted to bury my fingers in the strands.

“I don’t see the point of it, but I don’t care if you play with it.”

“Then you should let me do it all the time.”

A soft smile tugged on the corner of his mouth, and he ducked his chin, but it wasn’t enough to hide the brightening of his cheeks. “I guess, if you want.”

“Uh, yeah. You’re going to have to get up early for me to do your hair before class,” I said, already planning.

His expression darkened. Jaxon really did hate mornings.

I wanted to say I’d make it worth his time, but that wasn’t our relationship. Instead, I popped into the bathroom to grab all my hair care products. Jaxon’s hair was longer than mine, not to mention far thicker. I didn’t have any products made for his hair, so we would have to make do. Maybe I would order more. Tengu had to have some. Those bird shifters delivered everything so quickly.

I slid behind his chair and ran a comb through his hair. It was thick, practically swallowing the teeth, but not a single snarl, lucky bugger. I made quick work of putting product on the strands, then began braiding. The only ogres I’d ever seen either had Celtic or Nordic style braids, so I stuck with the same. I did two French braids on either side of his head, and the middle part of his hair I pulled back into a knot, while allowing some of his bottom layer to hang free.

Tugging on the strands, I grinned at him. "Looks good."

His cheeks went bright again, and a smug, almost possessive sensation twirled in my gut. I pulled on his hair again, making him look up at me, and when his gaze met mine, that feeling only grew, swamping me, pulling me under while lifting me up at the same time.

I whispered, "Don't look away from me. Please."

Jaxon nodded. "I can do that."

"Good." I moved to stand in front of him as I dragged my fingers through the loose part of his hair, the strands sliding like water through my grip. I wanted to sit on his lap and claim his mouth with mine once again. Kissing him had felt right—he'd felt like mine.

He trailed his fingertips up my thighs, coming dangerously close to my groin, and settled his hands on my waist. I swallowed. He was so warm, and I swore I felt his touch vibrating through every cell in my body. Unable to resist him any more than a moth could fight the call of a flame, I shifted in between his spread thighs until I was against his chest.

"Thank you for braiding my hair, babe."

It was my turn to duck my face.

Nudging my chin up, Jaxon said, "If I can't hide, neither can you."

"That's fair," I whispered.

His eyes flicked to my lips, and I could feel my resolve crumbling beneath my feet. I bobbed forward. So did he. At the last moment, I shook my head and backed away. Nope. Not a line we were crossing, especially because I didn't think Jaxon actually cared about me that way. I couldn't risk it, him, us, my damn sanity, everything.

"We should get dressed." Per the norm, since we'd kissed, I grabbed my clothes and bolted into the bathroom.

We both got ready in silence, then headed toward the Alpha Claw Omega house that was in town, but it wasn't a long walk. The second we were in the nice fall air, Jaxon snagged my hand, our fingers interlacing quite naturally. He asked, "This okay?"

"Of course," I forced out.

I didn't understand why the touch of his skin felt so different now. It was like scales had been removed from my eyes, and now I was seeing all these little things in a different light. How was I going to recover from this? Could I even? He felt too perfect. It had to be because this was my first time, not because it was Jaxon, not because I could feel myself slipping

deeper into this burning, all-consuming feeling that didn't have a name but was growing like a weed under sunlight.

Hand-in-hand, we walked to town. It was just starting to get dark, and the air held just a tinge of fall, not nearly enough to make me shiver or wish I'd worn a different outfit. I was quite pleased with my skinny jeans and purple crop top. It helped that Jaxon had just gaped at my toned stomach for a full minute, his face an electric blue. I unfortunately liked that way too much.

When we got to the house, two frat guys I didn't know were collecting "donations" for booze, so I handed over some cash, then high-fived Caleb, the frat leader, who was at the door greeting people. We weren't late, by any means, but the music was already loud and drinks were flowing. A strong smell of weed filled the air. Laughter, loud voices, cheering from the beer pong table, and shouting from the people going down the stairs on sleds mixed with the music. I grinned, already feeling the urge to sway with the music.

Jaxon, on the other hand, squeezed my hand and moved half behind me. This was very much not his scene. Turning toward him, I said, "We should look for Aaron."

"What?" he shouted, and I barely heard him. A sasquatch came careening down the stairs on a metal sled and crashed into the wall. People laughed and clapped.

Letting go of his hand, I pulled Jaxon down so I could say into his pointed ear, "We should look for Aaron."

"Later," was all he said in return, linking his hand with mine once more.

Not able to say anything else that he could hear, I tugged him toward the people dancing. He pulled against my hold, but I didn't relent. Yes, I knew he didn't dance, but I wanted to and wanted to do it with him. Besides, it was a good place to pretend we were dating and all that.

Pushing into a semi-free space, I hooked my hands behind his neck. Jaxon's lips were a flat line, and his brows were furrowed. I rubbed the nape of his neck, trying to calm him, but he didn't relax in the slightest. Going on my toes to shorten the distance, I said, "Dance with me."

"I can't."

"You can." I placed his hands on my hips and rocked against him.

He swallowed. I slid my leg between his and moved to the beat, and Jaxon... tried. He was graceful when he moved, something you wouldn't think for someone of his size, though ogres were used to their bulk, so it

made sense. Right now, though, he was far too tense to move in any way except robotically. Still, he tried. And it didn't matter that he wasn't good at it. I was smiling from ear to ear, my dick was half-hard, and my heart was racing.

I didn't care where Aaron was. I didn't care what anyone thought. I didn't care about the plan. Right now, all I wanted to do was dance with Jaxon. The music slowed just slightly, enough for me to justify wrapping my arms as far as I could around him and resting my cheek on his chest. Jaxon pulled me closer and pressed a firm kiss on the top of my head. The tender movement made something inside of me crack and solidify at the same time.

"You came," someone shouted as they slapped our backs.

I barely had a chance to breathe before I was whipped behind Jaxon. I blinked, and I wasn't the only one. All the couples beside us were gaping. Jaxon wasn't really one to stick out or make a fuss. But he certainly was now. The only one who wasn't fazed was Aaron. He was shaking his head and grinning.

Instead of saying anything about the whole protective-sweep-thing that made me want to swoon like some Regency heroine, I simply grabbed Jaxon's hand and pulled him away from the dance. Aaron was right behind us. We moved to the kegs, and someone handed us cups filled with beer before I could refuse mine. Thankfully, Jaxon took it from me and basically punched it into Aaron's chest.

"Chris is sober," Jaxon growled.

"Cool," Aaron replied, taking a sip of his beer. "I'm glad you made it."

"Me too," I said.

"Well, have fun, and I'll catch you later." Aaron wandered off.

"You didn't talk to him," I hissed.

He shrugged. "So?"

I sighed, pinching the bridge of my nose. "Jaxon, Jaxon, Jaxon. Like I said—"

"These things don't just happen. You make them happen."

"Yeah." He had been listening.

Jaxon snagged my hand. "I am."

"How?" He'd literally just let Aaron walk away. What exactly was he doing? I wasn't sure about this new plan of his, especially because he wouldn't loop me in.

“I just am.” Jaxon looked around. “You want to leave?”

“Already?” We hadn’t talked to anyone. We hadn’t even looked around much. Craning my neck around, I spotted Peter, a gnome, who was dancing with a fairy that I didn’t know. Clearly, I needed to be introduced and get the skinny on the tall, lovely fairy. Or Mort, one of our resident celebrities. What was he doing? Had the Alpha Claw Omega squared everything with their charter being threatened? Or the orc who was giggling, who was he? And was that fucking Tate kissing the devil, Luc? This place was a research and connections gold mine.

“Yeah.”

“I guess.” I couldn’t believe those words came out of my lips. But... I guessed I did have homework that I needed to do. Besides, we could spend more time alone, which I liked the sound of. He pulled me through the crowd and out the door, all while I followed, smiling.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

Jaxon

I sat in the stands on Tuesday morning, skipping one of my classes—something I almost never did. Today was one of Chris's first home games of the season. None of the other ones had been on campus, so I hadn't gone. I supposed I could've, as none had been overnight games. Maybe I should have. However, Chris hadn't acted upset.

But I was here today, watching him. I'd tried to learn some of the rules, and it hadn't gone well. I had basically just stared at the screen, utterly confused. Sports didn't make sense. At all. No matter how long I read and tried to learn, nothing had stuck. Perhaps I should've looked for a tutor.

Currently, Chris was sitting on the bench, watching from the sidelines. From here, I could see the tension in his body as he followed the play. He would tense and react as people moved. Cheering and jumping up when our team scored. Shouting when the other team did.

I hadn't truly watched soccer before this moment, but I'd assumed it was slow like football or baseball—it wasn't. At all.

The ball traveled from one end of the pitch to the other faster than I would've guessed possible. It was hard to follow what was going on because everything happened so fast. I was struggling to keep up.

From what little I'd gleaned, our team was decently good. I thought. Perhaps. Honestly, I truly didn't know. However, Aaron was a phenomenal goalie and blocked the ball more times than he let it through. The other team was winning, though. Their team consisted solely of monsters,

whereas ours was evenly mixed with monsters and humans—something I'd gathered was unique about Creelin U.

I wiped the sweat from my forehead and took a drink from the water bottle I'd brought—glass and reusable, of course. It was hot, and I wasn't a fan of the sun, the morning, or sports. Why couldn't this be inside or at night? I shook my head. I had to really like Chris to put myself through this torture. And not only was I here, I was also wearing a shirt painted with his number on the back.

I'd tried to order the correct numbered shirt from Tengu, but I couldn't find it, so I'd just painted his number on the back of one of my shirts. I'd also made a glittery sign with the school colors saying "Go, Team!" I felt like an idiot, but I truly hoped Chris liked the effort and could see that I was trying to woo him.

The ref blew their whistle, and Chris shouted along with everyone else when a flag was thrown. I assumed it meant something bad—a foul, though I couldn't even guess what that might be—and booed along with all the other Creelin U students watching.

Sam, who sat on one side of me, started hissing and screaming obscenities as she jumped up and down. Carter, who was on my other side, boxing me in, was much calmer, but he'd crossed his arms and was glaring murder at the ref, like he was plotting their murder.

Once the ball was in play again, Carter said, "I'm glad you came today."

Sam piped up before I could respond, "It's funner with you here."

"I didn't realize you both came to support Chris." I'd never gone to one of his games before, and he'd never asked after I'd turned him down the first time last year. Now I felt bad. Chris always supported me with my company, talking to people, and just in general, and I'd never made an effort to come before because it wasn't my thing.

"Of course," they both said at the same time in the exact same tone that said they couldn't believe I thought they'd miss their brother's games.

"You look nice in his number." Sam poked my side, grinning.

"Very couple-y," Carter added.

I swallowed. I didn't know how much Chris had told them—we hadn't talked about it—so I just nodded.

"We know, by the way," Carter added, like he could read my mind. "About the fake dating plan."

“Stupid idea,” Samantha muttered before screaming at the ref about missing a foul.

“It was Chris’s idea.” I hadn’t liked it, but now, I was glad. It gave me an excuse to move closer and try to become more. So it really was working out. Hopefully.

Carter just watched me squirm for a few seconds before asking, “Are you using Chris to get Aaron?”

I glanced around, but no one was paying attention to us, not in the slightest. I took a deep breath and tried to figure out what to say, but nothing came out. Should I be honest with Carter and Sam? In some ways, it would certainly help me, because they were exceedingly close to Chris, and I was almost positive that they would help me. Or would they tell Chris before I was ready for him to find out?

Finally, I settled on something simple. “No.”

“No?” Carter asked, glancing at Sam, who wasn’t paying attention. The game had picked up, and she was screaming about the ref, the players, and how they should just listen to her if they wanted to win. I wasn’t even sure which team she was yelling at anymore. It probably didn’t matter.

“No,” I said firmly. I wasn’t using Chris to get Aaron, not anymore.

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Carter pursed his lips as he stared at me, his deep brown eyes stabbing into my soul. I couldn’t help but shift again under the weight of his gaze, and the metal bench squealed in protest.

“Alright, then.” He focused on the game.

I took a deep inhale and turned forward. While I was distracted, we’d closed the gap. The crowd was cheering, and the energy picked up, vibrating through the stands. I stood when Carter did, though he had to stand on the bench to see around the troll in front of us.

Time was ticking down, and we were close, so close to winning. I clapped and cheered along with everyone else. My heart was hammering,

and sweat dampened my palms as I watched the ball move in almost slow motion. Our players passed it back and forth before one player shot it at the other team's goal. It curved around the skinny goblin and crashed into the net.

Silence lasted only a second before our stand erupted in triumphant screams. We'd won. Chris got another chance to play.

"Okay," I shouted over the crowd, "this is fun." I might not really understand, but it was still enjoyable to watch and support my school team.

Carter beamed. "Yeah, it is." He clapped my arm. "Let's go find your boyfriend."

My cheeks warmed at the word, but I couldn't stop the smile that spread across my face. I tugged on my shirt again, nervous about Chris seeing it. Also, I was sweating. It was hot. I didn't really want to see Chris when I was drenched, but I didn't want him to think I hadn't come.

The three of us wound our way out of the stands and headed toward the locker rooms. Apparently, Carter and Sam always met Chris afterward to celebrate or commiserate with the team. Before we got there, something crashed into me, something very familiar.

"You came," Chris cried as he squeezed me.

The musky scent of his sweat tickled my nose, and the brush of his sun-warmed skin sent my pulse skittering. I nodded, trying not to duck my head. "I did."

"And he's wearing your number," Sam said, grinning, her eyes twinkling in mischief.

Chris instantly turned me around, and I didn't resist. His hands trailed over my sweaty back. An odd tone filled his voice when he said, "You are."

"I am."

He gripped the back of my shirt in tight fists before forcing me back around. Chris didn't even hesitate as he reached for my cheeks, yanking my face down and claiming my lips. I started; I hadn't been expecting that. Not at all.

I returned the kiss before he could misunderstand and pull away. My arms slipped around his waist and drew him against me, needing him as close as possible. After a moment, Chris backed away, but I chased him, not ready for this to be over, and deepened the kiss.

When the tip of my tongue brushed his lips, he moaned, opening for me. I claimed his mouth with strong thrusts. Chris panted and moaned against

me. He returned every brush, lick, twist, and nip while adding some of his own. Everything inside of me screamed to keep him as close as possible and to never end this kiss. I lifted Chris so I didn't have to bend over, and he didn't protest, hooking his arms around my neck, fisting my hair, and wrapping his legs around me.

"Oh, eww," Samantha shouted. "My eyes are burning. Seriously, get a fucking room. No one wants to see this."

Chris pulled away, his face red and his eyes clouded. He turned toward his sister and said, "If you don't like it, don't look."

I laughed, making Chris smile at me. He ran a finger over my face, then poked my cheek. His voice a whisper, he pressed his lips to my ear and said, "I like when you smile. It makes me almost feral."

Swallowing the sudden arousal flooding me, I replied, "Same."

"Kim," Coach Braxton shouted. "Dismount your boyfriend and move your ass."

Chris unhooked his legs with a sigh, and I let him slide down my body. He gave me one last squeeze, then raced off.

Carter and Sam both smirked at me, and I ducked my head. Carter linked my arm with his, leading us toward the locker room. "I'm glad you're not using Chris."

Sam chuckled. "At least not to get Aaron, but Jaxon definitely wants to use him for something. Something nasty."

The siblings high-fived, laughing, and I rolled my eyes, but heat seeped into my cheeks. Yeah, they knew about my crush, and I had to hope they wouldn't tell Chris. He wasn't ready. But I hoped that kiss meant he was closer to wanting me in return.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

CHRISTOPHER

My foot tapped all the way through Coach talking, and none of his words penetrated my skull. As soon as he was done, I bolted off the bench and into the showers to take the quickest one of my life. I was drying off when Aaron, only wearing a towel, asked, “You coming tonight?”

We always celebrated wins or bemoaned losses, usually by drinking. Well, they drank, and I watched their antics. “Um,” I stalled. The party wasn’t mandatory, but it certainly was frowned upon to miss. But... “Maybe,” I finally settled on.

A small smile quirked on Aaron’s lips. “You can bring Jaxon.”

My expression instantly hardened. Aaron would like that, wouldn’t he? Me bringing Jaxon. Making Jaxon talk to him. And I should. I’d promised to help Jaxon. I’d told myself this feeling, this crush, would pass. That we were just friends. And yet, something deep inside of me didn’t want to bring Jaxon around Aaron.

“We’ll see,” was all I said.

I darted out of the locker room without a backward glance and saw Jaxon huddling near the wall just outside. Without thinking about it, I launched myself at him, and he caught me with ease, his arms surrounding me and pulling me firmly against his solid chest. I curled my arms around his neck and buried my face against him.

“Good job on the win,” he whispered, then kissed the top of my head.

“I didn’t do anything.” Like always, I’d sat on the bench. I was working hard, though. Perhaps this spring or next year, I would be a starter. I wasn’t good enough to go pro, so this was my one chance to play on some level. I craved it so bad I could almost taste it.

“You’re part of the team, which means it’s your win too.”

“Thanks, big guy.” I might not say it, but his words meant so much to me, just like his presence here. Jaxon had never come before, and seeing him on the pitch, wearing my number... It was hard to put into words how amazing it felt. But it was like everything in my world was finally in the right place. We were all where we belonged.

Without putting me down, Jaxon turned around and headed toward the dorms, and I didn’t fight him, simply hooked my legs around his waist. What was the point of dating someone so much bigger than me if I couldn’t be carried around? Not that we were dating. Not really. Fake dating. I squeezed him all the tighter, refusing to acknowledge how much I hated the sound of that.

“So we’re chopped liver now? All these years of support for this bullshit?” Sam called from behind me, and I flipped her the bird, not even looking. She shouted, “Asshole.”

If the shoe fit, then I was going to fucking wear it like a badass bitch. I didn’t care if I was an ass right now. I wanted to be alone with Jaxon. Besides, I had class later. It wasn’t like I had all day to just chill with him, so I needed to seize the time I did have.



After the game, Jaxon bought me coffee, and we just talked about nothing important before we both had to go to class. All through class, I struggled to pay attention, not anything new, but this time was worse than normal. I just wanted Jaxon right beside me, holding my hand, silently supporting me, or just being his normal steady presence. But we didn’t share any classes today, which sucked.

Now, though, I was heading to the cafeteria where I would meet Jaxon. Sure, Carter and Sam would probably be there, and whoever else they brought along—there was often someone new with them—but I would still

be with Jaxon. I'd missed him. Only because we were best friends. No other reason. None. Not for this crush that I was clearly getting over for damn sure.

It was easy to spot Jaxon; he was one of the tallest students here. He was sitting with Carter, Sam, and Penelope. I hadn't seen Penelope this year—we had very different classes, as she was on track to be a teacher. Her warm ochre skin looked even richer against the orange of her sundress, and her black hair was a lovely afro. I'd had a crush on her in high school. She was so nice, cool, and smart—it had been impossible not to like her. But she hadn't liked me as more than a friend, which was for the best. We were much better as friends.

I slid into the chair beside Jaxon, and he grinned at me. I said, my voice rather tight with emotions crowding it, "Hey."

"Hey, babe." Jaxon snagged my hand, like it was normal, like it was nothing. Maybe it was nothing to him. I mean, we did hold hands a lot—this wasn't new—though this wasn't the same. Of course, I was the only one with a... Nope. Not a crush. Not anything. I was basically over it.

"Penelope," I cried, giving her a huge smile. "Where have you been?"

"Here at school. Where else?" She smirked. "I think you've been too busy to socialize."

"Me? Never."

"Right." Penelope blatantly looked at mine and Jaxon's interlaced fingers that were resting on the table. "*Nothing* has changed that's kept you busier than usual."

"So you heard," I commented.

"Jaxon just told me. Well, Carter actually said the words, but Jaxon nodded in agreement."

I glanced at Jaxon, and he just met my gaze with an unreadable expression. I hated that I didn't know what he was feeling. I was unused to it. He was like a book, one I was very fond of rereading, and I didn't like that he'd been so mysterious lately. All I said was, "Cool."

"It makes sense," she remarked with a shrug, leaning back to cross her long legs. "I think everyone was waiting for it last year. I figured you would be one of the many human/monster couples, but it seemed to take you a minute to get your shit together."

"I guess." Why was everyone saying that?

"You *are* a player," Penelope continued, and I winced. That fucking lie.

Both Carter and Sam shook their heads as they gave me identical expressions: narrowed eyes and pursed lips. I cocked my eyebrow in response. Yeah, they didn't need to say it. I knew already. I shouldn't have lied. Blah blah blah. Siblings. You'd take a bullet for them... but you also wanted to chuck them off a cliff at the same time.

"Not anymore," Jaxon said. His voice was quiet, barely more than a whisper, as he didn't usually talk in front of Penelope, but it was utterly firm. "He's mine now."

I swallowed, hoping to the monster god that my heart wasn't in my eyes as I stared at him. My crush was right back to full throttle. Damn him.

"I can see that," Penelope replied, grinning and showing off her tooth gap that made her even prettier.

"Yeah." I cleared my throat. I needed to move this conversation along, or I was going to break down. I was either going to spiral into panic about thinking what would happen if Jaxon found out about my feelings and left me, or I was going to freak out about that lie that was holding me in a stranglehold. "I'm starving. Let's get food."

Jaxon didn't need any prompting to stand and drag me toward the buffet. I sadly only got salad—dressing-free—chicken breast, and broccoli, while Jaxon loaded up on French frights and vegan Grendel cheese sandwiches. Thankfully, when we returned to the table, the conversation had moved on. They were talking about classes, teachers, homework, the usual. I nodded along while picking at my dinner. I only snuck a couple of frights from Jaxon, who grinned.

By the time dinner was done, I was flagging. I was a morning person. I didn't do late nights. And I was already wanting to sleep, but I needed to do some homework first. On the walk back to the dorm, Jaxon held my hand, as was becoming the norm. The sky was slowly growing dark, and the stars had begun to peek out from their hiding places.

"Are you going to the party tonight?" Jaxon asked.

I mmm'd. I honestly didn't know. I didn't want to. We had class first thing in the morning, and I had to work out, not to mention do Jaxon's hair. Also, I really didn't want to spend time with my team, even though I liked them.

"Is that a yes?"

"It's an 'I don't know.'" I sighed, looking over at him. "Would you come with me?"

His expression flattened out. "If you want me to."

If that wasn't a non-answer, I didn't know what was. "I don't really want to go. I'm tired."

"Then let's not."

A warmth bloomed in my gut and made me squirm a bit. Jaxon had assumed that we were an "us," which... Well, it did things to me that I refused to acknowledge, because it was a huge NOPE.

When we stepped into the room, I flopped onto the ground and starfished out. I groaned. Silence. Peace. Safety. Jaxon chuckled, but he stepped around me with ease, no doubt too used to me doing this.

"Did you want to work on our paper?" Jaxon asked, settling at his desk.

"Not really." This horrid paper. Nothing screamed an introductory English class more than a paper on a play.

"How about reading the play?"

I'd read *Hamlet* before. I'd read all of Shakespeare's plays. In high school, I'd gone through an I'm-so-cool-and-artsy phase that made me read a ton of classic British literature—I'd hated basically all of it, though Jane Austen's works and *Bleak House* by Dickens had been fairly interesting. I peeled open one of my eyes and suggested, "How about we watch a rendition of *Hamlet* tonight?"

"Okay," Jaxon said with a shrug.

I sat up with a groan. "Kenneth Branagh's version is probably the most accurate."

"How do you know that?"

I flushed. Yeah, I'd watched a shit ton of different remakes during that cool artsy phase, not that I was going to admit that to Jaxon. Gods, freshman year of high school had been the worst.

I grabbed my laptop and pushed Jaxon toward his bed. He settled back with his legs open. I blushed even harder at realizing we were going to have to cuddle. Well, we didn't *have* to, but we sure as hell were going to. Jaxon set my laptop aside and pulled me down between his legs, then wrapped his arms securely around my waist, keeping me there.

"You okay?" Jaxon asked.

"Yep," I squeaked as I leaned into his embrace. This was probably going to be the best watching of *Hamlet* ever.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Jaxon

“Carter, I need your help,” I said as I sidled up to him outside the library. Never before had I felt like the gargoyles adorning the gothic building were looking at me as much as I did now. Some of them weren’t even alive, but it was as if all of them were staring at me. This might be a bad idea, but I couldn’t *not* do something after Christopher had said something.

Carter readjusted his bag, then took a sip of his coffee. “What do you need?”

I took a deep breath. “Chris mentioned that your parents were going to South Korea for Chuseok.”

“Yeah. They go every year.”

“Well, he seemed upset.”

“Not shocking. We all hate missing the celebration, not to mention seeing our family.” He moaned. “Gods, I want some songpyeon right now.”

“Those are good,” I commented. We’d found some at a Korean market last summer, and Chris had demanded I try them, not that it took much convincing.

“Anyway,” Carter said with a shake of his head. “What about Chuseok?”

“I was thinking we could celebrate it here.”

He stared at me for a moment. “Like the Chuseok that is technically on Friday? This Friday?”

“Is there another one?”

“Nope, so you mean Friday. Cool. Cool. Cool. That’s not rushed at all. Do you know anything about Chuseok?”

“Not really. It’s like Thanksgiving, right?”

“In the barest sense that it’s a harvest festival and focused on family,” Carter replied. He moved toward the grass and plopped down beside a tree, then waved a hand next to him. I quickly sat down near him. “Look, I don’t think it’s a bad idea. I really don’t.”

I smiled. Thank the monster god.

“But,” he said before I could get truly excited, “I think one, you need to learn more about the holiday so you fucking know what you’re doing, and two, you need to keep your expectations low. Very low. This”—he waved around—“is never going to be like going to my grandparents in South Korea and seeing all our cousins and aunts and uncles.”

My shoulders hunched up.

He rested a hand on my arm. “It’s not a bad idea, Jaxon, and I’m sure Chris will love it. But yeah, it won’t be the same. However, saying that, it doesn’t mean we can’t have fun here, okay? Chuseok is about family and honoring those who came before us. We might not all be blood-related, but you and our friends are all family.”

“So you’ll help me?”

“Of course, man.” Carter laughed. “Samantha will too.” He looked around like someone was spying on us and bent forward. “Never tell her I told you, because she says she won’t be relegated to the kitchen just because she has a vagina, but Sam is an amazing cook. I could probably bribe her to make food. We’d have to help, of course.”

“Of course.” I would do whatever I could to help. I didn’t want this all to fall on Carter and Samantha. Besides, I wanted to make this special for Chris. I wanted to show him I was listening and that I cared. I also made a mental note to read some blogs and watch some videos on Chuseok. Carter was right; I needed to educate myself on it.

“Also, we need to figure out who to invite,” he said.

I paused. “Is that something you can do?” The thought of having to actually speak to people almost made me not want to do this.

“You’ll need to help.” He chuckled. “But yeah, I can take care of actually inviting people.” He pursed his lips. “Tate will have to come. Oh, and that transfer student Luc. He *has* to come. Seth for sure. Maybe Aaron.” The

longer Carter mused out loud, the more my stomach clenched. This was going to be a rather large get-together.

“Maybe we should hold it outside?” I offered.

He nodded. “Probably a good idea. Your room is way too small for this.”

I was coming to see that.

“Chuseok takes place over three days, but it’s actually on Friday. I think we will just have to stick to celebrating the one day.”

Yeah, we couldn’t hold a three-day party. As Carter had said, this wasn’t going to be the same as celebrating with his family, but I was determined to make it the best that I could for Chris. He deserved it.



“So Chuseok is really old,” I said as Sam threw even more stuff into the cart. At this point, I was no longer keeping tally on the cost. Chuseok was about abundance, like most harvest celebrations, and I wasn’t about to be miserly. Thank the monster god my parents gave me a healthy allowance.

Sam snorted. “Yep. Korea’s old.”

The last few days I had been doing research on the holiday, and yeah, it was old, old. Like over two thousand years old, though, if I recalled correctly, it had only been a formally established holiday for six hundred some years. It was mind-boggling to my American self.

When she chucked even more stuff into the cart, I dutifully ignored the growing pile while steering the full cart around the small market. Sam had found an Asian market about an hour away, and we’d made the trip. Well, after she’d begged to borrow Carter’s car. He’d been terrified of something happening to his “baby,” but in the end, he’d let her take it.

“So where’d you learn to cook?” I asked.

She shot me a withering glare. “You are going to help, right?”

“Of course.” I truly was. “I was just curious.”

After a few moments of silence, she replied, “My grandmother. I spent a lot of time with her when I was younger, and she taught me to cook. Neither my dad nor mom are much for cooking, so I really wanted to learn and she taught me.”

“That’s cool.”

“Yeah.”

“What are you—we,” I amended when she glared at me, “making?”

“Don’t worry, there will be vegan recipes for you. I follow this awesome vegan Korean chef, and I’ll make sure you can eat plenty.”

A warmth swelled in my chest. I hadn’t even thought about that. It meant a lot to me that Samantha had considered my diet without me having to mention it. “Thanks.”

She shrugged. “It’s not a big deal.”

It might seem like nothing to her, but it was to me. Clearing my throat, I asked, “So food?”

“Right. Songpyeon, of course.”

A Chuseok staple. Made sense.

“Bulgogi, beef and tofu, japchae, pickled radish, gimbap, different types of jeon, namul, and kimchi. Oh, and rice, obviously. I wanted to make a stew, but I didn’t think with us eating outside that would be feasible.” She glanced at me. “Was there anything in particular you wanted?”

“No, whatever you want is good.”

“Okay, then.”

I trailed unseeing behind Sam as she shopped. I wanted to do everything that I could to make this the best Chuseok possible. I knew from my research that Koreans honored their ancestors during this holiday by going to clean their graves and offering food to them at the gravesite and at home. We couldn’t go to any of our relatives’ graves, obviously, but maybe we could make a table for them.

“What do you think about having a table for our ancestors?” I asked randomly.

Sam turned and went down a different aisle. “You want ritual food for the ancestors?”

“Uh, yes.”

“We can do that. We should get some more pears and apples. Maybe a couple persimmons. There’s a certain layout for where you put the food. I can’t remember it off the top of my head, but I can call my grandma. She’ll know.”

“That would be awesome.”

“Not a problem,” she said.

I paused, catching her eye. “I really appreciate it.”

Meeting my gaze, Sam's expression hardened. "Just don't hurt Chris, okay?"

"I won't."

"Good."

As we stood in the checkout line, I asked, "Where are we going to cook all this?" I really should've thought of that before I embarked on this shopping venture. My eyes flicked to the register, and I winced. Very expensive shopping venture.

"Don't worry about it."

Uh, that was easier said than done. I was very worried about it.

Some of that must have bled through to my expression because she said, "I'm friends with a local."

That didn't surprise me. It seemed that the Kim siblings were friends with everyone.



"Hey, Babs," Samantha said, greeting the woman with a hug.

I blinked. So Sam's friend was a woman in her eighties at least with bright pink curly hair, ghostly wrinkled skin, and deep brown eyes. She was short, barely five feet, and wearing a bold-patterned kaftan. Not what I'd be expecting.

"Sam, my girl." Babs cupped Sam's cheeks, grinning broadly.

"Appreciate you loaning me your kitchen and storing all this stuff until Friday."

"Not a problem at all." Babs glanced in my direction. "Who'd you bring?"

"Babs meet my brother's boyfriend Jaxon. Jaxon, Babs."

I waved, my cheeks flushing.

"Nice to meet you."

I waved again; my throat was too strangled to speak. I wanted to. I really did.

"He doesn't talk much," Sam said to Babs, then turned toward me. "Help me carry all this in."

We (mostly me) hauled in all of the groceries and put them away before Sam hugged Babs goodbye. We then went back to Creelin U. I was more than ready to see Chris, and maybe we could cuddle while watching another Hamlet movie.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Jaxon

I'd never thought Friday would come. All week, Chris had been a bit quieter than usual, not even arguing with Shianne when she'd brought up Romeo and Juliet being the greatest romance play in history. He didn't seem upset with me or anyone—more pensive than anything. I'd caught him sitting with headphones on and staring into space more often than not. I was fairly certain that he was stressed about something, but he hadn't shared as of yet and I didn't want to push him.

Also, I'd been busy too, inviting people with Carter, doing prep work with Sam, and trying to keep up with my homework. I'd been basically running around campus more than I'd been in my room. I hated it. However, it was for a good reason. But when Friday evening rolled around, I was exhausted. I'd spent the time around class cooking with Sam and Carter. And Babs. She'd pitched in, even though she'd refused to come when Carter had invited her.

Now it was time to lead Chris to the place we'd secured by the river and hope he liked the surprise that we'd put together. Not that people would yell surprise like a birthday party. Besides Carter and Sam, no one knew that Chris had zero idea this was happening on Friday—evidence of how out of it he'd been this week.

I walked into our room, and Chris was lying face down on the carpet. I smiled. It was so unsanitary, but he insisted on doing it. I had zero idea why.

It was just him. I found it endearing. Without thinking about it, I grabbed him about the waist, making him squawk, and set him on his bed.

“Jaxon.” His bottom lip went out. “Where were you all day?”

Monster god, he was so cute when he pouted. I pushed the black strands of hair that hung in front of his face behind his rather round ears. “I was doing something.”

“Obviously.”

My smile softened as I gently trailed my fingertip over the shell of his ear. Chris shivered, and his teeth sank into his plump bottom lip. In a whisper, he asked, “Why does that feel so good?”

My head cocked. Many people liked their ears touched. Maybe Chris’s previous lovers—*ugh*, I hated thinking about them, though that was hardly fair—had never played with his adorable ears. I asked, even though I knew the answer, “You like it?”

He nodded, chewing on his lower lip.

Carefully, I massaged his earlobe, and Chris swallowed, the knot in his throat bobbing in such a distracting way that it took all my power not to mash my mouth to his. Having him react to me like this was so hot. We weren’t even doing much of anything, but I’d never been this into someone before. Of course, no one had been Chris. No one had ever looked so much like mine before.

“I have a surprise for you,” I said eventually.

Chris leaned into my hand, his eyes falling closed. “You do?”

“Yep.”

“What is it?”

“You’ll have to come and see.”

“I have to leave the room?” he asked with a loud sigh.

I chuckled. “Yes.”

“Fine.”

He pulled away from me and stood, but the moment he was on his feet, he snagged my hand, holding it with both of his. The way he seemingly wanted to touch me as much as I did him soothed the worries I held. Hope continued to burn within my chest. Christopher would like me as much as I did him, one day. He had to.

“Come on.” I led him out of the room, through the campus, and toward the river.

“Are we actually going to a bonfire party? Of your own free will?”

Laughing, I said, “Nope. Guess again.”

Chris swerved in front of me, walking backward, though he didn’t release my hand. “Is this a game?”

“Do you want it to be one?”

“No, I just want you to tell me.”

“And ruin the surprise? I don’t think so.”

“Jaxon.” He yanked on my hand.

“We’re almost there.”

He moved so fast to face forward that he tripped over his own feet. I stabilized him before he could fall to the ground and get hurt. Chris froze at the sight that greeted him.

Lights were strung between the surrounding trees. Three tables with mismatched tablecloths weren’t far from the gurgling river where the lagoon monster Blake chilled. About twenty people milled around, chatting, drinking, laughing. Tate was chatting with Peter while Luc looked on. The devil seemed to be glaring at Peter, but I didn’t know him well enough to say for certain. Teagan was smiling tensely as Evander chatted his ear off and Sam nodded at what the football player was saying, then made a comment, waving her hands. Aaron and Caleb were talking, or rather laughing about something.

Carter and some human I didn’t know (he’d probably picked up a stray somewhere) were near the table covered in food. They were serving, and everyone had real plates. Yes, it would be a bitch to clean all of the dishes, but nothing disposable. So much better for the environment.

Off to the side was an ancestors’ table with food laid out on it. Incense burned in a burner, filling the air with a light scent.

“What is this?” Chris asked slowly as he looked around the gathering.

“Chuseok, or well, as best as I could put together,” I replied, blushing.

“You...” He faced me. “You did this for me?”

“Well, with Carter and Sam’s help. But yeah. You just sounded so sad about your parents going to South Korea without you. I wanted to do something for you.”

A strangled noise sounded in the back of his throat before he hurled himself at me. I caught him and lifted him into my arms; he basically weighed nothing at all. Chris wrapped his arms around my neck and pressed his lips to mine. I groaned. His lips moved frantically, sloppily over mine. With my hand planted on his ass, I hauled him even closer to me. My

tongue teased his lips, and Chris gasped. I took advantage and licked into his mouth, plundering him.

After a minute, Chris yanked back, his chest heaving. My breathing wasn't any better. Gripping the hair at the nape of my neck, he asked, his voice thick, "How can I thank you for this?"

"You don't need to. I would do anything for you."

An attractive flush bloomed on his cheeks. "I would do anything for you."

"I know." I kissed the tip of his nose.

"Still, thank you, big guy. This..." He looked around. "This is one of the sweetest things that anyone has ever done for me."

I brushed a thumb over his cheek. "I don't like you sad, and I'm just glad I could do something."

"This is amazing."

"I'm so glad you think so."

"Did Sam cook?"

I nodded. "Carter and I did help."

"Oh, I'm sure she put you both to work."

"Also," I said, "an older woman named Babs helped. She's apparently a friend of Sam's."

Chris nodded like that made sense, and I supposed it did.

"Is that Teagan Dae?"

"Carter made sure to invite him," I replied. "He had to pressure Sam for his phone number. It was a whole thing."

Chris hopped down and pulled on my hand. "Come on. I need to meet him. I can't let Sam hog him."

I followed Chris without hesitation.

He wasted no time introducing himself to Teagan, who was quite nice. I made sure to keep my fingers entwined with Chris's so Teagan wouldn't get any ideas, not that he seemed interested. Chris didn't notice my firm hold, but Sam caught my gaze, then rolled her eyes. I just frowned at her.

Chris, however, couldn't get many words in, as the conversation was soon dominated by Evander, who instantly began to talk sports. Whether it was football or soccer or some other sport entirely, I didn't get it. I swore the words entered one ear, swirled around a bit, then flew out the other. When Sam joined the conversation, Teagan bowed out with no one but me the wiser.

After several minutes, I managed to drag Chris away from the sports talk and toward the table so he could get something to eat. He snagged a plate with one hand and gripped my fingers with the other. “Ooh bulgogi. I love bulgogi. And jeon. Ooh, and pickled radish.”

I smiled at his enthusiasm. “Is there anything that you don’t like?”

“On this table? Nope. I want it all, Carter,” he demanded.

His older brother rolled his eyes. “Sure. You and everyone else.”

While Carter dished up Chris’s plate, he told his companion, “Only vegan options for Jaxon.”

I gave Carter a warm smile, thankful I hadn’t been forced to say something. Chris was far too distracted by the food to speak for me, and I didn’t mind. His joy was a tangible thing. It radiated off him, warming up the fall evening. As we moved to one of the tables, I couldn’t help but stare at his smile, his bright expression, at him being him.

People took the seats next to us and conversation flowed. But all of it might as well have been white noise for the amount I paid attention to. No, all I could see or hear was Chris. He seemed to consume every ounce of my focus. All night, I watched him talk with people, laugh, eat, drink, and just be happy. Every movement, laugh, and word filled my soul to the brim and drew me in. I couldn’t look away from him. Chris was all I saw. He was all I wanted to see for the rest of my life.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

CHRISTOPHER

I was still riding the high of Jaxon planning a Chuseok celebration for me through the end of September and the beginning of October. Fall finally seemed to be settling in at the school. The air was growing cooler, especially for my Californian self. People were fully settled into classes. Our Hamlet paper was going as well as it could, as were my other classes. I was still working hard, trying to improve my game. Jaxon, though, had expressed his worries about me working out too much, but I was sure I was fine.

Well, not right at this second. I was in the health center. Dr. Lee was frowning at me. He was a silver daddy if I'd ever seen one. He was in his fifties, but oh, daddy, he was hot. I didn't normally go for older guys, but I definitely saw the appeal when I looked at him. Not that I was interested in Doctor Maverick Lee. Unfortunately, my crush, which I was refusing to acknowledge, on Jaxon was still burning strong.

"Did you seriously go for a run after your team workout?" he asked—more like demanded.

"I usually do," I confessed.

He frowned, and I sat up taller. Dr. Lee gently flexed my ankle, and I flinched. I'd stepped funny towards the end of my run and had fallen. Besides some scrapes and bruises, I was mostly fine. It was my ankle. It wasn't happy. At all. I was really hoping I hadn't done something serious to it.

What if I had? What if I couldn't play? Gods, what was I doing with my future?

Cold, harsh panic swamped me. My pulse skyrocketed, and sweat gathered on my palms. I brushed my hands over my thighs as I tried to breathe through the sensation, to push it away, but it didn't want to go. All I could think about was what my life would look like after college. No soccer. No classes. No career, because what the fuck did I want to do anyway. No Jaxon. No. No. NO! I couldn't have that.

A sudden clap on the back of my neck made me groan. The hand forced my head between my knees. "Breathe, Chris. In through your nose, out through your mouth."

My lungs flailed in my chest.

"Come on," he said in a kind, yet stern voice. "In through your nose, and out through your mouth. Nice and slow."

I followed his direction, focusing on his calming hand and deep voice. Once the world stopped spinning and the white noise left my ears, I gently sat up. I looked up at Dr. Lee, fighting a blush. I couldn't believe I had freaked out in front of him. Seriously, I needed to stop thinking about the future.

He crossed his arms, and his eyebrows drew together. "You want to tell me what that was?"

"Not really."

He sighed and sat down. "Anything you say here is completely private."

I rubbed the back of my neck, not meeting his eye.

"You can tell me anything."

"I'm fine," I lied, but I didn't want to talk about it.

Dr. Lee stared at me for a moment, then lifted his hands. "Fine. But know I'm here if you need to talk."

"What's wrong with my ankle?" I asked, changing the subject.

"Just bruised. Rest. Actual rest," he said firmly as he began wrapping it. "Elevate, ice. You should be okay in a couple of days."

"So the usual." I was an athlete. I knew the RICE method.

He grunted. After he finished, he asked, "Do you have someone who can help you to your dorm, or should I walk you?"

I could obviously call Carter or Samantha, but I didn't really want to worry them. Also, knowing Carter, he would lecture me. There really

wasn't a choice in who'd I call anyway. Jaxon. I nodded at the doctor. "Yeah, I have someone."

"Alright."

I shot Jaxon a quick text, and he responded less than a minute later that he was on his way. "He's coming," I told Dr. Lee.

He nodded and went about his business in the health center. I'd almost expected him to prod me about my freak out, but he didn't, which relieved me and made me oddly sad. It was almost as if I wanted him to pester me, so I had to tell him, not that I wanted to. No. I just needed to keep this shit bottled up, and everything would be fine.

The door opened, and Jaxon stood there, breathing hard as if he'd been running. "Baby," he said, rushing toward me. "Are you okay?"

I nodded. "Just bruised my ankle."

"He needs to rest," Dr. Lee said, not bothering to look up from the file he was reading.

"I will make sure he does, sir." Jaxon drew me into his arms, and I flushed as he picked me up. I should be used to it by now. I loved when he carted me around, but for some reason, with the hot doctor staring at us, Jaxon taking care of me when I was hurt, and me coming off a panic session, I was oddly embarrassed. "Come on, babe. Let's get back to the room."

Thankfully, it was Saturday, so no classes, but the campus was busy, and we received several looks and whistles as Jaxon carried me. He paid no attention to any of them, just holding me close in his arms, whereas I flipped people off or told them to fuck off while I hugged him.

When we got back to our dorm room, Jaxon placed me on his bed, then shoved a pillow under my ankle. "Don't move," he ordered. "I will get you some food."

"And coffee?" I pushed my bottom lip out.

Jaxon ran his fingers through my hair. "And coffee. Just stay here."

"I can do that." When he left, all I did was watch the door. I was trying not to think of anything. Also, I missed Jaxon when he was gone. It was getting bad, this feeling. I shouldn't feel this way. I needed Jaxon to just stay my friend, but I couldn't seem to help it.

It didn't take too long for Jaxon to reappear with food and coffee. He settled on the bed beside me, and we both ignored the ominous creaking. "Thanks," I told him before taking a long drink of my coffee.

“Thank me by working out less.”

“Jaxon,” I groaned.

“No, baby. You’re going to hurt yourself.”

I sighed and rested my head against his arm. “I will try. Alright?”

Jaxon kissed the top of my head. “I just care about you.”

I flushed.

“I don’t want you to get seriously hurt.”

“I will be careful. I promise.”

“Please do.”

We silently ate, then Jaxon snagged his laptop so we could work on our paper. But I found that as we worked, I was more focused on him than the paper. Hamlet had nothing on Jaxon.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

CHRISTOPHER

“A blood moon is coming,” Dean Yaga said to the assembly. She floated on her platform, looking at all of us students sitting in the auditorium. “It is something all of our monster students need to be aware of. There is information in the health center for you, and Dr. Lee is available if you have questions.”

I nodded along, not really paying attention, as Jaxon was sitting right next to me with his arm draped over my shoulders, holding me close. His fingers were slowly dragging over my bicep in a distracting manner. It was impossible for me to do anything besides focus on him. He had been so caring and protective since I’d hurt my ankle, and the injury had barely been anything. Such a small thing that had resolved itself rather quickly. However, he’d taken it so poorly, like I was deathly ill. Having Jaxon take care of me had been... Fuck, it had been magical. I’d loved it way more than I should have.

When the assembly ended, it was safe to say that I had barely heard anything. But Jaxon grabbed my hand and led me out.

Pressing a kiss to my hand, he asked, “I’ll see you after class?”

“Of course.”

Jaxon gave me one more kiss before he left, heading in the opposite direction to me. I watched him until he disappeared out of sight. Sighing, I readjusted my backpack and headed toward class. I couldn’t be late. I really

needed to keep my head on straight and focus on class. I couldn't let my grades slip. I needed to maintain my GPA to remain on the soccer team.

"Hey, Chris," Aaron said as he approached me.

I tensed. I didn't know what this "new" plan of Jaxon's was, but I was struggling to think about him and Aaron together. I needed to get over it. I forced a bright smile to my lips. "Hey, Aaron."

"I don't suppose you could get me more Bro-tein?"

I chuckled. What was I? His supplier? Still, I answered, "Yeah."

"I was talking to a couple of the guys on the baseball team, and they want some as well."

"Really?"

"Yeah. So do some of my frat brothers."

It seemed like it was taking off a bit, which was amazing for Jaxon. I might have to pursue this more with the various coaches. Maybe I could get them on board with buying Bro-tein for their players. That would be huge for Jaxon.

Aaron clapped my shoulder. "Thanks, man."

"Of course. Anything for Jaxon."

"You two seem really solid."

I should tell him no. Express doubts. Something to make Aaron think he had a chance. "Yeah, we are."

Apparently, my mouth wasn't on board with my fake dating plan.

"Cool," Aaron said, like he had zero opinion or care about it, like he was just making conversation. "Well, I'm off to class, man. Hit me up when you have the Bro-tein."

I watched him go for a second, then shook my head and walked to my class.



The day passed molasses-slow. By the time I was done, I was exhausted. Thankfully, I had a little bit of time before dinner, so I went back to my room and crashed on the floor. My thoughts just kept circling Jaxon and these feelings that refused to go away. I had messed up today with Aaron,

and yet I couldn't bring myself to regret it. Jaxon... I couldn't help but think that he didn't belong with Aaron, as nice as the other ogre was.

The door opened, and I glanced up to see Jaxon walk in, then I pressed my face into the carpet again. I wasn't quite sure why lying on the floor calmed me as much as it did. But fuck it all, sometimes being on the floor was the only thing that made me feel better.

"You alright?"

"Yeah."

"Tomorrow, do you want to go out for dinner?" Jaxon asked after a minute.

I glanced up. "What?"

He wasn't looking at me, instead staring at his feet. "Tomorrow. We should go out to dinner."

A ringing started in my ears as my stomach curled, then took off in a flutter of butterfly wings. "Why?" *Ohmygod is this a date? Is he asking me out?*

"We could work on our project."

My brow furrowed. I would think the library was a better place to work.

"We could get phantom cakes at the diner. Do breakfast for dinner," he commented.

I loved phantom cakes, especially smothered in maple syrup with bacon on the side. There was an all-night diner in town that I loved. A lot of students did homework and hung out there. The food was cheap, the portions generous, and the owners were friendly.

"Okay," I said. "You won me over."

Jaxon's gaze took on heat when he shifted to look at me. His voice was a deep rumble as he said, "I'm glad. I like winning you."



What the fuck was I supposed to wear on this maybe-date-not-date? I hated the uncertainty of it all. We were best friends. This was a time to work on our project. Not a date. And yet... It didn't feel like anything other than a date, but maybe I was being ridiculous. Looking for signs or something to

feed this feeling that I was fighting not to acknowledge. I couldn't do that. I couldn't be that person, as easily as it was to fall into that trope.

So what did it matter what I wore? It didn't. Jaxon had seen me looking like shit, sick with the flu, puking; I doubted I could look any worse, no matter what I wore. Keeping that in mind, I snagged the first pieces of clothing in my closet: a purple crop top, a white button-up, and a pair of jeans. I slipped into the bathroom, tugged them on, then pulled my hair up into loose space buns. I refused to evaluate my appearance like this was a date and simply strode out the door.

Jaxon was finally back, and I fought the urge to throw myself at him. It had barely been any time since I'd last seen him, a handful of hours at the most, but I'd missed him. It shouldn't have been possible, at all, and yet here we were.

A smile lit up his face when he saw me and made my heart pitter-patter in my chest. I couldn't help my returning expression. He was still allowing me to braid his hair, so it hung over his shoulders in two plaits, and he looked rather fine in his plain black t-shirt and jeans. I couldn't help but run an appreciative gaze down his body. Jaxon was hot. Like, mega hot. Not to mention cute. Fuck, I wanted to squish him.

Two steps later, Jaxon was in front of me, slinging his arms around my waist to draw me close. His lips found mine, and my heart stuttered before racing to the point it pounded against my ribs, as if it was trying to escape. No one was around to perform for. No one around to say this kiss was for. It was just him and me. I gripped the front of his shirt, kissing him back for all that I was worth.

I might not have known what was going on. I might not have wanted to think about what I was feeling. But I knew I couldn't push Jaxon away. He felt too right, too perfect, too... *Mine*. I moaned, and his tongue gently prodded into me. I opened wider for him, for *my* Jaxon. This. This was what I was fighting—or had been fighting. How could I fight when he felt like he belonged to me? This was what I'd feared. I hadn't known it before this moment, but this was it. Somehow I'd known that Jaxon was meant to be mine, and if we didn't make it, if he didn't choose me, I would never be the same again.

I would... Fuck, it was hard to even breathe thinking he might not be with me a month from now if I indulged this feeling and he didn't return it. My gut grew heavy, and my mind whirled. Soon, I wasn't even paying

attention to his mouth on mine, but rather the panic of *not* having Jaxon. It had been like three weeks since the start of school. How had so much changed so fast? It seemed impossible.

Slowly, he pulled away, and I was panting, but it wasn't from arousal. It was panic, pure and simple. He didn't seem to notice as he remained close to me. His lips brushed mine as he said, "You look nice."

Forcing a bright smile as I ignored the rapid pound of my heart, I grabbed one of his braids and gently tugged. "Do I?"

"Yes, very hot."

His words rushed over me like a wave and soothed the frantic energy that had taken up space in basically every cell of my body. Unable to help it, I laughed because of the sudden release of tension. I tugged on his braid, then twirled it around my fingers. "Well, I'm seducing you."

"Are you?" He bit his lip.

Chuckling, I pulled on his braid again. "I'm teasing." *Mostly*, I silently added. What would it be like to actually seduce Jaxon? Would he enjoy it as much as I thought I would?

The warmth that had been blooming in his eyes dimmed, and something inside of me died. Did Jaxon like me *like that*? Did he feel this pulse between us? Was it not just me? Regardless, I didn't want to hurt him.

I pressed closer and grinned up at him; I was rewarded with a lightening of his cheeks. I twirled his braid around my fingers again. "I can be persuaded to seduce you." Dear monster god, was I flirting? I'd never done this well before. I lacked practice. "If you want."

Jaxon pressed his forehead against mine. "What if that's exactly what I want?"

I bit my lip, my pulse picking up and sweat dampening my forehead. I honestly didn't know. This was all new and terrifying. But more importantly, this was Jaxon. I couldn't lose him, but I couldn't lead him on or lie to him. Holding him tight so he couldn't escape, I was honest with him. "I don't know."

"Do you not want this? Me?"

"I thought you wanted Aaron." What was happening right now?

"I don't. Not anymore. Not since basically the beginning of this plan."

Hope and fear burned bright in my soul and twined together so tightly they were basically indistinguishable from each other. Gathering what little

courage I possessed into my very shaky hands, I asked, “And you want me?”

“I like you,” Jaxon whispered. “A lot. More than anyone ever before.” He took my hand, placing it over his pounding heart. “I want us.”

God, he was so much braver than I was. Or more willing to risk everything. Risk us. My throat was strangled with emotion. The words locked in my throat. I wanted to tell him the same; I really did. I didn’t know how to, though. Because what if... What if we didn’t work and he no longer wanted me in his life? I couldn’t handle that. I needed him. Right now, I felt like everything was spinning out of control. I was at a major crossroads that would lead to my future, and I was balking. Only Jaxon made sense right now, and to lose that? I wasn’t sure if I was brave enough.

All I could say was, “I’m scared.”

“Me too.” Jaxon’s fingers tightened around mine. “I don’t want to lose you, Chris. It would kill me.”

Tears burned the backs of my eyes. I wetly chuckled. “You never will, because it would gut me too.”

“Good.”

I burst into peals of laughter, even as emotion built in my stomach. “Misery does love company.”

“Are you miserable, babe?”

Unable to help it, I cupped his cheek with my free hand and dragged my thumb over his lovely iridescent skin that almost glimmered like gemstones. “Never with you.”

“Good.” His sweet smile made me want to attack him with kisses or squeezes. He made me fucking feral. “I never want to make you sad.”

“You don’t.”

“So...” He swallowed. “Can I keep...”

“Keep?” I pressed. I honestly didn’t know where he was going with this.

“Pursuing you?”

I felt my knees buckle, and I gripped even tighter onto Jaxon to keep myself upright. “You’ve been pursuing me?”

“Of course.” Jaxon tucked a stray lock behind my ear before tracing the shell of my ear. It made my knees weak. “Romance doesn’t just happen. You have to make it happen.” He pressed a gentle kiss to the shell of my ear, and I shivered. “And you’re worth making it happen with. More than worth it.”

Tears threatened to spill, but I fought them. No one had ever wanted me like that. And he wasn't anyone, he was fucking Jaxon. "I don't know yet, about us, you know, romantic-like. But I do know that you will always be the most important person to me."

"So that's a yes?"

"More to the point, are you okay with chasing me, big guy, when... when I'm so scared? So unsure?" I shook my head before he could answer, not wanting him to take back his words. "As long as you're okay with me not being sure, then yes, I'm fine with it. Pursue away."

"I'm fine with it. I really am. I just like you, Chris. A lot."

"Thank you," I whispered. A tear tried to escape, but I kept it at bay. Someone—no, not someone—*Jaxon* wanted to make it happen with me. He wanted me. He liked me. The best person, the most attractive person, the sweetest person, the cutest person, my most important person, wanted *me*.

He shrugged, his eyes not leaving mine, but I saw a tightening near the corners. Embarrassment? Stress? Worry? I didn't quite know, and I hated that I didn't.

"So, no Aaron?" I needed confirmation.

"As a friend, sure," he replied, shrugging once again. "Anything else? No."

My shoulders relaxed and my gut unclenched. "Okay." I nodded. "Good to know. I like all the information."

"All the information?" he asked, lifting an eyebrow.

"Wipe that smirk off," I ordered, poking his cheek. "I like information."

"I know." Jaxon continued. "You like to plan."

"Some things." I mean, I did plan romantic entanglements. Well, ones that weren't mine. I blinked. Hell. I was in a romantic... something or other. Holy underworld. I never would've thought about this happening. With Jaxon. I still wasn't sure of what I felt besides panic—I really wanted to ignore its ever-looming cloud—but I wanted to figure it out.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Jaxon

We were on our first date. Maybe. I honestly didn't know. Chris hadn't agreed to be mine, but hadn't *not* agreed either. I wasn't sure where we were, besides the fact that Chris was okay with me pursuing him, but he didn't feel as I did, at least not yet. I hoped that in time he would. But for now, I would show him how important he was to me. I could do this. I could be superior to every other person who'd wanted Chris. None of their feelings possibly compared to how much I liked him. I knew everything about him, and I knew we were meant for each other.

I didn't want to give him up. This fake dating had been almost kismet in a way, because it had finally opened my eyes to us being an actual couple. Also, it had allowed me to explore what the two of us dating would be like. I adored the way I could touch him, hold him, kiss him, and just be with him. I liked Chris so damn much. But were we even fake dating now? He knew I didn't like Aaron, let alone wanted to date him, so this scheme was no longer needed. I didn't want it to end, though. I liked it, even if it was fake.

Chris flipped the page on his plaster-covered menu, drawing my attention to him. His deep brown eyes were scouring the options, even though he would get the same thing—he always got the same thing. He loved phantom cakes. No doubt he would get them topped with fruit and powdered sugar, and then basically bathe them in maple syrup. My Chris did love his sugar.

My heart stumbled in my chest. My Chris. Monster god, I liked the sound of that. No. I *loved* the sound of that.

“What are you going to get?” Chris asked me, looking over the top of his menu.

“Uh.” I glanced down; I hadn’t even looked yet. “Not sure.”

“It’s so hard to choose.” He gave a small moan, and I swallowed. I’d heard that noise from him more times than I could count, but it had a very different effect on me now than it had in the past. I wanted to hear it when he was deep inside of me, claiming me, chasing his pleasure.

I cleared my throat. “Struggling to pick what kind of phantom cakes you want?”

“No. I’m going to get the cinnamon roll ones, but I also want french frights too.”

“Hmm.”

“This is definitely a cheat day,” he commented. “But how can I turn down phantom cakes from Ghoulbers? They have the best here.”

They did. They had an excellent vegan menu too, which I appreciated. The owners were a ghoul and a human couple. He cooked, and she ran the front of the house. The diner was a little cheesy, with its neon lights, purple walls, and retro theme, but I loved it. On one wall that was basically windows were vinyl booths, then opposite was a chrome counter with round stools. There was a janky jukebox, which only worked half the time. The waiters rolled around on skates and only talked to you when you absolutely needed it, which made me feel comfortable enough to come here.

“I thought you weren’t going to do those this year.” I had been the one to invite him here and mention the phantom cakes, so I should probably apologize for tempting him.

Chris groaned, and his head dropped back, making his neck appear a mile long. “Don’t remind me. Yeah, I want off the bench, but...” He made another throaty sound that had me squirming in my seat and making the booth protest loudly. Chris sighed. “I’ll just have to run it off later.”

Unable to stop myself, I rested my hand on his. “Baby, please don’t run tonight. You’re going to hurt yourself again.”

“I’ll be okay.”

He wouldn’t, though. Chris worked out too much, and I was afraid he was going to harm himself. Again. I’d barely survived that simple bruise. Hell, I had been so worried about him. I couldn’t imagine how I would react

if it were something worse. I understood he wanted to play more, but I also didn't understand why he pushed himself so hard. I was trying to, though. I'd never understood an athlete's willingness to work themselves to the bone. However, Chris was an adult. He knew his limits.

"Alright," I said, but I retained hold of his hand. "But it's fine to rest. You know that, right?"

Squeezing my fingers, Chris said, "I know, big guy."

"How about we get a side of frights to share?" I suggested, and Chris beamed at me.

"That's perfect."

In the end, Chris got the cinnamon phantom cakes, a side of frights, and a chocolate milkshake, and I got a mushroom burger with a side salad. We were supposed to discuss our project, but we didn't. All we did was chat, laugh, and tease each other. It felt like old times and yet more. We casually held hands, as if we'd been doing it for years, and when Chris offered me a fright, it was natural as could be to open my mouth for him to pop it in.

By the end of the night, we were walking hand in hand down the road toward Creelin U. The stars were so bright, and the chilly air held an edge of peace I'd never experienced before. Chris sighed and dropped his head against my arm. "This is nice."

I grunted in agreement.

"Is the blood moon going to affect you?"

My brow furrowed at the sudden change in topic, but when my gaze flicked upward to the silvery moon hanging in the sky, I figured it really wasn't that abrupt. Dean Yaga had just been talking about it. Also, it was something that every monster needed to be aware of. Blood moons happened. I couldn't remember the last one being a big deal; I'd been in high school. My parents had always kept me home from school, not that I thought they truly needed to. Sure, emotions might be heightened, but nothing extreme.

"Not really, no," I said after a second. "Shifters will be most affected, but this is my only form." Many monsters had different forms, but I was just me, so the blood moon wouldn't have the same extreme effect on me.

He rubbed his face on my arm. "Good. I figured, I just wanted to be sure."

My heart pounded so loudly I feared he would be able to hear it. Chris was just so special. I came to a stop, and he looked at me. I gently nudged

his chin up and pressed my lips to his. He moaned, and I swallowed the sound. It was mine, like he was. I teased him with the tip of my tongue, and he made a whiny, needy noise that stirred my soul.

With slow movements, I kissed him, tracing every part of his mouth. Chris gripped the front of my shirt as he returned my gentle exploration with his own. He seemed as desirous as me, as wanting as me, as loving as me. My hands slid down his sides and came to rest on his narrow hips.

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Chris pressed closer, and I shivered when his groin pressed against my thigh—he was hard. I rocked into him, and he took a sharp inhale. I flicked the tip of my tongue against his upper lip, then whispered, “Can I? Please.”

“What?”

I chuckled, cupping his cheek. “Can I take care of that?” I brushed a gentle kiss to his lips. “I want to taste you so bad. Fuck, I want to be on my knees for you.”

An unexpected flush burned his cheeks, and his eyes widened. I blinked. He seemed so shocked. Blow jobs were hardly odd, and I quite liked giving them. I hoped Chris would want me to suck him off. Often. I liked the thought of being on my knees for him and him using my mouth to feel good.

“I-I-I.” Chris swallowed, and his blush deepened as well as started to spread to his adorably round ears.

An odd thought sprang into my head, but it couldn’t be true. It couldn’t. But I couldn’t put it out of my mind. I stroked his cheek with my thumb. “Baby, can I ask you something?”

His mouth just opened and closed; not a single word came out.

“Chris, baby, have you...” I took a deep breath. I didn’t want to accuse him of anything or say he lied. I especially didn’t want to hurt him or end this before we’d even started. But I couldn’t *not* ask. I forged forward. “Baby, have you *actually* had sex before?”

“Wh-what?” His flush deepened.

“You just seem so...” Inexperienced, but I didn’t want to say that. Our first kiss had been so hesitant. And every new thing seemed to shock him, and he was so nervous.

Chris looked down and pulled away, or rather tried to pull away from me. I drew him closer; I wouldn’t relinquish him. Not ever. I pressed a lingering kiss to his forehead. “I don’t care, baby. Whatever the answer is, I don’t care. I just care about you.”

His eyes flicked up to mine, then away, but it was long enough for me to see the sheen. That plus his softening cock, his slumped shoulders, and the gentle shaking of his body, gave me the answer. I pressed yet another kiss to his temple.

“Can you tell me?” I asked in a whisper. “Please.”

“I didn’t mean to lie.” He shook his head, his black hair covering his face. “Well, I did. At first. Not now.”

I brushed his hair back and nudged him up so our gazes met. The instant his deep brown eyes clashed with mine, a warm symphony started in my chest and spread like roots to every part of my being. I kissed his eyelids, trying to convey even a fraction of my feelings. Chris took a shuddering breath.

“Tell me, baby.”

“It was a lie. One stupid lie freshman year of high school.”

As the story spilled out, I nodded along and ran my hand up and down his back in what I hoped was a comforting motion. When he finished, I couldn’t help but snuggle him close, and he gripped the back of my shirt, holding me tight.

“I’m so sorry, big guy. I didn’t mean to. I swear I never meant to.”

“I know.” And I did. Chris wouldn’t lie intentionally to me.

“Please don’t leave me. I’m so sorry.”

I blinked as I gripped him tight enough to leave bruises. “Never.” I practically snarled the word. “I will never leave you, Christopher.”

He sniffled, pushing his face against me.

I started rubbing his back once again to comfort him. “It makes sense why you did.”

“It does?” He looked up at me, and I wiped a tear that was on his cheek, my heart about shattering. I did not like my Chris crying, not at all.

Giving his cheek a couple more rubs with my thumb, I replied, "It does. You were a year older than everyone else. You wanted everyone to see you as older, as your age, as more mature. You were overcompensating. It makes sense to me."

"I'm not embarrassed about being a virgin. But, fuck, that lie." Chris sighed and squeezed the back of my shirt. "I hate it. I've been too nervous to be with anyone or to do anything, because what would someone think? Or what if I did it wrong?"

"Are you scared of that with me?" I hoped not. I abhorred the thought of anyone being afraid of me. Ogres got that a lot. We were big, and that could be intimidating. But the thought of Chris being scared of me... It stabbed me deep in the gut and made it hard to breathe.

"No," Chris said without hesitation. "I have never been afraid of you. Not once. If anything, you made me brave enough to want someone, want to try and have a romance of my own."

"Good."

He went up on his toes and captured my mouth in a possessive kiss that had me groaning. Chris whispered, "You make me brave, Jaxon. You make me happy."

"You make me happy too." I claimed his lips again, holding him close. If I had my way, I would never let him go.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

CHRISTOPHER

The instant Jaxon shut the door, I launched myself at him. He grunted; I blushed. Fuck. So that was wrong. Note to self: don't randomly attack the dude you're interested in. Good to know. His large hands cupped my ass, and his mouth found mine. I moaned. Maybe not so wrong after all. Maybe Jaxon liked being mauled by me. When his tongue tangled with mine, I twined my fingers into the braids I'd put in there earlier, messing them up, but I couldn't care less. I held him close. This kiss should never end. Not now. Not ever.

"Chris," he breathed against my lips, sending a cascade of shivers down my spine.

"No talk." I claimed his mouth in a deep kiss that had him groaning. Each noise was mine. Never had I felt so possessive of someone that I wanted to take even his sounds as my own. But here we were. I wanted everything that Jaxon was to be mine.

He chuckled, then began pressing kisses all over my face, bringing my own humor to the surface. Jaxon said in a low voice, "We have to talk."

"Nope." I was a virgin, sure, but I did know how things worked. Porn. Books. I got the gist. His massive dick in my tiny ass. It would work out. My cock was rock hard against his stomach, and I was probably leaking in my briefs. Fuck, I was needy for him. So damn needy. "Jaxon." I wiggled out of his arms, and he made a noise of protest. Still, I kept my mouth latched to his as I walked backward to my bed.

His fingers slipped under my shirt and stroked my bare stomach, stealing a loud moan from me. “Jaxon,” I cried out, and he slid his hand up further.

I started. Jaxon smiled against my lips as his fingers circled my nipples. I’d never thought of them as sensitive—they never were when I played with them in my jerk-off sessions—but they were under his tantalizing touch. Oh my monster god, they were. I moaned and writhed as Jaxon slowly tweaked and played with my nipples, plucking them like strings. Each touch sent tingles dancing through me and settling in my groin. My already-hard cock grew even harder, throbbing and leaking.

“Need you. Now.” I wasn’t above begging. Or ordering. I knew what I wanted, and I wanted Jaxon, naked and desperate for me.

Jaxon pressed his lips to my forehead, and the movement shocked me with its gentleness and the intimacy that bloomed from the small touch. “You already have me.”

My eyes darted upward so our gazes met. “Good.”

Keeping my eyes on his, I grabbed the hem of my shirt and pulled it off before dropping it on the floor without a care. Jaxon dragged his eyes over me, and his look near burned me from the heat. I smiled, though my cheeks reddened. I reached for him and started to lift his shirt. I needed his help in removing it because he was so damn tall.

I groaned at the sight of all his purple iridescent skin being revealed. Almost reverently, I dragged my fingers over his round stomach, adoring the smooth skin and the firm feel of him beneath my touch. The line of hair that went from his belly button and disappeared under his gut. His full chest, with a scattering of white hair that I wanted to rub my face on. I explored him, letting my fingers roam over every exposed part—his dark purple nipples, his wide arms, his thick neck, his broad back—nothing escaped my attention. Feeling brave, I leaned forward and pressed a lingering kiss to his chest.

He took a sharp inhale.

A smile pulled at my lips. I liked that sound. A lot. And more than that, I wanted to hear it again. I wanted to hear more sounds, more pleasure from him. Just Jaxon, though. No one else had ever lit a fire within me like he did. And I couldn’t help but wonder if anyone else ever would. We weren’t dating, but I thought I might want to. Not yet, though. It still scared me. I couldn’t lose him. I could never bear it. I couldn’t risk the change. My panicked brain couldn’t handle it right now.

Jaxon knocked my chin up. "Where did you go, baby?"

"Somewhere not pleasant," I confessed. Part of me wondered if I should take Dr. Lee up on his offer to talk, but I pushed the thought away.

"That won't do." Jaxon captured my mouth in a possessive kiss, then whispered, "Just stay here, with me. Please, baby. I need you."

I could never deny Jaxon anything he needed. "I'm here."

"Are you?" he asked, trailing his lips over my face.

"Hmm." I was. My cock certainly was.

I dragged my fingers down his chest, brushing the pads of my thumbs over his nipples until they became hard peaks, and over his large apron stomach to the buttons of his jeans. Jaxon nodded, so I flicked the button open and slid the zipper down to reveal his navy boxers. I didn't know why that made me smile, and yet it did; Jaxon did favor dark colors. Even without pulling the boxers down, I could see the huge bulge tenting the thin fabric. There was a small wet stain too. He was leaking for me. I swallowed. I wanted to taste him so badly.

I traced his dick through the fabric. "Can I see?"

"Yes, baby. I'm desperate for you to touch me."

Grinning up at him, I said, "So am I."

Without waiting for him to reply, I continued to rub the massive bulge before dipping my hand under the waistband. I groaned at the same time he did as I grasped his thick shaft. Fuck, he was huge. I'd known he would be; I'd looked up ogre porn before. But it was one thing to see on the screen of my phone and another to feel the pulsing dick within my grasp. I pulled him out, and all I did was gape at him.

Holy fuck.

My fingers barely met around his shaft, and it was long, way longer than a human's dick. The shaft was covered in large bumps and ridges that had my ass clenching, and the mushroom head was massive, with a slit on the underside that was leaking as much as I knew my own cock was. His heavy balls sat just below his shaft, the right testicle slightly larger. The lop-sided appearance just made me grin, and I couldn't say why.

Experimentally, I pumped Jaxon, and he let out the most delightful moan that was music to my ears. I continued to jerk him in slow movements, letting his copious pre-cum slick the way. Each of the bumps slid along my palm in the most amazing friction.

"Jaxon, can I taste you?"

He grinned, threading his fingers in my hair. “Of course, but I’d rather suck you off.”

My mouth dropped open. All I could do was nod. Like hell would I say no to that.

Jaxon kicked off his boxers and jeans, then slid his hands down my sides to my hips, and then began toying with the waistband of my jeans. I finally managed to draw my eyes off his throbbing dick that was pointed straight at me—it knew what it wanted, apparently—and looked up at him. He unbuttoned my jeans with a flick. Ever so slowly, he peeled my bright pink briefs, jeans, socks, and shoes off. I panted as he ran his gaze over me.

I was certainly not as big as he was, but I wasn’t tiny either. I wasn’t cut, but he hadn’t been born with a foreskin, so hopefully he didn’t think it was odd. Jaxon stared at me, his gaze burning hot. He caged my shaft with his thick fingers and pumped upward, making my eyes roll back.

“Fuck, Chris. Baby, you’re so hot.”

All I could do was moan. Jaxon touching me felt nothing like when I touched myself. It was lighting me on fire and melting me into a puddle. I gripped his biceps. “Jaxon,” I breathed, my thighs trembling as he worked my cock. Already, my balls were drawing up and hugging my shaft. Not yet. I couldn’t come already. This was ridiculous. Jaxon twisted his wrist, and I saw stars as I cried out, clutching on to him.

“Jaxon,” I begged.

“What, baby?”

“Close.”

He chuckled. “Already?”

“Too good.”

Jaxon pressed his mouth to my ear and whispered, “I want to make you feel better than you ever have.”

Well, he’d already succeeded there. Mission accomplished. A-plus, Mr. Bolder.

His hand fell away, and I cried out, “No. Close.”

“Let me take care of you.” Jaxon picked me up, and I didn’t fight. Why would I? I wrapped my legs around his waist and found his mouth. He walked toward his bed and lay me down. I reached up for him, and he settled on top of me.

Something inside of me fell apart and reforged until I felt more at home and at peace in my skin than I’d ever had before in my entire life. I often

felt as if I didn't fit within my family, though they never said it, not once, and I often felt like I was putting a smile on my face, even when I didn't feel like it. I often felt as if I was pretending to know what I wanted. I often pretended the future didn't freak me the fuck out.

Jaxon, though... He made me feel at home.

I pulled his mouth down to mine to slowly kiss him, our tongues meeting after only a minute. His hand found my cock again and began to stroke it. A bead of pre-cum dropped onto my stomach.

"Jaxon," I breathed, rutting up into his grasp. "Please. Need to come."

"Let me taste you, baby."

I nodded so fast it was a wonder that my eyeballs didn't pop out.

He pressed a quick kiss to my lips, then began sliding down my body, leaving lingering kisses in his wake. His tongue flicked one of my nipples, and I arched up with a cry.

"Sensitive?" he asked.

"Yes. Oh, Jaxon. More. More!"

"Of course." He sucked on me, and I nearly bowed off the bed and shrieked from the sensations coursing through me. Jaxon worked his mouth over the nipple, his tongue flicking it, and sucked on it. "I hope you know, I love giving blow jobs."

"Do you?" I asked, my voice strained. "I never knew that."

"Well," Jaxon said, resting his chin on my chest, "we never discussed my sex life."

"I never wanted to."

"Why?"

I couldn't give an answer because I didn't have one. However, I'd always hated the thought of him with anyone else. I was jealous of his attention. I wanted it on me at all times. When I stayed silent, Jaxon continued torturing my nipple until I feared I would come from that alone. Like, my thighs were shaking, and my lower back was tightening in a way that signaled I was about to nut all over him.

"Big guy, please," I cried, my hips bucking. "I need to come."

"Not yet, baby. Soon. Let me taste you first."

Before I could protest, he continued downward, then engulfed my cock in a single swallow, all the way down to the root. I screamed. My sac tightened; my muscles clenched; I utterly embarrassed myself, coming into the wet heat of his welcoming mouth.

He grunted as I spilled my release, swallowing around me, which made my pleasure even more acute to the point my vision wavered and my hearing went fuzzy. When the waves of pleasure receded, I sagged back, panting. Jaxon looked up at me, grinning.

“Fuck, sweetheart,” I whispered as I laced my fingers in his hair. “That was amazing.”

“Sweetheart?”

Heat raced to my cheeks. “So?”

“I like it.”

I cleared my throat, looking away, but kept my fingers buried in his hair. I needed him close. “Can I...”

“I’d like that.”

Jaxon slid up the bed to kiss me, and I grunted in surprise when he guided my hand down to his shaft. I’d planned to use my mouth on him, but I didn’t mind doing this either. I just wanted him. He needed to feel even a fraction of how amazing I felt. I began to jerk him rapidly as our tongues dueled. He began to pant harder and harder against my mouth until he was breathing on me more than kissing me.

“Come on, sweetheart. I want to see it. So badly,” I said as I continued pumping his dick, focusing on his glans, especially his leaking slit on the underside. I circled his crown with my thumb and spread that pre-cum around.

“Chris,” he cried out as ropes of cum spurted out of him and painted my stomach. His mouth was open as he moaned, and his eyes were squeezed tight. Never had he looked more attractive, or more mine.

“So hot,” I said, and Jaxon smiled, lying down on me, though he did rest most of his weight on his elbows so he didn’t crush me. I wrapped my arms around him, keeping him against me, ignoring the wet mess between us. Snuggling him close, I whispered, “Don’t leave.”

“Where would I go?” Jaxon looked at me. “We’re in my room too, not to mention my bed, but most importantly, you are everything.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

Jaxon

My first sensation upon waking was the slippery feeling of drool sliding down my neck. Not pleasant as far as these things go, but I didn't mind because it was Chris. He was pressed against my side, his face tucked into my neck, and his arm thrown over my bare chest. We were both naked, and his skin against mine was one of the most delicious feelings I'd ever experienced in my entire life.

I threaded my fingers through his long hair and smiled softly.

Chris was mine.

Ogres mated permanently, like many monster species, and we were exceedingly territorial of what we'd claimed as ours. And there was no doubt—Chris was mine. My instincts screamed to keep him safe, right next to him. It didn't help that we ogres were solitary creatures. Usually, mates holed up in a cave alone, only occasionally socializing when needed.

Obviously, we couldn't do that as much as I wanted to. It would be far more convenient if I could throw him over my shoulder, caveman-style, and leave our classes behind. Somehow, I thought Chris would be opposed—rightly so.

Kidnapping was never cool.

But this thing between us was so good that I'd give up my life at Creelin U to keep Chris all to myself. I'd never felt anything like his skin on mine, his warmth snuggled against me, and his breath slowly wafting over me. I continued to trail my fingers over his spine, feeling each of his vertebrae in

smooth movements, not wanting to stir him as I memorized every sensation, every inch.

It was shocking that Chris hadn't woken up yet. *He* was the morning person after all, not me. Typically, he would've already been awake and had worked out. Without looking at the clock, I could tell it was late enough for us to have missed our first classes. Chris would be horrified—he never missed class. Not even once. He should be awake. I must've worn him out.

A smug smirk tugged on the corner of my mouth. Hopefully, he would let me keep wearing him out. To say I had enjoyed last night was an understatement of enormous magnitude. It had been perfect. I wanted to go on my knees for Chris all the time. I wanted to do more. I wanted him to slide inside of me. Fuck. I shivered. I hoped we could do that soon. I needed him to claim me, even if he wouldn't bite me like an ogre sealed a mate bond. It was too early for that, anyway.

I shifted slightly, something moving deep inside of me. An instinct. A need. I had to have Chris claim me in some way.

Chris groaned, pulling me out of my thoughts, and I kissed the top of his head. He threw a leg over one of mine and pressed even closer, grinding his morning wood into my thigh. My own dick responded in kind, twitching. Not wanting to pressure him or to move on from this moment, I shifted my hips away from him and continued to drag my fingertips over his back, and he arched into the touch like a cat, which made me grin. Did he learn that from his family? Or was it just him? Both? Neither?

"What time is it?" he asked, his voice rough with sleep.

"Late."

He shot up, his hair sticking out from where I'd been playing with it. Chris looked around frantically until his gaze connected with my alarm clock. "Shit," he bit out. "We missed class."

"So it doesn't matter how long we lie here," I remarked, hooking my arms around his waist and yanking him down.

He frowned, but I could tell he wasn't serious because his eyes sparkled and his body melted against me. Chris wanted to be here as much as I did. Resettling him on top of me, I rested one of my hands on his firm ass, and he swallowed. His hard cock was pressing even further into me.

"Do you want me to take care of that?" I asked, my voice a deep rumble, and my cock kicked.

"Do you want to?"

“Yes.” I really did. Chris stared at me, biting his lip, and I frowned at his hesitation. “What?”

“I’m... jealous.”

“Of what?” I literally couldn’t think of anything or anyone Chris should be jealous of.

“Whoever else you’ve done this with.”

Okay, fair. I’d been jealous when I’d thought Chris had slept with other people. It was foolish, on both of our parts, but I thought it was rather natural. We wanted each other to ourselves—or at least, I hoped he wanted me to himself. I nudged his chin up so I could kiss him, and Chris groaned into my mouth. I kept the touch soft and undemanding, merely wanting to be with him right now.

After I’d pulled back a couple of inches, I said, “There have been two other guys.”

“You don’t have to tell me,” he whispered, his cheeks pinkening. “I’m being stupid.”

I wasn’t bothered by my past, and if he wanted to know, that was fine with me. “My first was my friend Devin in high school. Neither of us liked each other like that, but we wanted to see what the fuss was about.” It had sucked. I easily recalled how awkward I’d felt and how Devin had come after like twenty seconds in my ass. He’d gotten me off after that, but the whole experience had lasted maybe five minutes and been extremely lackluster.

Chris just nodded, not looking at me.

“The other guy was last year.”

He jerked up to meet my gaze. “Who?”

The rough, possessive demand sent a delighted shiver through me. I tried to hide my smile, but I doubted I was successful; I was just too happy. Sliding my hand over his muscular back, I replied, “A senior. James McDougall.”

The frown Chris gave me was so severe I winced. He asked, “Why didn’t you tell me?”

I shrugged. “We’d never talked about our sex lives before.”

And we hadn’t. I’d known the story of Chris being an expert, but that was as far as it had ever gone. He’d never asked, and I hadn’t been interested in sharing about my own sex life or hearing about his trysts. I paused. Had I liked Chris longer than I thought? Even back then, I’d hated the thought of

Chris with anyone, and my short situationship with James hadn't been much of a thing. Just mainly me sucking him off or us fucking when one of us was desperate.

When Chris stayed silent, I cupped his cheek. "Are you mad?"

"No. I just..."

"What?" I asked with a frown.

"I don't want to embarrass myself. I know basically nothing."

The pink was back in his cheeks, and fuck, it was cute, not that I would say that. I didn't want him to think I wasn't taking his worries seriously—I was. Chris had already told me he hadn't wanted to try with someone before because he'd been scared of making a fool of himself. Of course that worry hadn't been extinguished just because it was me. I nudged the tip of his nose with mine before slotting our lips together. The kiss was slow and sent shockwaves through me. Every touch was more perfect and better than anything I'd ever experienced.

"You won't," I murmured against his lips.

"You don't know that."

"I do. You and me are meant to be."

His flush returned full force. Making Chris blush was becoming one of my favorite things. I kissed each of his red cheeks, then began to trail kisses down to his jaw to his chin before capturing his mouth again. He moaned into me, and I swallowed the sound. Gently, I flicked the tip of my tongue over his, teasing him.

My cock began to wake up again, and it wasn't alone. Chris's, like mine, had flagged when we'd moved onto more serious topics, but now, it was pressing against my stomach. He rocked against me, grinding his shaft on me. I grunted at the silk of his skin and the drops of pre-cum that were leaking onto me.

"Chris," I breathed.

He kissed my cheek, then slid down, his dick dragging on me as his lips moved over my skin. Chris greedily sucked and nipped, no doubt leaving all kinds of marks behind, but I didn't stop him. Why would I? I loved him leaving his claim all over my skin. It soothed something inside of me that needed it. Something potent. He nipped at my full chest before sucking one of my nipples into his mouth, laving his tongue over the fast-hardening nub. I gasped at the wet warmth.

"I've always wanted to try that," he muttered, grinning at me.

That smile. It was lovely. I brushed my thumb over his bottom lip. “Feel free to try whatever on me.”

Chris burst into laughter. “You say that now.”

I joined him but also said, “I will probably also say it later.”

“Yeah, you probably will, big guy.”

I did have an issue saying no to him.

Before I could actually *respond*, Chris continued downward, utterly distracting me. His tongue skated over the swell of my stomach, and I groaned, low and needy. He smiled against my skin. I couldn’t help but watch his every movement. He was intoxicating. When he reached my belly button, he circled it with the tip of his tongue, making me jerk and my cock leak.

“Baby. *Nngh*. Fuck.” My hand moved to his long hair, and my fingers twisted in the inky-black strands. “Please.”

Nerves skittered across his features. “Promise me you’ll tell me if I’m doing it wrong.”

He was more nervous than I would’ve ever suspected of him, but if he needed comfort, I would provide it. I told him, “Of course. But whatever you do, I will enjoy it. It’s you, Chris.”

And that adorable blush was back. Even with the obvious nerves, Chris grasped my shaft, and I grunted at the feel of him holding me. Watching my face, he gave me a few rough pumps that had my breath turning harsh and pleasure dashing down my spine. His thumb teased my slit on the underside of my crown, then he lifted the digit to his mouth and sucked.

“Monster god,” I breathed. “That’s hot.”

“You taste good,” Chris remarked. “Kinda earthy.”

“I wouldn’t know. I’ve never tasted another ogre—or myself for that matter.”

Chris rubbed my slit again, which had me gasping and my hips arching, before he half-crawled up my body, the bed groaning from our combined weight, and offered his glistening thumb. I didn’t hesitate for even a moment and sucked his finger into my mouth, swirling my tongue around it. He was right. I did taste earthy, maybe iron-y?

“Now that’s hot,” he teased, and I chuckled around his finger. Chris, seeming more confident, returned to his earlier position. This time, he didn’t hesitate and took the head of my dick into his mouth and sucked.

“Chris,” I grunted, gripping his hair. “Baby. *Ugh*. So good.”

I was too large for him to fit much into his mouth, but he sucked on the crown, lapping my slit, while his hand pumped my shaft in a tight grip. Spit and pre-cum slid down my shaft, and Chris grunted and gagged as he sucked me off. This was without a doubt the messiest blow job I'd ever received, but it was by far the best. I was swearing up a storm, moaning and calling for him. I wasn't alone.

He was just as loud as I was. Vibrations traveled up my shaft as Chris cried around me. It felt so damn good, but I refused to close my eyes and miss even a moment of this. He had never looked hotter, and I'd never seen a more erotic sight than his mouth full of me, his cheeks flushed, and tears making his eyes shine.

Chris fondled my balls, and I nearly came off the bed. I practically screamed, "Yes, baby. Just like that."

Grinning around me, he played with my sac. Each tug and fondle shoved me closer to the edge. My muscles began to tighten as tingles gathered at the base of my spine.

"I'm close," I forced between clenched teeth.

His fingers left my balls, making me protest, but one slid back further and started to tease the furled skin of my hole. Sparks flashed in my gaze, and I opened my mouth to warn him, but nothing except a loud growl came out as waves of heat crashed over me. My cock released spurts of cum, and Chris jerked back, probably surprised. I slipped from his mouth, and rounds of white cum decorated his face.

"Fuck," I snarled at the sight of me giving Chris an accidental facial. My cock gave one final spurt, which landed on his lips. His tongue snuck out and swiped it away; a sharp breath hitched in my chest. "Baby." I didn't even know what I wanted to say. I swallowed, still shaking with the aftereffects of my orgasm. I reached for him. "Come here. Let me take care of you."

He bit his lip, half smiling. "I kinda already came."

"That's so hot." I grabbed Chris and dragged him on top of me, finding his mouth and giving him a harsh kiss before licking my cum off his face, then feeding it to him. He mewled and happily swallowed my release down. His tongue lapped at mine as he chased the taste of me. After a bit, he pulled back to give me a wide smile. He wrapped his arms around me and snuggled close, and I secured him even tighter to me.

"I liked that," Chris said. "A lot."

“Me too.”

“I like you,” he whispered. “A lot.”

My heart started pounding so loud it was a miracle it didn’t burst from my chest. “Me too.”

“I’m still nervous about everything.” He waved a hand, then rested it over my heart. “But I thought you should... uh, know or whatever.”

I kissed the top of his head. “Thank you for telling me.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

CHRISTOPHER

So I'd told Jaxon I liked him, and the world hadn't ended. That was nice. I had felt like it would, but apparently, that wasn't an accurate feeling. Truly shocking. Also kind of surprising was my utter unwillingness to leave bed. I was usually up before the sun rose. I had a hard time not being busy or always moving. And yet... right now, I didn't want to move. I wanted to stay right beside Jaxon.

His fingers were lazily tracing my spine and sending little shocks of pleasure through me, not enough to start anything, but more than enough to have me contentedly sighing. Jaxon didn't seem any more inclined to leave the cozy bed than I was. We were existing in a perfect bubble, one I was hesitant to burst. It was almost as if I feared that once we stepped outside of our room, we'd have to go back to pretending instead of just being. Or maybe it was just that I feared I'd have to question each touch and wonder if it was because of the lie that had started whatever we currently were or because Jaxon actually liked me.

However, we couldn't stay here forever. Besides, the sheer practical reasons of food and whatnot, both of us had classes, and we couldn't very well miss all of them. Already, I felt awful that I'd missed my morning class. I never skipped lessons. Why pay to be here, only to then skip class? It had never made sense to me, though I was one of the few who felt this way.

“We need to get up,” I commented. I needed a shower. Cum facial while hot was not a scent I wanted to walk around wearing.

Jaxon just groaned, though his stomach growled. I chuckled, tucking my face against him. Before he could respond, his stomach released another huge rumble. I burst into peals of laughter. I peeked up at him, and his cheeks had turned bright blue, making me giggle. His stomach just continued to keep protesting, which fueled my amusement.

Fingers locking around me, Jaxon rolled. The bed creaked dangerously, but I ignored it in favor of staring up at him as his body stretched over me. Thankfully, he supported most of his own weight on his elbows, or else he’d have squished me. I cupped his cheeks, tracing the flush. My laughter quieted to a soft smile.

“Think that’s funny?” he asked.

I chuckled, making Jaxon smile. I touched the small quirk with my fingertips. “I think we should get you food before your stomach stages a revolt and just bursts free.”

He rolled his eyes.

“Maybe I should just give you a shot of Bro-tein.” I lifted my eyebrows.

“Oh, my god. Seriously?”

“I’m always serious about Bro-tein.”

Jaxon rolled off me, but not before shooting me a glare.

I didn’t let him get away and threw my arms around his neck, hanging off his back when he stood. “Dude, are you sure you don’t want some Bro-tein? It’s packed full of vitality.”

“Monster god,” he muttered.

“It is nice and creamy with a not-ass taste. All cruelty-free. Nope, just nice, hot pleasure.”

“Seriously, Chris?”

“Of course I’m serious. I’m happy to give you a shot of Bro-tein.”

He glanced over his shoulder at me, and his cheeks were alight with embarrassment. I grinned, poking him, which just made his cheeks lighten even further. Squeezing him close and hooking my legs around him, I smacked loud kisses over every inch of skin I could reach. He was so damn cute and so fun to tease.

Releasing him, I slid down his back. Jaxon turned to face me, and I had to look up so our eyes could meet. I tugged on one of his braids until he leaned

down and I could slot our lips together. Only after a second, I backed away and playfully jerked on his braid. "I need to fix these."

"If you want," he replied with a shrug.

"I do."

We both showered, one at a time. The school shower wasn't big enough for us to go together, sadly, though we'd be even later starting our days if I'd been in there with him. A wet, naked Jaxon? Yeah. That was far too much temptation. I was only human, after all. Once we were both done, I rebraided his hair, and then we were off to the cafeteria. It was too late in the day to get a regular breakfast, but we should be able to find something.

Cereal and muffins stuffed in our faces, we parted ways, which made me honestly more upset than I thought possible. I wanted to keep him close. I'd always been protective, but now that feeling was joined by possession, and boy howdy, they really weren't good companions. It made it hard for me not to be right beside him at all times. So ridiculous. But romance often was. At least in the books I'd read.

I gave him a long, lingering kiss before I darted away toward class. At least I would make sure that he would keep thinking about me the rest of the day. I sure as hell would be thinking about him, so this way it would be mutual. Also, the possessive part of my brain wanted Jaxon not to even think about anyone else. Unhealthy? Most definitely. Something I needed to work on? A big yup. Something I could fix right this second? No. I hoped that in time I would feel more secure.

But we would see.

Putting it out of my head, I went to class. My next class passed without much thought or excitement. But the following class I shared with Aaron. Before this whole thing with Jaxon had changed, I would've been scoping Aaron out for him, but now, I was trying not to feel challenged by the massive, hot ogre whom Jaxon originally had liked.

My eyes lingered on Aaron as he came into the classroom, chatting with a sasquatch, Phil, who was on the water polo team. Both athletes, so I guessed it made sense they were friends, though, honestly, Aaron seemed like he was friends with everyone. I wanted to look away, but I couldn't seem to manage it.

He turned, and our eyes clashed. A toothy smile stretched over his face, and Aaron headed toward me. "Hey, Chris." He slid into the seat next to me. "I didn't know you were in this class."

We were basically halfway into the semester, and he'd just noticed. It wasn't like I was quiet, but then again, I didn't pull focus most of the time, which was fine with me. I said, "Hey, Aaron."

Aaron pulled out his laptop, then began fiddling with the end of his braid—his very neat braid. My eyes roved over his hair. It was always so shiny and well-done. He frowned. "Can I help you with something?"

"Um, this might sound odd, but how do you keep your braids so nice?"

He blinked, then laughed. "Jaxon?"

I nodded. "He's finally started to let me braid his hair, but he hates waking up early."

"Silk bonnet," he replied.

"Excuse me?"

"I sleep in a silk bonnet. It's better for your hair anyway, but it should help keep his braids neat."

"Oh! I'd never have thought about that."

Aaron nodded. "Ogre trick."

"Really?"

He laughed. "No. My dad's Black, and he wears one when he sleeps. It helps protect his locs."

"That makes sense." I yanked my phone from my pocket. "I appreciate it."

"Of course, man." Aaron rested a hand on my arm, making me look at him. He smiled. "I think you and Jaxon are a good couple."

Heat rushed to my cheeks. "Thanks. I think so too."

Class started, and I paid very little attention as I scrolled through Tengu, trying to find a good silk bonnet. I wanted to order one right away, so that Jaxon wouldn't have to suffer me waking him up early too much. Generally, the bird shifters who worked and delivered for Tengu were fast, but still, it was better to act as quickly as possible now that I had a plan of action.

I scrolled and scrolled until I found one that had good reviews, then bought two of them. I figured if I wore one too, it would make Jaxon feel less self-conscious. Besides, it wasn't like a silk bonnet wouldn't be good for my hair.

When class ended, I bolted up, practically climbing over Aaron to get out of our row. Jaxon's class was in the next building over, and he would often wait for me right outside. I ran out of the classroom, ignoring the annoyed calls following me. The second I burst out the door, I skidded to a stop.

People behind me got stuck in the doorway and calls for me to move sounded, but I ignored them.

Jaxon was leaning against the wall, waiting for me.

I swallowed the sudden emotions climbing my throat. Jaxon was waiting for me. I didn't know why that stirred me so much, but it did. I raced toward him, and he smiled, though it turned to a look of surprise as I launched myself at him. He grunted when I impacted, winding my arms around his neck and my legs around his middle. I held on like the stage five clinger that I was. Koalas had nothing on me. I was going to cling to Jaxon and never let him go.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Jaxon

“We’re doing this why?” I asked when Chris put a face mask on me.
“Because we deserve it.”

“Not disputing that.” I’d seen Christopher do this before, but I’d never joined in. He’d also never asked in the past. Of course, he hadn’t asked this time either. He’d just sat on my bed, braided my hair, put a bonnet on me, then started to open face masks.

He was sitting, crossed-legged, in between my outstretched legs, facing me. He was wearing his own bonnet, though his was bright pink to my black, and he had a face mask on. “Because self-care is nice, and it has been a day.”

I reached for him, and Chris came toward me without hesitation. I curled my arms around his waist. “What happened?”

When he’d come back after class, he hadn’t said anything, just put in headphones, turned on his audiobook, and flopped face-first onto the ground. I’d tried to ask what was going on, but he hadn’t responded.

Chris shrugged.

“It’s something.” My fingers fisted around his shirt. I didn’t like him upset. “But you don’t have to tell me.”

Playing with one of the strings from my hoodie, he muttered, “I’m just overwhelmed.”

“About?” He seemed to be on top of homework, and our paper was going well. Soccer was good. He’d been cutting back on running and working out

to a healthier amount.

“I talked to my parents.”

My eyebrows drew together. Chris was extremely close to his parents. I asked, “Are they okay?”

“Yeah.”

I tucked my fingers under his shirt and smoothed my fingers over his bare skin. A shiver went through him. Chris settled closer toward me, chewing on his lip. I freed it. “What’s wrong, baby?”

“They were talking about Samantha choosing a major. Sports education. Which is great. It’s so great.”

Yeah, Chris didn’t sound as if he believed what he was saying.

“But then they started asking if I’d chosen yet. What I want to do.” He looked up at me, and his brown eyes were so bleak—bleaker than I’d ever seen. Chris shrugged, shaking his head. “I just... I just don’t know.”

“Baby.”

“I have no idea.” He started panting. His grip on my sweater got so tight that his knuckles turned white from the strain. “I don’t—” Chris took a sharp inhale, shaking.

“Oh, baby.” I pulled him solidly against me, our face masks forgotten.

He was gasping for breath, trembling in my embrace, and sweat coated him. I tried to soothe him, not completely sure what was going on, by rubbing his back and whispering nonsensical, calming words. I started rocking him, my eyes wide as he struggled to breathe. What was going on with Chris?

Eventually, he sagged completely against me, his face pressed against my chest. In a small voice, he begged, “Please don’t leave me.”

“Never, Christopher. I’m not going anywhere.”

“I can’t handle any of this without you.”

“And you don’t have to.”

“Please. I’m so scared.”

“Oh, baby.” I kissed the top of his head, wishing the bonnet wasn’t in between me and his hair. “I’m right here.”

“What if this... What if I mess up?”

I tightened my hold. “No matter what, I’m staying right here with you.”

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Chris gripped my hoodie, not responding. I continued to kiss the top of his head and hold him firmly in my embrace.



Lying on my back, I Boogle-d on my phone. I had to know what that had been. Chris was pressed against my side, his face tucked into my armpit. He'd been clingy the rest of the night, not wanting to be away from me for even a minute, and I didn't mind in the slightest. I wanted him to feel as secure about me as I did about him.

As I researched, I dragged my fingers over his spine. Hopefully, my touch would help him sleep better. When I put what I'd witnessed into the search bar, the first thing that came up was a recommendation on how to help with panic attacks.

I glanced at Chris, who was deeply sleeping against me. Panic attacks. He was having panic attacks. How many? It probably hadn't been just that one. How many had he been hiding or brushing off?

"Oh, my Christopher," I whispered.

He grunted in his sleep, then nuzzled me as he made a happy sound.

Turning back to my phone, I started reading articles, blogs, and even forums about panic attacks and undiagnosed anxiety. I didn't know what to do. I wanted to help him, but I also didn't want to overstep. The remembrance of Christopher shaking in my lap as he struggled to breathe rushed back. My fingers curled into a tight fist against his back. I had to do something for him.

All night, sleep eluded me, and I continued to run my fingers over Chris to soothe him. When the alarm went off, he woke up with a smile. I watched him closely all morning, but he didn't show any signs that

yesterday had even happened. I didn't bring it up, because I didn't want to upset him.

Classes passed slowly as I simply waited for a moment to do what I'd planned last night. I didn't know if it was a good idea, but I couldn't do nothing. I cared about Chris too much.

The second I was free, I headed over to the medical center. Thankfully, when I opened the door, Dr. Lee was by himself. He looked up from his computer. "What can I do for you?"

I swallowed. I did not think this through. I couldn't talk to people.

He lifted his eyebrows.

I wrung my hands. Fuck. I had to say something. This was Chris. He needed me.

Dr. Lee stood. "Are you alright?"

I nodded and took a deep breath. I could do this. "I need..."

"Yes?"

I wet my lips. "I need to know more about panic attacks."

"Are you having panic attacks?" the doctor asked as he waved toward the chair.

"No. My... boyfriend is."

"Ah. Christopher Kim. I did wonder."

"You did?"

Dr. Lee didn't answer. "Has something happened?"

For a few long moments, I battled myself. I wasn't sure if Chris would like me telling someone about what I'd seen. In the end, my worry for him won. Carefully, I told Dr. Lee about last night and my concerns. All he did was nod as he listened. When I finished, I asked, "What do I do?"

"Be there for him, Jaxon. You clearly care about him, and from what I've seen, he cares about you. If you can, encourage him to come see me or talk to a mental health professional."

"I'm worried about him."

Standing, Dr. Lee clapped my shoulder. "I know. But you can't make him get help. All you can do is be there for him and encourage him, alright?"

"Yeah." Well, I could do that. Nothing would pull me from Christopher's side.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

CHRISTOPHER

I took a long drink of my sugary coffee, looking at Dan, who sat across the table from me. This was the first time I'd seen him since the school year started. We weren't as close now as we'd been in high school, though we were friends, and we'd both been busy. I'd run into him outside of the library, and he'd invited me to get coffee. I could've hardly said no just because I wanted to go see Jaxon. I couldn't be the person who ignored all of their friendships because they'd started dating someone.

Not that we were dating. I couldn't think about dating him, not without freaking out, because dating meant it could end, we could end, and that wasn't something I could handle.

"How are you doing?" I asked Dan. He looked well enough. His brown hair was neatly brushed, his freckled skin glowed, and his clothes were as stylish as ever. He was even wearing a bowtie.

He took a drink of his warm coffee. "Not great, to be honest."

I frowned. "What's wrong?"

"Annabeth and I broke up."

My gut fell to my shoes.

Dan shrugged, but his eyes were slightly glassy. "We made it through the summer, but I didn't know what I expected. How long does the average college romance last? Not long. I don't know why I thought we would. Utterly ridiculous. Naive of me, really."

I wanted to say something, but I couldn't. A deep throbbing was resounding in my ears. Numbness spread through my body, leaving me feeling not quite real. Everything was distant, and tingles were sparking all over me.

"It was inevitable," Dan said with a shrug. "It really was. We wanted different things out of life. I mean, we started as friends last year, so maybe that's why I had hope. But..." He shrugged again. "We just didn't work."

"I'm sorry," I finally managed to say. The words sounded hollow to even my own ears. However, Dan didn't seem to notice.

"I'll be alright. Eventually." Dan gave me a bright smile, revealing the dimples in his cheeks. "But we don't need to talk about this. Tell me about what's been going on with you."

I wanted to answer. I really did, but all I could hear was that it was inevitable. How long did college romances last? Jaxon. We weren't dating, but... Fuck... I couldn't... My brain came to a screeching halt. It was as if the entire future had crashed into me at once. A giant "What if?" hung over me.

The world went wavery. I clutched the front of my shirt. Fuck. Not now. Not again. My lungs tried to inflate, but they didn't seem to want to work. It felt as if my body was trying to rip itself apart. I couldn't... Everything was too much.

Something warm and gentle pushed my head between my knees. An even voice said, "What are five things you see?"

What?

"Chris, think of five things you see," the person ordered. No. Not just a random person. Dan.

I saw Dan's gods-awful wingtip shoes, the floor, a large coffee stain, my own Chucks, and the legs of the table.

After a second, Dan said, "What are four things you hear?"

The coffee grinders, Dan's smooth voice, people laughing, and the creak of the library door.

My pulse was starting to slow, and my breathing was beginning to even.

"What are three things you feel?"

The chair beneath me, the grasp of his steady hand, and the press of the table's edge into my arm.

"What are two things you smell?"

"Coffee. Sugar," I rasped.

“One thing you taste.”

I paused, then looked up at him. “I don’t know. My own spit?”

Dan chuckled. “I guess that works.”

I took a huge inhale through my nose, then released it in one large gust through my mouth. “What the fuck was that?”

“Just a grounding technique to help you through a panic attack. You can always try box breaths if you prefer that. This works better for me.”

“Panic attack?” I asked, blinking. Was that what they were?

Dan frowned as he sat back down. “You didn’t know?”

I shook my head.

“Was that your first one?”

I shook my head again, gripping the edge of the table until my knuckles were bleached white.

“Can I ask you a question?” Dan asked.

“What?”

“Have you been feeling super overwhelmed lately?”

“Yeah.”

“Like a lot of pressure, dread, exhaustion, absolutely unable to take change?”

“Yeah. How did you know?”

He grabbed my hand, but it didn’t feel sexual, more comforting than anything. “I have anxiety.”

“I don’t,” I retorted, but I wasn’t all that sure anymore.

“Are you sure about that? I’m not trying to diagnose you, but...” Dan squeezed my hand. “Have you thought about talking to someone about what you’re feeling?”

Dr. Lee and his offer popped into my thoughts, but I pushed it away. “No, because I’m fine.” I tugged my hand out of his. “I don’t need to talk to anyone.”

“Chris,” he started, but I stood.

“I need to go.”

I grabbed my bag and raced outside, only realizing later that I’d left my coffee behind, but I could hardly go back for it now. Nope. Definitely not. Unable to fathom what I was doing, I started to run. My feet pounded on the sidewalk. I didn’t know where I was going or why. It was like I could run away from whatever happened in Mummy Mocha, like I could outrun the pressing cloud over me.

Coming to a stop and breathing hard, I looked up and blinked. I was standing in front of the athletics building. I wasn't even sure why I was here. I had no reason to be here. But something inside of me was so tired. Not even thinking about it, I went inside and walked until I stopped in front of the health center. Dr. Lee had said that I could come whenever I wanted. That I could talk to him.

I raised my hand to open the door, but I froze. Did I actually want to talk about it? Did I want to actually think about everything? I shook my head. No. I just needed to keep pushing the panic away. My fingers curled into a fist, then fell to my side. I didn't need to bother anyone with this. Dan was wrong. I was fine. I just needed to ignore everything.

I gave the door one last look before slipping back outside.



I climbed onto the bus, asking Coach, "We'll be back by the blood moon, right?"

Coach looked up from his clipboard. "Yes, for the thousandth time, Kim. Jesus, you'd think you were a shifter."

While Jaxon didn't think the blood moon was going to do anything to him, I wanted to be here for him just in case he needed me. I was already struggling enough with leaving him for this short amount of time without even bringing the blood moon into it.

"Sorry for being curious," I quipped.

He just glared at me and pointed to the aisle.

With a frown, I went about halfway down the bus before picking a seat near a window. I rested my head on the side of the bus and sighed. My breath fogged the glass. I was worried about Jaxon. He had been watching me a lot lately. Nothing had changed between us, but he seemed even more careful with me, which I honestly liked. I liked being something precious to him.

My phone flashed, and I looked down. Dan. He'd texted me. Again. I had told him I was fine, multiple times. I didn't know how to say it so he would finally understand. He just kept pestering me. The fucker was so annoying. I knew he was concerned and wanted to help, but I was fine. Sure, I'd

researched anxiety and read all the blogs and watched all the videos he'd sent. Yes, it sounded like I had anxiety. Yes, it made sense. But it didn't mean I *had* anxiety. I didn't want it. I didn't want one more thing that set me apart from my family.

The seat beside me creaked, and someone warm pressed into me. I glanced over and swallowed a sigh. Aaron. It was shocking that I'd used to consider him a friend. Jaxon had said that he liked me, not Aaron, but I couldn't quite banish my jealousy.

"Excited about the match?" Aaron asked.

"Sure." Nope. I would rather stay here with Jaxon.

"It's sure to be a good one."

I made a noncommittal sound.

"You alright?"

Why the fuck was everyone asking me that? I forced a smile. "Of course."

"Nervous about the blood moon?"

"Nervous for Jaxon," I replied.

Aaron clapped my shoulder. "As long as you're around him, he'll be fine. He'll just need you."

"Me?"

He nodded. "Ogres are very territorial."

I blinked.

"Just trust me. Be with Jaxon when the blood moon rises, okay?"

"I can do that."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Jaxon

I woke with a groan and instantly looked over at Chris's empty bed. He was on his first away game, and it was torture. When he was leaving, I'd had to convince myself repeatedly not to ask to come with him or beg him to stay. I knew it was my instincts demanding he was only safe beside me, which wasn't true. Also, we were not even close to me talking to him about mates and him being mine. Permanently. Hell, we weren't even dating, officially, though neither of us had clarified the fake dating plan we'd enacted. I needed to get a hold of these emotions, but they were potent. I'd even called my dad for help.

Neither he nor my mother had been shocked that Chris and I were dating. They had truly thought we were already a couple and just hadn't bothered to tell them. Had Chris and I been the only oblivious people? Probably. But Dad had said it would get better as time passed. I was normal. Loved hearing that. No sarcasm at all. I truly liked knowing what I was feeling was typical, and that everything would be okay. Well, as long as Chris accepted me, but I wasn't going to think about that right now.

I groaned, finally sitting up. I needed to go to class. I didn't want to. It was English, and Chris was supposed to be with me. It would be fine, as much as I didn't like it. I headed to the bathroom, and after I'd pissed and washed my hands, I gently took off the black silk bonnet that Chris had bought for me. It made me smile just thinking about how much he cared about me, about my hair. My braids were much neater now that I was

sleeping with them covered. I shook off my morose thoughts and finished getting ready—Chris would be back soon enough. No need to mope.

Once I was dressed, I walked across campus, my head down and my eyes locked on the ground. Thankfully, without anyone talking to me, I made it to my class and took my seat. Looking at my phone, I frowned. No texts from Chris. Not too shocking. He was busy. I shot him a quick text, just to let him know I was thinking about him.

I didn't even have the consolation of thanking Aaron in person for his bonnet suggestion. I had sent him a text, but it wasn't the same thing.

Professor Crimpton flew up to her position on the lectern, near a microphone so her squeaky pixie voice carried over the classroom. "At this point," she started, talking over the general din of the classroom as people settled in their seats, "you should be nearing the end of your first draft of your paper—if you want to pass my class that is."

Chris and I were nowhere close to done, and from the groans and people shifting in their seats, we weren't alone. Honestly, Chris and I had been much more distracted by each other to do schoolwork. This paper was also very low on our to-do lists as well. Who wanted to write a paper about Hamlet? I'd much rather we'd picked one of Shakespeare's comedies, but here we were. Chris and his competitiveness. Well, when he got back, we'd have to work on it and get it done.

I took diligent notes, knowing that Chris would need them as much as I did for the quizzes and the upcoming midterm test. He was much more studious than I was. He had to be. He had to have good grades to continue playing on the soccer team, which was more important to him than the actual schoolwork.

After that class, I went to my next ones, not really paying much attention. I'd never have thought I would be *that* person once I'd found someone I truly cared about, but here I was: the lovesick, mooney boyfriend. I didn't want to do anything at all until Chris came back and was right next to me.

I forced myself to head toward the library to work on homework. I had enough to do and being in our dorm would just make my lethargy worse. As I neared the library, I spotted a familiar figure. Carter was heading out, coffee in hand, when someone slapped his back, and he jumped. Suddenly, he vanished into a puddle of soggy clothes. I burst into laughter as his much smaller black cat form struggled to get free of his shirt. A frat guy I knew by

sight, though I didn't know his name, apologized profusely as Carter hissed at him.

Picking up speed, I headed over to him. When I reached the two of them, I nodded at the frat guy.

"Bro-tein," he yelled, holding out his fist. I bumped mine with him, and he made an explosion sound that had me wanting to roll my eyes.

Carter yowled, drawing our attention back down to him.

"Sorry," the frat guy, maybe Shorely, said again. "Got to go to class."

Chuckling, I extricated Carter from the rest of his soggy clothes. His bright yellow eyes glowered at me, and I just started laughing again. "Be grateful I saved you from that frat bro. He might have just toted you around all day."

Carter hissed.

"The blood moon is tonight; I wouldn't have thought it'd be affecting you already."

Carter swiped at me, but his claws didn't do much damage. Ogre skin was thicker than that. But it was two weeks before Halloween, and the blood moon was affecting all of us monsters, though it wouldn't get bad until the moonrise. I paused, thinking about it. Perhaps that was why my instincts had been even worse than typical today. It was possible that the blood moon was riding me just as hard as my shifter counterparts. Dean Yaga had said that *all* monsters would be affected; I just hadn't believed her, because I'd been mostly fine in the past.

A yowl sounded, and I glanced down at Carter, who was still trapped in my hand. "Sorry," I muttered, putting him down. I snagged all of his soggy clothes and his bag. "I can walk you back to your dorm if you want."

He made a low meow that sounded like a grumble, but he started off toward the dorms, his tail straight up in the air, so I assumed that was an affirmative. I had to slow my steps so I didn't outpace the much smaller cat, but I didn't dare to pick Carter up. He would've sat at my feet and yowled if he'd wanted me to carry him. So we just slowly plodded along until we reached his dorm. Fishing his keys out of his bag, I opened the door and said, "I'll, uh, give you some space. I'm heading to the library if you want to hang out."

Carter didn't answer, not that I'd expected one. It sucked to be a shifter right now.

Like I'd told him I would, I went to the library and into one of the stacks areas that Chris and I frequented because there was a table that rarely had people at it. This time was different. A transfer student I sort of recognized but didn't know was sitting at the table. It took me a second, but then I remembered he was the devil who'd been staring at Tate, Carter's roommate, all during Chuseok. He'd been glaring at Peter, or so I'd thought. I had no idea if Luc and Tate were together—maybe, given how he'd been eyeing the human.

Chris would know. That thought made me frown and want to check my phone for the millionth time.

I'd almost turned around and left to find an unoccupied table, but Luc sighed, his shoulders sagging. With a weird sense of obligation that I had no business feeling, I headed over to the table and sat down. He looked up but didn't remark.

Neither of us spoke. I didn't know him well enough to know if he was shy, introverted, or just quiet. He looked like he was also doing homework, though he seemed to be staring at his phone more than actually working. Maybe he was upset? I almost thought about asking him, but my stomach roiled in discomfort. Luc didn't know me; why would he want to share anything? Besides, it was the blood moon. He could just be having an off day, like basically all of us were.

After a minute, Luc gathered all of his stuff and left, not even bothering to glance at me. Watching Luc leave, I shook my head. I wished I'd been able to be more helpful, but I really wasn't good with people. I couldn't even ask him if he was alright. If only Chris had been here. He would've pestered Luc into talking, even if it was just to snap at him. But Luc was probably fine. Besides, he was most likely with Tate. I was sure everything was going perfectly fine with them.

I'd just cracked open my textbook and was about to start on an assignment when Carter wandered up. I wished he'd been here sooner. He probably knew Luc, and he was very similar to Chris in the ability to make people talk. A deep frown marred his face, and his arms were crossed. I cocked an eyebrow at the dark expression, but my shoulders curled inward and I slumped in my seat.

His frown deepened. "I'm not annoyed at you, Jaxon. Stop looking like a kicked puppy."

“Wow, cranky much?” I asked, then blinked. I couldn’t believe those words had come out of my mouth.

Carter laughed, clearing the clouds that had gathered on his expression. “You have been spending way too much time with Chris.”

“Not possible.”

He rolled his eyes, but the smile stayed. Carter plopped into the chair beside me and slouched until his head could rest on the back. “I’m just embarrassed.”

“Why?”

“About not being able to control my shifts.”

I nodded. “Yeah, it seems horrible.”

Carter scoffed. “You think?”

“If it makes you feel better, my emotions and instincts have been on overdrive today,” I commented.

“You’re dating my little brother. Of course it doesn’t make me feel better.”

Heat rushed to my cheeks. “Fair.”

He turned to look at me, his eyebrows drawing together. “How are you doing, though? Like, don’t tell any *urges* regarding Chris.” He shuddered. “But I still want to make sure you’re doing okay.”

“I miss him.”

“Makes sense.”

“It does? It’s not... needy?”

“Well, sure, I guess, but it makes complete sense,” Carter replied with a shrug. “You want Chris as your mate.”

I sputtered, making him laugh. I tried to form words, but my mouth opened and closed without a single utterance.

“Look, I can Boogie things as well as anyone, and Witchipedia was pretty clear that ogres mate and get all territorial. I mean, I assume you don’t eat people, though. Right?”

I rolled my eyes.

“I’m gonna take that as a yes and move on. Blood moon. So high emotions. Territorial. Yada yada crap that I don’t want to think about in conjunction with my brother. But you miss him. You need him. It’s not rocket science. Besides, I see how you look at Chris.”

“How do I look at him?” I was truly curious.

“Like he’s the best thing in the entire universe and you want to never let him go,” he answered matter-of-factly.

If I’d thought I was blushing before, I’d been very wrong. *This* was blushing. It felt as if my cheeks were going to burst into flames.

Carter gave me a soft smile. “I’m glad it’s you.”

“Really?” I was glad it was me too, but part of me felt as if Chris could do better.

“Yeah. You know me. I’m extremely overprotective of my younger siblings, and I worry about them a lot. Chris probably more than Sam. That girl is a force of nature. Heaven forbid someone cross her.”

I nodded in agreement. Sam was something else.

He continued, “I know you will take care of Chris and love him like he deserves. I trust you, and more importantly, Chris trusts you.” Carter patted my arm. “I’m very, very glad it’s you, Jaxon.”

The backs of my eyes burned for some reason. “Thank you, Carter. That means a lot to me.”

“Good. Now, don’t fuck this up or I will kill you and hide your body. I know people.” He gave me a smile that had zero kindness or humor in it, and his eyes seemed to glow.

I rapidly shook my head. “I would never hurt Chris.”

Patting my arm again, Carter said, “Then you have nothing to worry about.”

I tried to smile, but it was hard with Carter having just threatened me. “Are you doing okay, besides shifting randomly?”

“I’m fine.”

Glancing at him, I wondered if I should tell him about Chris’s panic attack. Carter would want to know. I knew he would. But I almost immediately decided against it. Chris wouldn’t want to worry his brother, and Carter was overprotective and relentless. He wouldn’t allow Chris to slowly come to terms with having anxiety. He would bowl everything over until he was certain his little brother was safe.

“By the monster god, seriously, calm down. I’m not going to kill you,” Carter said, readjusting. “Chris would never forgive me.”

I laughed.

“Now, if you hurt him, then all bets are off.”

“I know, I know,” I said, giving him a smile and turning back to my homework.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

CHRISTOPHER

I was jittering with excitement to the point I was bouncing in my seat. I was so ready to be back at Creepin U. Jaxon and I had texted on and off while I was gone, but it hadn't been enough. I'd missed him. Also, though I wasn't excited about it, I had so much homework to catch up on. We had that paper on Hamlet to work on. Why in the hell had I chosen Hamlet? Though to be honest, none of the plays would've been fun to write about. Shakespeare wasn't my thing; it never would be, as much as I had pretended freshman year of high school. Still, I had to write this paper, so I had no choice but to make it my thing.

But first: Jaxon.

I bolted out of the bus the second it stopped. Whistles followed me. I shook my head, yelling, "You can all fuck off!"

"Language, Kim," Coach snapped, but I ignored him.

Nothing at this point would stop me from finding and tackling Jaxon. I had never missed anyone like I'd missed him. It had become an ache deep in my gut that would only relax when I finally saw him with my own eyes. And today was the blood moon. We were cutting it finer than I would've liked. Yes, it was hours before moonrise, but I wanted to make sure that Jaxon was handling the blood moon well.

With my bag slung over my shoulder, I bolted toward the dorms. I returned the greetings that were shouted at me, but I didn't stop. I needed to get to the dorms. Right now. A loud caw made me look up. I was fairly

certain the raven judging me was Reginald—he was the seeing-eye bird for the transfer student Arie—but I could’ve been wrong, because he wasn’t wearing his scarf. I wasn’t close with the music student, as nice as he seemed.

“Fuck,” I snapped when I collided with something—or rather, *someone* who squeaked loudly.

“Shit,” they cried as we crashed onto the hard sidewalk.

Wincing from my scraped elbow and throbbing knee, I opened my eyes. Tate lay beneath me. I didn’t know him well, having only really talked to him at the bonfire and Chuseok. But Carter liked him a lot, which told me all I needed to know. Tate was blinking dazedly, and I swore again. I touched the back of his head. Had he smacked it on the sidewalk? Fuck, Reginald. He’d distracted me. Tate stared up at me, blushing. Poor dude.

“Tate, my man,” I said, as I untangled our legs. “You alright? Did you hit your head? Should I call someone? Like Dr. Lee or an ambulance? Or... Carter?” *Please don’t make me call Carter*, I silently begged. My older brother would never let me hear the end of it.

He blinked again, blushing even more, and averted his eyes—not easy to do with me on top of him. “I’m fine.”

“You sure?” I didn’t wait for him to respond as I jumped to my feet and yanked him up, ignoring his subsequent squeak. “I can walk you to the school nurse. Or call someone.” Someone who wasn’t Carter. “That’s right.” I clapped my hands together. “You’re with that transfer. The demon, no, devil. Luc, right?”

“Did he say that?” Tate asked, his voice breathless.

“I can call him.” I might not have his number, but it shouldn’t be that hard to track down.

“N-no,” he said, shaking his head. “You don’t need to bother him. I’m fine.”

Somehow, I doubted it would bother Luc for me to call him about Jonathan. Yeah, I didn’t know him well either, but I’d seen how Luc looked at my fellow human. Still... I shrugged. It was Tate’s decision. “If you’re sure?”

“Yep. All good.”

I watched as Tate left, his freckled cheeks still bright red. Looking up at Reginald, who was still staring at me in the most judgmental way, I pointed at him. “Not cool, dude. Don’t distract people.”

Someone twittered, and I flushed. I was lecturing a bird. In the middle of campus. Yeah, I'd officially lost it, but in my defense, Reginald had distracted me. I pointed at the bird one more time and hissed, "Behave, or I'll sic Carter and Sam on you."

Reginald cawed, almost bored-sounding, then began picking at his foot. Apparently, he wasn't afraid of my house-cat-shifting siblings. Couldn't say I blamed him. They were more likely to get distracted by a patch of sunlight and take a nap than chase a bird, especially one as large as Reginald.

Shooting him one last glare while ignoring the people who were chuckling at me, I headed toward my dorm again. This time I didn't race. It was too dangerous; I didn't want to crash into anyone. Again. Still, I didn't linger. I wanted to be back in Jaxon's arms sooner rather than later.

I bolted up the stairs, then shoved our door open. Jaxon's head jerked up. He was sitting at his desk, working on his laptop, probably doing homework. "Baby," he breathed, pushing his chair back.

I hurled myself at him, and Jaxon snagged me close without hesitation and drew me onto his lap. Straddling his thick thighs, I curled my arms around his neck and squeezed. "I missed you."

His arms were nice and tight around me. "I missed you too."

Groaning, I buried my face against his neck to breathe in his earthy scent. He was so warm. I snuggled as close as possible, and Jaxon pressed a kiss to the top of my head as he tightened his grasp even more. The way he was holding me made me feel as if he didn't want me to be away from him any more than I wanted to be away from him.

Normally, I loved away games. New place. Chilling with the team. It was always fun. But now... I was really dreading each one. Being apart from Jaxon was painful. At the same time, I didn't want to make my whole life about whomever I was dating. Not that Jaxon and I were dating. No. There was too much risk involved. We were still friends. I would cling to that relationship description until my fingertips were bloody. It was safer. Familiar.

I pulled back enough to meet Jaxon's eyes, and my heart thumped. Gently, I cupped his cheeks, running my thumbs over his smooth cheeks. With every pass of my thumb, his eyes grew heavier, heat blooming in their golden depths. My breath began to speed up, my chest heaving. Swallowing, I leaned forward and pressed my lips against his.

Jaxon groaned. His hands slid down my sides and rested on my hips, gripping me tightly. His fingers dug into me enough to leave bruises, ones I would relish. I wanted to see him on me. I wanted him to mark me. Fuck. What would it be like to be his mate? To have him bite me and tie me to him for the rest of my life? I definitely wouldn't mind that.

I curled my fingers into a fist around one of his braids, dragging his head back, and deepened the kiss. His lips were warm on mine. I sighed into his mouth. I'd missed him so damn much. The tip of his tongue traced my lips, and I groaned. I opened my mouth in invitation, one he was more than ready to accept. His tongue plunged inside and tangled with mine. Fuck. He was so damn perfect. He tasted so good. I ground against him, my dick starting to swell. His large hands moved toward my ass, squeezing almost tentatively.

"Yes," I grunted. He could touch my ass. I was all for that. But could he touch it without me wearing clothes?

My cock at full mast, I started rocking my hips on his stomach to get more friction on my needy shaft. It wasn't alone. Jaxon was hard beneath me, and he rutted up into me as he grunted. Pressing kisses over his cheek, up the line of his jaw, to his pointed ears, I nibbled on them. When I sucked on the tip, Jaxon gasped. I grinned. Well, that was nice to know.

"We should move to one of our beds," I whispered in his ear, then pressed a kiss to it, making him shudder. "Or I could kneel between your legs. I'd be more than okay with that." A low groan rumbled in his chest. I smirked, nuzzling his cheek. "I think that's a yes."

Before I could slide off his lap, Jaxon said, "We really shouldn't."

I paused. I'd raced across campus, skinned my elbow, bruised my hip, and slammed into Tate, but we shouldn't? Why the hell not?

"We both need to do homework."

I gaped at him. He wanted us to do homework while we were both sporting boners? What the hell? I didn't want to do that. I wanted to suck Jaxon off while jerking myself.

He laughed, cupping my face and giving me a loud, smacking kiss. "You probably need to shower, and we both need to do homework."

I stuck out my lower lip, which just made Jaxon laugh harder. The sound stole a smile from me. I couldn't help it. His humor was infectious. He said, "You make it hard for me to ever say no to you."

"You say that like it's a bad thing."

Jaxon chuckled, then pressed a gentle kiss to my forehead. "It's not."

"Good." I rubbed my nose on his, taking a deep inhale of his scent, before I gave a loud sigh and pushed off his lap. "Fine, we'll be responsible."

"Monster god forbid."

I grabbed my bag that I'd dropped next to the door and set it on my bed. Everything was basically dirty, so I chucked it all into my hamper. Most of my clothes made it. Unpacked, I grabbed some clean clothes to head to the bathroom for a shower. Jaxon snagged me around the waist.

"What?" I asked, my dick perking back up. Hey, I wouldn't say no if he were suddenly in the mood.

"What's this?" His voice was a low growl and his touch tender as he skimmed the scrapes on my elbow. "Did you get hurt playing?"

"Oh." I glanced at it. "No. I crashed into Tate trying to get to you faster."

Jaxon smiled; it was something soft and warm. "You are so cute."

I flushed.

Looking up at me, he said, "I forgot to ask how your game was."

I plopped onto his lap. I wasn't going to have this conversation while I stood here awkwardly. Leaning back into him, I replied, "It was fantastic. Henry got hurt."

He sputtered, and I blushed.

"Fuck, that's not why it was good. I never want one of my team members to get hurt. I swear."

"That's not what it sounds like."

I shot him a glare over my shoulder.

"I'm teasing." Jaxon placed a kiss on my shoulder.

"Well, he got hurt, so I actually got to play. It was so exciting. Henry should be fine by the next game, but I'm still ecstatic I got to play for a bit." I looked at him. "I even scored."

"Good job, baby."

I beamed, though it dimmed after a moment. "It was all great."

"Then why are you making that face?"

My teeth sank into my lower lip as I debated whether telling him the truth was wise or not. In the end, the thought of lying to Jaxon made my decision for me. Hopefully, he wouldn't find me too needy. Averting my gaze, I answered, "I missed you. A lot. I spent most of my time thinking about you. I didn't like being away from you."

With a gentle nudge, Jaxon turned my chin toward him, and our gazes met once more. Leaning forward, he slotted his lips to mine. From our positions, it was not the easiest to kiss him, but I melted into him with a moan. Every touch was just so damn perfect. I couldn't have pictured this only a couple of months ago, and now, I was having a hard time imagining my life without it.

He stroked my cheek and muttered against my lips, "I missed you so much it hurt."

Jesus. How did he spout some of the most romantic things at the drop of a hat? I was an avid romance reader. I was the romantic soul—or so I'd thought—but I had nothing on Jaxon. I pressed my lips to his once more in a slow, gentle kiss. "Same, big guy. I think we should just stay right by each other."

"I agree."

"Still think we should do homework?"

Jaxon smiled. "Yes." I groaned, but he pushed me off his lap. He ordered, "Go shower."

"Fine," I complained, but I stepped into the bathroom with a huge smile and heat filling my cheeks.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Jaxon

The instant we stepped out of the dorms, I took a huge breath. I'd just about tackled Chris back in our room. His sweet vanilla scent had almost overpowered me. I'd missed him a lot, but it was more than that. Instincts were riding me hard. I needed to claim him, make him mine. He'd basically offered himself to me, but I was afraid of hurting him. I was so much larger and stronger than him.

Chris snagged my hand, interlacing our fingers. Something inside of me warmed at the motion. He'd said he wasn't ready to commit to us actually dating, and yet... He acted as if we were already together. I was hopeful that, in time, Chris would see that our relationship would remain intact. Yes, dating would change the label, but at this point, that was about all that it would change. No matter what happened, Chris and I would remain side by side.

We belonged together.

As we moved across the campus to the library, Chris greeted people and waved at almost everyone. I couldn't help but smile softly at him. He knew everyone. I had no idea how he was able to make friends with everyone, let alone keep them all straight in his mind, but he somehow did. It was far out of my skill set. Being painfully shy as well as introverted limited my social circle, not that I minded. I didn't need many people to be content in life, and I saw no reason to change it.

When we stepped into the gothic library, we of course had to go to Mummy Mocha first. Monster god forbid, Chris studied without a sugary coffee in hand. Once again, Chris greeted people, and I simply nodded while continuing to clutch his hand.

“Hey, Tanner,” Chris said to the human standing behind the counter.

Tanner’s red hair always made him stand out to the extent that I actually knew who he was. He’d transferred in last year, I believed. I didn’t know much about him, except that he was dating the dryad Kovi, whom I knew slightly better because we’d taken a couple of classes together.

“Hey,” Tanner replied with a smile. He looked at me and said, “Jaxon, nice to see you. I’ve been hearing good things about your Bro-tein. I guess the water polo team has been using it. Also, someone mentioned it to Seth, and he’s been hooked since.”

I nodded. The water polo team had placed a huge order, which was really helping my sales. Apparently, a lot of people really liked the coined “Bro-tein” name. I didn’t really get it or like the actual name, but that was fine. Besides, I *did* like that Chris had come up with it. I was probably going to have to rebrand everything to Bro-tein. It worked.

“Seth commented about getting some. I think he wants to add protein-blended coffee to the menu or something.” Tanner shrugged. “Doesn’t sound good to me, but we do have a lot of athletes.”

“Oh my god, yes,” Chris gushed as he bounced on his toes. “We need Bro-tein coffee. I would so drink that.”

I flushed, and Tanner laughed.

After Chris placed both of our orders, we moved to sit at one of the free tables. He once again snagged my hand and began playing with my fingers as he rambled about the different people he recognized. I was only half paying attention as Chris relayed some drama happening at the Alpha Claw Omega frat. It was hard to pay attention when I was distracted by his warm touch and the way his slimmer fingers looked next to my thicker digits.

All I wanted to do was pull Chris onto my lap and hold him close, never letting him go.

Part of me, a huge part, regretted stopping Chris’s earlier amorous intentions back in our room. I needed him. Badly. But if we’d had sex, we would have never gotten any homework done. Grades were important to Chris, especially since he wanted to be a starter, and we also had a rough draft due for the Hamlet paper. We had to finish that or we might actually

fail our English class. So while I really wanted Chris to be fucking me right now, I was glad I'd done the responsible thing and put a stop to it.

Also, we should wait until after the blood moon was over, although I truly didn't think I would ever hurt him. He was my mate, even if I hadn't bitten him yet. Some things were instinctual. This was one of those things. Chris was so important to me. I could never injure him physically, mentally, or emotionally, at least not on purpose.

"It's all so dramatic. I'm glad I didn't join the frat," Chris said, breaking me out of my thoughts.

I blinked. I honestly had no idea what he'd been saying. Instead of admitting that, I commented, "I never thought about joining Alpha Claw Omega."

Chris laughed. "Why doesn't that surprise me?"

"Because you know exactly how good I am at talking to new people?"

He chuckled, pulling our joined hands closer. His dark brown eyes warmed and his eyes became hooded as he said, "You're a lot better with people than you think, but I'm glad you're my roommate and not in the frat."

"Just your roommate?" I asked, shamelessly fishing. I shouldn't pressure him. I really shouldn't, but I couldn't help but wonder if his feelings had changed enough for him to want me as his boyfriend in truth. None of this fake dating lie. Just him and me together. Label and everything.

Lifting our hands, he pressed a tonguing kiss to the back of my hand that had my heart accelerating to the point I feared it would burst free from my chest. He whispered in a husky voice, "You are so much more than just my roommate, Jaxon."

I swallowed.

"You're—"

"Here you go," Tanner said, bringing us our coffee. "Sorry about the delay. The blender wasn't working. So as an apology, I decided to bring them over to you."

A growl started to swell in my chest at the interruption, but I swallowed it before either of the humans heard it.

"Thanks," Chris said, giving Tanner a warm smile. Turning toward me, Chris asked, "Are you ready?"

Part of me wanted to say no and demand he finish his thought, but I suppressed it. Chris didn't owe me anything. I simply needed to wait for

him to be ready to tell me. I nodded, and we headed upstairs to find a secluded corner to study in.



“Uuuuuhhh,” Chris groaned, throwing his head back and slouching until he was barely in the chair anymore, halfway under our secluded table in the recesses of the library. “Hamlet is so boring.”

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“You’re the one who chose it,” I reminded him, my fingers clacking away at the keys on my laptop.

“I know. I hate it. Why didn’t Hamlet just die in the first act and spare us all boredom? Seriously, he is so whiny and annoying. I’m glad he dies.”

“I’m sure the Crypt Keeper would love that take,” I said with a snort. “So original. ‘I want Hamlet to die in the first act so there’s no play’ is an excellent paper that is sure to give us an A.”

He frowned at me, poking me in the side. “Ass.”

I grinned. “You *were* the one who chose it. I would’ve gone with one of the comedies.”

He released a loud moan and sagged even further. Honestly, I wasn’t even sure how he was still in his chair. I tangled my fingers in his silky hair and began massaging his scalp, bringing a very different type of moan from his lips, which stirred my dick. I swallowed, ignoring it. Now wasn’t the time. While there was no one around us, that didn’t mean I wanted to be sporting a boner in the library.

Like he sensed my arousal, he opened his eyes and gave me a sultry smirk. “You know what would make me feel better?”

“We are supposed to be doing homework,” I muttered, my pulse leaping in my chest.

“We have been. For a while now. I’ve caught up on everything, and we’re making headway on this stupid paper.” Chris straightened, then slowly slid onto my lap, making my mouth go dry as the desert. He pressed a gentle kiss to the corner of my mouth. “Just for a little bit.” He snapped my laptop closed before winding his arms around my neck. “No one can see us here.” Kiss. “No one ever comes here.” Kiss. “Just you, me, and the dusty books.”

Did I have the strength to resist him a second time? Nope. I sealed my mouth to my mate’s, and he groaned against me, melting into my embrace. I curled my arms around him, keeping him close, and pressed my lips to his in slow, measured touches. My body vibrated with the need to explore him, to know everything about him, to be as close as possible physically, mentally, and emotionally.

Before I had caught feelings for Chris, he’d already been the most important person in my life. Now, if possible, those feelings had increased, deepened. It was like all that I was yearned for him, craving a closeness I’d never even thought was possible.

Chris flicked his tongue against my lips in permission, and I opened for him instantly, only to growl when his tongue met mine in a sultry dance. My pulse throbbed in my ears, and my dick stiffened in my briefs. I slowly slid my hand up his side, grinning against his mouth when he shivered, until I reached his face. Almost reverently, I rested my thumb on the hinge of his jaw and allowed my fingers to brush against his rapidly pounding pulse in his neck.

“Jaxon,” he breathed.

I squirmed at hearing my name from his lips.

Diving back into my mouth, he plundered me with his tongue. I submitted to him fully, holding him close as I slid my tongue around his in an attempt to get him as deep inside of me as possible. Still, it wasn’t enough. I needed more. So much more.

“Chris, baby, I need you.”

He nodded, not speaking as he trailed his lips over my face. His tongue flicked out to tease my earlobe, and I shuddered at the sensation. Chris groaned. He sucked it into his mouth, then dragged his teeth over it before trailing tonguing kisses up to the point of my ear, when he once again sucked. I bucked under him, my cock straining against the zipper of my

jeans. I needed friction. I needed him. I needed more. I had to have him. Claim. Mine. All mine.

“Chris,” I moaned.

“Mmmmmhhh, I think I love you like this, big guy.”

I whimpered. “Please, baby. I need...” My words broke off into a quiet cry when he began to rhythmically suck on the tip of my ear.

“What do you need?” he asked in a husky whisper that made me tremble.

“You.”

“Well, technically you have me.” He chuckled. “I am on your lap.”

I shook my head. It wasn’t enough. “I need you inside of me.”

He took a sharp inhale and ground his hard cock into my stomach. “Yep. I’m good with that.”

In a rush, I helped him off my lap and started to haphazardly gather our stuff. My cock was hard and throbbing in my pants. I needed relief.

Fanning his red face, Chris said, “Just need this to go down before we leave. Don’t want to traumatize anyone.”

My eyes dropped to the obvious bulge in his pants, and I swallowed. Everything in me screamed for me to drop to my knees and take him into my mouth. However, I wasn’t one for sex in public locations—not to mention we hadn’t talked about whether or not he was okay with it. I yanked my eyes away and took a deep, calming breath.

“Seems like you also need a moment,” he commented, and I looked at him again before following where he was staring. My hard cock was obvious in my pants. I couldn’t say anything because arousal was strangling my throat, but I nodded. I certainly did need a second. Averting my eyes from Chris because he was just too enticing, I stared at the ceiling and breathed.

After a bit, we’d both calmed down. I took Chris’s hand and headed outside, then to our dorm, ignoring everyone who greeted us.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

CHRISTOPHER

Nerves and excitement pulsed inside of me. Jaxon wanted me to fuck him, and I wanted to. Badly. It kind of surprised me, though. Somehow I'd thought this would be the other way around. Not that I was disappointed. We had time to try everything.

Also, I was terrified. What if I messed up? What if I wasn't as good a fuck as the other two people Jaxon had been with? I shouldn't care. I really shouldn't. But I did. Comparison was the enemy of joy, and all that. But the fears and doubts slowly grew in my mind like weeds. I didn't want to be bad for Jaxon. I cared about him so much, and he made me so happy. I wanted to be perfect for him.

Jaxon closed the door behind him and turned the lock. That thud had never been so loud before. I swallowed, tense, when he faced me, his hands settling on my hips. Leaning forward, he pressed his lips against my forehead. The sweet gesture made my eyes flutter closed while warmth swelled in my gut and spread throughout my limbs.

"We don't have to if you're not ready, baby," Jaxon murmured against me.

I flushed.

"I'm in no rush. All I want is to be close with you, and we don't need sex to be intimate."

That was true, but I wanted to have sex with him. I wanted more. I wanted to be inside of him. I shook my head and went up on my toes to

plant my mouth on his, taking him in a slow kiss.

I whispered, "I want to be inside of you. Badly."

He groaned, low and loud, the noise settling in my cock and making it harder than ever. Curling a hand behind Jaxon's neck, I pulled him down and claimed his mouth. I held onto him tightly. I didn't want him going anywhere before I was ready. When he wrapped his arms around my waist and drew me flush against him, I figured he had the same idea.

Our tongues tangled in a slow dance that practically sent my body vibrating. His hand began to run up my sides, lifting my shirt with the movement so he could begin to tease my skin. Every brush made me shiver, ever so sensitive right now, or perhaps I was just attuned to Jaxon. Everything about him drew me in and made me want him even more.

His hands slid to my ass, and I groaned when he squeezed. His hands were so large they easily engulfed me. I adored how much larger he was than me. I'd never felt small before, and now I did. The feeling was addictive. Jaxon growled into my mouth as he lifted me up easily; my legs snapped around him instinctively. I gasped, but didn't stop kissing him. Rather, the kiss turned frantic as my need swelled.

I rocked against him, trying to drag my stiff shaft over his stomach. I needed friction. I needed more. His skin on mine. His body yielding to me. The two of us becoming one.

Jaxon kept moving across the room toward his bed, then he dropped me onto it, making me grunt. His golden eyes practically glowed as he ran his gaze over the length of my body. I lifted my arms and stretched out even further in invitation, and he growled. My cock bucked. I loved that sound. A lot. I also loved that I was the one who drew it out of my quiet Jaxon. I wanted to be the only one who would ever make him like this or see him like this.

Lifting my arms out for him, I said, "You're too far away."

He grasped my hand, bringing it to his mouth to press a hasty kiss on my knuckles. "Give me a minute, okay?"

I nodded, and Jaxon rushed off to the bathroom.

The instant the door closed, I was up in a flash. Okay. Romance. I needed this to be perfect. To make up for my lack of experience. I snagged my phone, then paused. Carter was inviting me last minute to a seance that Tate was throwing. Rude to wait until only a few hours before. But whatever. They were out of luck. I left him on read and then pulled up a light

instrumental music playlist. I had made it to read books to, but I found it soothing. I guessed it worked. I mean, I didn't have a sex playlist. I needed to get on making one. Later.

I yanked the curtains closed to help block the late afternoon light. I looked around the room frantically for candles or something, but we weren't allowed to have them, not to mention I'd never been a candle guy. So I grabbed a new can of air freshener and sprayed away. I blinked at the heavy chemical smell. Well, it would fade. It was fine.

Why was the room such a mess? I mean, all of Jaxon's stuff was neat and tidy, but I had crap everywhere. I chucked all my dirty clothes into my hamper and hastily piled my books onto my desk, trying to make it as neat as possible. I then straightened Jaxon's bed up and threw a couple of my pillows over on it to make it more squishy. I glanced around the room, wishing I could do more, but there wasn't really anything else I could do.

Lastly, I stripped off my shirt and shucked off my shoes, socks, and pants, leaving me in my plain green boxers.

Fuck. Was that a rip? Why the hell didn't I have better-looking underwear? I was going to lose my fucking virginity in horrible underwear. I should've thought this through.

All of a sudden I froze as I recalled the pair from a gag gift that Carter had given me last year on my birthday. I raced to my closet and dug them out, holding them up with a blush. Little had he known how much I would love them. Or maybe he had known and had played it off as a joke. It was hard to know with Carter. I had been saving them for if I ever got the courage to date someone. While Jaxon and I weren't officially dating (no changes for me), we were about to have penetrative sex for the first time.

I tugged the briefs on and glanced in the mirror with a smile. They were dark blue and lacy, hugging my ass. My hard cock barely fit right now; the flushed tip kept trying to peek out the top. I heard the door opening, and I flung myself on his bed and tried to lie as seductively as possible.

Jaxon paused when he saw me, his nostrils flaring. I truly hoped that was because of me, not the fake beach smell that insisted on lingering in the air. He grabbed the back of his shirt with a low snarl and tugged it off. I bit my lip as my eyes roved over the expanse of his chest. Even though I'd seen him before, it felt different this time. He leaned over me, and I rubbed my hands over his smooth skin, then flicked my thumbs over his nipples. He shuddered.

“Baby,” he groaned as his fingers traced the lace of my briefs.

“Do you like them?”

He moaned again, slotting our lips together in a harsh kiss. “I love them.”

I arched up. “Me too.”

“How many pairs do you have?”

“Just this one,” I replied between kisses, rubbing against his fingers when they skirted over my erection.

“We might need to fix that.”

“I wonder if Tengu has some for a good price.”

Jaxon chuckled. “I’m sure they do.”

I cupped his cheeks and yanked his mouth back down to mine. I didn’t want to talk about buying more briefs. I wanted Jaxon to rip mine off so I could fuck him. With that in mind, I reached down to his sweats and started pushing them down.

“Naked,” I demanded.

He chuckled and kicked his sweats off. He had nothing on underneath, leaving him wonderfully bare. I whined at the feel of his thighs rubbing against mine. Curling a hand in his hair, I crushed my mouth to his and rutted against his round stomach. Each brush sent shivers down my spine and electricity arcing through my veins.

“Not yet,” he said, drawing back, and I gave needy protests, which he ignored. “I want you inside of me, baby.”

I nodded rapidly. “I want that too.” I dragged my thumb over his cheek. “Can I...” I flushed. “Help?”

Jaxon grinned, then kissed the pad of my thumb. “You want to finger fuck me? Get me ready for your cock?”

My blush deepened, setting me basically on fire. “Y-yep. I do. A lot.”

“Hmmm,” he groaned, nuzzling my cheek. “I want that too.” Jaxon kissed down my body, sending pulses to my cock, which leaked profusely. When he reached the band of my briefs, he sucked on my skin. I bucked, whimpering. Tonguing my throbbing dick through the blue lace, he whispered, “Let me get you naked first.”

I nodded, arching my hips in expectation.

He hooked his fingers under the delicate lace and slowly pulled them down. I shimmied, trying to speed him up, but he wouldn’t be hurried. Jaxon continued at an agonizingly slow pace that left me squirming. My cock, freed, smacked my stomach and left behind dots of pre-cum.

“Hurry,” I demanded.

“So needy.”

“Yes.” There was literally no point in trying to deny it.

Jaxon bent, pressing a kiss to the crown of my dick, and I cried out. My hips lifted automatically, chasing his mouth, but he didn’t return, just continued to drag my briefs off. His fingers slipped across the skin of my legs as he removed my lace briefs, driving me toward the edge without having to touch me anywhere more exciting, like say my very desperate, leaking cock.

Finally, when he pulled them over my feet, I heaved a sigh of relief. Holy fuck. I would never have thought getting naked would be so torturous. Pressing a kiss to my calf, Jaxon groaned. “I can’t wait to have you inside of me.”

“Let me help you.” I paused, then added, “You might have to tell me what to do.” I’d researched, but it wasn’t the same. Sadly. However, I did know the basics; I wasn’t completely clueless.

“More than happy to, baby. I’m not worried.”

I pulled him close, our bodies skin to skin, and kissed him. I dragged my fingertips over his back as I slowly traced his lips before sucking his bottom one in my mouth, nibbling on it. I ordered, “Turn around, big guy.”

He instantly followed, and I moaned when his full ass was in front of me. Jaxon braced himself on his elbows and looked back at me. I cupped his full cheeks, swallowing. “Fuck, Jaxon. You are so fucking hot.”

His face turned a lovely light blue. “You think?”

I kissed one of his ass cheeks. “I know.”

Nuzzling him, I pressed kisses along each cheek, unable to contain my moans. His skin was so warm and soft. Placing a kiss near his crack, I asked thickly, “Can I eat your ass?”

A shudder went up his spine. “Yes, baby.”

“Do you like it?”

“I do.” He glanced back at me. “And I really want you to.”

Nerves bubbled in my gut, but I ignored them. I’d wanted to try this for so long, and now I finally had the chance. I pulled his full cheeks apart and moaned when I laid eyes on his entrance. The furled skin was a couple of shades darker than his regular purple-blue tone. As I stared at him, his hole clenched, making me grin.

“Baby,” he pleaded.

“Don’t like being teased?” I asked, but before he could answer, I took the bull by the horns and dove forward.

I dragged my tongue over his twitching hole and moaned. I wasn’t alone. Jaxon released the lewdest sound I’d ever heard before, and it made my cock throb. Keeping hold of his round ass, I licked and lapped around his entrance. The musky taste spurred me on. I liked this even more than I would’ve thought possible. Also, the way Jaxon was whining and crying, pushing back against my tongue was so fucking hot.

The more I licked, the softer his hole seemed to grow. Perfect prep. Curious about something I’d read, I sucked on the furled skin, and Jaxon cried out, “Chris. Baby. F-fuck.”

Grinning, I tried again, and Jaxon gave the same loud response. Encouraged, I continued attacking his hole for a few more moments until I wiggled the tip of my tongue inside. He grunted and arched back, rocking onto me.

“More,” he begged.

I shoved my tongue into him as far as it could go, and he ground back against me. Moaning, I fucked him with my tongue for as long as I could manage until my jaw and tongue started to hurt too much. When I pulled back, he cried out and his hole fluttered.

“Lube?” I asked, my voice already hoarse.

With a shaking hand, he pointed to his desk. I got up, my legs threatening to collapse and my dick protesting moving away from Jaxon. I snagged the lube, then moved behind him again. Squirting some on my fingers, I spread it around his hole, and Jaxon pushed back. I chuckled. “And I’m needy?”

“Inside of me. Now. Please,” he begged, looking at me. Some of his hair had come loose from his braids and his face was a deep blue. His mouth was open as heavy pants escaped him in harsh bursts.

Fuck, he was hot.

I circled his hole a couple of times before sinking a finger into his tight warmth. We both groaned. I’d never experienced anything even close to this. It was... Hell, it was magical. I pumped my finger in and out of him. “Does it hurt, sweetheart?”

He shook his head, his breaths sawing out of him. “Not at all. Feels good.”

I smiled. “Another?”

“Please.”

I pulled out, added more lube, then came back with two.

Jaxon cried out, "Fuck. Yes. Baby, yes."

I ran my fingers over the front of his passage, searching for his prostate. Suddenly, Jaxon jolted. I asked, "There?"

He bobbed his head. "Please, baby. More."

I returned to the same spot and brushed over it. Jaxon grunted, pushing back on my fingers. I thrust my two fingers into him, making sure to touch that perfect spot as I slowly prepped him. Jaxon's ass jiggled as he fucked himself on my fingers, and the sight turned me on so much. I wanted to see how much his ass would jiggle when I was fucking him. My fingers slicked inside of him, reminding me that I was soon going to have the chance.

"One more," Jaxon said.

Panting, I slipped three fingers into him easily. "You're so warm. I can't wait to be inside of you."

"Now," he said. "Please, baby. I need you now."

My fingers paused. "I won't hurt you?"

"No." Jaxon shook his head, his eyes wide and his mouth open. "Please, Chris. I need it."

I kissed the small of his back and dragged my tongue over him. He groaned at the same time as me. The sweat gathered on his skin was like an aphrodisiac. I whispered against him, "I probably won't last long."

My cock was dripping and throbbing in need. Honestly, if I kept playing with him, I could probably come untouched.

"Doesn't matter. Close," he grunted.

Going up on one knee, I spread lube over my cock, then grabbed the base as I notched the crown to his hole. With a deep breath, I pushed in, and after only a moment of resistance, I slid in. "Fuuuuuccckkk," I groaned at the slick heat surrounding me.

Jaxon cried out. "Yes, baby. *Nngh*, so damn good."

Slowly, I thrust into him as I tried to control the urge to just pound into him. I wanted to sheath my entire prick inside of him in one move, but rationally, I knew that might hurt him. Pulling out until only my cockhead was inside, I pushed back in. I sank in a bit more every time until my hips were flush with his ass.

"Jaxon," I said as I watched my cock slide out, then disappear back inside of him. I was fucking Jaxon. I couldn't believe it. "We're... I'm... Fuck, I'm inside you."

My only response was a low snarl as Jaxon continued to slam back on my cock. His ass jiggled perfectly, making me whimper. Fuck, that was hot.

The tight warmth of him was stealing my thoughts. I gripped his hips and pounded into him. My grunts and groans matched his whining snarls. The sound of our skin slapping and the scent of sex in the air both only added to the perfection of this moment. I bent over him as much as I could, my thrusts turning erratic, and placed desperate kisses to his sweat-soaked skin. I grabbed his cock; I wanted him to come before I did. I pumped him.

“Come, sweetheart. Let me feel it. Please.”

“Chris,” he cried only a moment later as his cock throbbed within my grip as it shot cum all over his bed.

His ass squeezed me to the point it was hard to thrust in and out of him. I was holding onto my orgasm by a thread, but I was determined to ride out his to make it feel as good as possible. When his cock stopped pulsing, I released him before he became too sensitive and chased my own pleasure, slamming into his hole. My balls were pulled up tight against my shaft, my thighs were shaking, and my cock was hard to the point of pain.

“Jaxon,” I howled as my release crashed over me in a wave of whitehot pleasure. My dick kicked inside of him as I continued to thrust erratically into him, unloading my cum deep inside of him.

Panting, I was draped on top of him. I was shaking so hard that I couldn’t move. Jaxon shuddered as he dropped to his bed. I flopped on top of him with a grunt. My cock slipped out of him, and I shivered from sensitivity.

“Fuck,” I whispered. That had been amazing. Like, was it always like this?

“Chris,” Jaxon said, his voice rough. “I need to hold you.”

I rolled off him, crashing into the wall. Jaxon turned; the bed complained beneath him. The poor thing had probably been shrieking under us the whole time, and I’d paid it no mind. Jaxon pulled me into his shaking embrace, and I burrowed close. He kissed the top of my head. I smiled, basking in the bliss of the amazing orgasm.

“Was that okay?” I asked after a few quiet moments. I didn’t want to be that person, but I had to know.

Jaxon snorted. “That was literally mind-blowing. You broke me, babe.”

Blushing, I looked up at him. “I hope not. I quite like you.”

He dragged his finger down the center of my forehead, over my nose, and to my lips with a soft smile on his lips. “I quite like you too.”

More warmth rushed to my cheeks, and I buried my face against him, snuggling close.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

CHRISTOPHER

I groaned. What was going on? Something was squeezing me. What was that? Something warm and wet swiped over the skin behind my ear. I opened my eyes. I was lying in Jaxon's bed. We must have dozed off after we'd cleaned up. It was dark, but I couldn't tell the time. I closed my eyes, wiggling a bit in Jaxon's tight embrace. He was holding quite firmly. Whatever. Back to sleep.

Jaxon grunted behind me, his hips canting against me as something soft and wet dragged over my skin again. My eyes popped back open. His tongue. Jaxon was licking my neck. A moment later, I felt the scrape of teeth against my neck.

A low moan ripped out of my throat as my cock hardened in a flash. "Jaxon, sweetheart, are you okay?"

"Mine," he growled.

I blinked, and my cock throbbed. Well, I liked that tone. "Yep," I replied, shoving my ass against him. I wasn't going to dispute his claim, though I was a bit shocked he was being so aggressive.

Jaxon grabbed the hair at the back of my head and pulled my head to the side. Growling, he bit the side of my neck, not enough to break the skin but enough to sting. I groaned as I pressed into his teeth. Fuck, I liked that. A lot. I'd be okay with him biting me hard, though. A lot harder. Like a mating bite. All for that.

My pulse lurched at the thought. Fuck, would he? We should probably talk about it, but being his mate would for sure calm some restless part of myself that was convinced I was going to lose him.

“Need you,” he said.

I tried to look over my shoulder, but Jaxon just snarled and didn’t let me move even enough to see more than his pointed ear. I frowned. I wasn’t scared of him in the slightest. I was more concerned for him. He was acting oddly. Like, very weird. He didn’t get aggressive with me. All of a sudden it hit me like a bolt of lightning. The blood moon. It was the blood moon. While I couldn’t see outside, I assumed it was starting to rise. Aaron had told me that Jaxon would need me, and it seemed he did.

I rocked my hips back against his hard cock. “You can have me.”

One of his hands tightened around my hair and the other gripped my hip. “I don’t...”

“Sweetheart, let me turn around.”

He panted, his fingers digging into me until they eventually relaxed. I rolled so I was facing him. Jaxon’s skin was flushed bright blue, and his golden eyes were wide, pupils blown. His chest was heaving, and his mouth was hanging open with a continuous pant. I cupped his cheeks as I pressed a gentle kiss to his lips. Jaxon gave me the sweetest moan.

“You can take what you need from me,” I told him.

Jaxon shook his head, his lips dragging against mine. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You won’t.”

“Chris.”

“No,” I said, placing my fingers over his lips. “You won’t, Jaxon. You would never hurt me. I trust you. Completely.”

His breath sped up even more.

I kissed him again. “Trust me like I trust you.”

He swallowed.

“Just trust me, sweetheart. Just trust me.”

“I trust you.”

I smiled, brushing my thumbs over his cheek. “Tell me what you need.”

“You,” he growled.

Fuck, that tone. It sent shivers down my spine. “Exactly how do you need me? I need you to tell me. Directly.”

Like he was afraid that I would leave, Jaxon held me tight. "I need inside of you. I need to claim you." He yanked me closer, if that was possible. "You are mine."

Fuck me. I mashed my lips to his. "Yes, Jaxon. All yours."

"Mine."

"Yes, sweetheart." I started rocking against him, grinding my cock against his leg.

"Need to mark you. Claim you."

I nodded. Well, that answered that question in my brain. I was all for this. But... we should talk about it. Was Jaxon even in the right state of mind to be making life-changing decisions? Probably not. I couldn't say no, though. Not when he was holding me so close and was so desperate. "Whatever you need, sweetheart. I'm all yours."

Jaxon growled low and long as he hauled my mouth to his. I whimpered as he thrust his tongue inside. I swirled and tangled my tongue with his, my pulse picking up with every movement until I was afraid that my heart would burst through my chest. I couldn't stop, though. I needed him as much as Jaxon needed me. Also, I wanted him inside of me. I wanted to be as close to him as possible. To feel him taking me like I'd taken him earlier.

Pulling back, I whispered, "I'll need a lot of prep." I just wanted to make sure he was still thinking. Somewhat. "You're really big, and... I'm inexperienced."

"Mine."

Unable to help it, I chuckled. "You can prep me." I kissed him. "I want you to."

Before I could even react, he rolled over on top of me. I grunted. Jaxon loomed over me, his white hair hanging around my face. I arched up to press my lips to his jaw. "What are you waiting for?"

His mouth crashed into mine, then he ripped away, kissing along my jaw line before moving down my neck. I moaned when he pushed my face to the side and sucked on the skin above my throbbing pulse point. My hips bucked. Fuck. I couldn't stop crying out as Jaxon sucked and nipped at me until he pulled off with a pop. The abused skin stung in the best possible way.

Growling, Jaxon continued downward in sucking kisses that had me bowing off the bed. I wanted more. I wanted him to leave hickies all over me. I wanted him to bite me. I wanted him to keep me for the rest of my

life. As he continued down, sucking on my belly button, I curled my fingers around his hair. Whines and cries kept slipping out of my throat as he played with me. My dick was bucking and leaking all over the place.

“Please, sweetheart,” I begged. “Please.”

He growled, ignoring me as he continued to suck and lick my skin. His teeth grazed the skin over my hips, and I cried out. My fingers tightened into a fist, practically strangling the strands of his hair. “Jaxon,” I pleaded. “Please. I need more.”

Once again, he ignored me. His teasing, sucking, nibbling kisses continued. All over my hips, over the sensitive skin between my groin and thigh, then to my thighs, where he started to bite me hard enough to bruise.

“Fuck,” I grunted, pre-cum leaking out of my tip and smearing over my stomach. “More.” I wanted—no, needed him to bite me in truth.

Jaxon seemed beyond words because all he did was bite me again, hard enough to leave yet another bruise, but not hard enough to permanently mark me. When he sucked on the bite mark he’d just given me, I gasped at the sharp pain that was immediately followed by pleasure. I gripped his hair and the sheet under me so hard my knuckles burned.

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He grabbed my hips and flipped me, ripping my hands from their holds. I gasped, my chest pressing into the bed. Jaxon moved away, and I instantly protested, but I didn’t have time to do much. He yanked me back into him. He’d rearranged himself, leaning back against the headboard. I was now situated in between his legs. His hard cock wasn’t far from me, and my ass was in his face.

As he pulled my hips back even further, I yelped, my hands scrambling on his thighs to hold myself up. I’d never been manhandled like this before, but from my throbbing prick, I could definitely say I liked it. A lot. Jaxon’s massive hands gripped my ass and separated my cheeks, sending warmth to my face. I shouldn’t be embarrassed by being so exposed to him, but fuck, I

was. However, it wasn't just that, though. I was turned on. My hole kept clenching in anticipation of what was to come.

Jaxon didn't keep me waiting. His tongue dragged over my entrance. I took in a sharp breath. Holy fucking monster god. He lapped and sucked on my hole, sending sparks up my spine. If I'd thought my cock was hard before, I'd known nothing. Fuck. I could come. Just from this. I pushed back onto his tongue, crying out. Whimpers and moans never stopped. I couldn't help it.

"*Nngh*," I grunted when the tip of his tongue wiggled into me. Holy shit. Slurps and wet licking sounded. Jaxon moaned and growled as he wiggled deeper inside of me. I gripped his thighs for everything that I was worth as I shrieked under his ministrations. His fingers dug into me and his thumbs kept me open wide for his tongue to continue attacking me. With every lick, suck, and gentle nibble around my rim, I was losing my fucking mind.

"More," I begged. "I need you inside of me."

His tongue withdrew and a cap popped open with a sharp snap. Jaxon's voice was a deep rumble as he said, "Need to go slow."

I shook my head. "I don't want slow."

I grunted when Jaxon bit my ass. Hard. He growled, "Let me take care of you."

Part of me wanted to keep protesting. I wanted Jaxon in my ass, and I wanted him now. However, he was right, and I knew it. His dick wasn't small. My hole was untouched. We had to be careful, as much as every cell in my body was screaming for him. So I surrendered to him, relaxing as much as I could.

Cold, slick fingers circled my rim, making me tremble. I looked over my shoulder at Jaxon, and he was staring intently at where his fingers were. Over and over again, he spread the lube over my entrance. I shivered. My fingers were holding onto him so tightly that I had to be leaving bruises behind.

"Beautiful," he whispered.

"*Uugh*," I whimpered. "Please, sweetheart. Stop teasing me."

Without preamble, one of his fingers slid all the way into me. The digit was longer and thicker than his tongue. It stung, but didn't truly hurt. All I could do was buck and grind back on him. Jaxon snarled as he began shoving his finger in and out of me until I was crying his name like a mantra, like it was my final breath.

The lube cap popped again, then Jaxon returned with two fingers this time. Head bowed, his leaking cock against my cheek, I shoved my ass into the air and ground back on his fingers. I was grunting with each backward thrust, because ohmygod it was good. More than good. It was fucking perfect.

Jaxon's fingers rubbed against something, and my eyes shot wide as I jerked. "Holy fuck," I snapped. "Is that what I think it is?"

Jaxon didn't respond more than a low hum, but his fingers returned. I cried out, my back arching. Yep. That was my prostate, and why hadn't I been playing with it before this? Three fingers now stretched me open further. It stung and felt fucking amazing at the same time. He continued to tag that perfect spot as he worked more lube into me. His fingers wiggled and scissored, stretching me, but I could barely pay attention to anything besides the pleasure washing through me.

My balls hugged my shaft and tingles began to gather in the small of my back. "Fuck," I moaned, grabbing the base of my cock as I fought impending release. "Baby, you need to hurry or I'm going to come."

"Wait," he snapped.

"I can't," I whined. I really couldn't, but I really, *really* wanted to come on his cock.

Another finger slipped into me, and I cried out. Holy hells. I was so open, so damn full. Jaxon pumped his fingers in and out of me a few times before he slowly pulled them out. I groaned. My ass clenched automatically. It ached. It was much too empty.

Ever so gently, Jaxon turned me around so I straddled his thighs. He cupped my cheeks, the lube from his fingers getting everywhere. He whispered, "Mine."

I pressed my lips to his. "All yours." I traced my fingertip over his ear. "And you're mine? Right?"

"Yours."

Heat rushed to my cheeks. Damn right he was. I yanked his lips back to mine, where they belonged, and kissed him nice and slow. Jaxon began shifting until my back hit the bed and he loomed over me. I hooked my legs over his hips as I trailed my fingers over his warm skin. Jaxon's golden eyes were practically molten as he stared down at me.

I felt the crown of his cock nudge my hole, and I moaned in response. Wanted this. Needed this. Jaxon slowly pushed in. I couldn't help the whine

that came out of my lips. The stretch was enormous. I wouldn't say it hurt, but it wasn't super comfortable either. Jaxon paused. I locked my legs around him and my arms behind his neck before he could pull out.

"I don't fucking think so," I said and smashed my lips to his. "I want you inside of me."

Jaxon growled and sank a little deeper into me. The round ridges on his cock rubbed against my rim. I clawed at his back. "Fuck, yes, sweetheart."

He pressed his lips to my cheek, and I turned to catch his mouth. My tongue tangled with his as Jaxon pumped in and out of my channel. When his ridges caught on my prostate, I nearly came off the bed, screaming. He swallowed my noise and his tongue kept plundering my mouth. With every thrust, his cock rubbed against my passage, setting my nerves alight.

When his hips smacked into my ass cheeks, I whimpered. I was so full. So impossibly full. I couldn't help but pant against Jaxon's mouth. The sensation of his dick fully seated inside of me was almost too much, and yet, I loved it. I squeezed him close. Slowly, he pulled out, then pushed back inside, his heavy balls smacking into me.

"Jaxon," I whined. "Jaxon." I couldn't help but say his name over and over again as he rutted into me.

Growling, he yanked out before pounding into me. I grunted from the impact, and pleasure shot up my spine. "*Nnuugh*," I cried out. "More. More."

He listened, thrusting into me hard and fast. I had to stretch up a hand to plant on the footboard to keep from sliding forward. My other hand gripped his hair. I rocked my hips in time with him, trying to get Jaxon in even deeper. It felt as if he was rearranging my insides, but it wasn't enough. I wanted to be even closer to him. No. Want wasn't strong enough. Crave. Need. Must. If it was possible, I would crawl inside of him and never leave.

"I'm not going to last," I gasped. I was on the cusp, my dick throbbing, my balls high and tight, and my muscles so tense it felt as if I would rip apart. Jaxon angled his hips, and I grunted. He tagged my prostate. Everything tightened even more until I leaped over the edge with a loud scream. Pleasure washed over me in a wave. My ears rang. My eyes closed. All I could do was feel as my ass contracted around Jaxon's dick. He snarled, and a second later heat bloomed inside of me.

My eyes cracked open. Jaxon was panting above me. He rested on his elbows, covering me completely. I weakly kissed him. "You about killed

me.”

His eyebrows immediately pulled together. “Are you alright? Did I hurt you? I’ve never topped before.”

“Now you tell me.” Before he could respond or pull away, I snuggled closer and kissed every inch of skin I could reach. “It’s a compliment. I’m fine.”

Jaxon nuzzled my cheek. “Mine.”

“Yep.” I chuckled. “You’re never getting rid of me now.”

His eyes met mine again. “I never want to be away from you.”

I smiled and wrapped my arms around his neck. I wanted to tell him yes to dating. I wanted to ask if he would mark me in truth. I wanted to tell him I wanted to be with him for the rest of my life, just like this. I liked Jaxon. Hell, I was almost positive it was more than like at this point. However, fear remained. I couldn’t lose him. I pushed the thought away. I didn’t want anything to dampen this moment. This perfect moment.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Jaxon

I stared down at my mate and ran my fingertips over his warm skin. The sun was filtering in through the window. The alarm would go off soon, and we'd have to start our day. Right now? Well, right now, I could simply hold him in my arms. Chris was pressed against my side, his face resting on my chest, an arm thrown over my gut. Bruises and bite marks covered him. Each one settled something deep inside of me. Chris was claimed. I was showing anyone who cared to look that Chris belonged to someone. Though I had managed to hold off the *actual* claiming bite, which was good. That wasn't something to do in the heat of the moment or without an extensive conversation beforehand.

Last night had been revolutionary. Both times. But Chris taking me... I'd never had a better experience in my life, and I wasn't shocked. Then he'd let me fuck him. I'd never done that before, and I hadn't planned to with Chris, too afraid of hurting him, but he'd enjoyed it, if his pleased screams had meant anything. I wouldn't say I liked topping better, because I didn't, but I'd certainly enjoyed it. Not shocking either.

This was Chris. Everything was better with him. I wanted a lifetime of better with him, though it was far too early to bring that up. I couldn't tell him the depths of my feelings or that he was my mate yet. He didn't even want to be my boyfriend because of how it might affect our friendship. He would for sure freak out if I told him I was deeply in love with him and ready to claim him, tying him to me forever.

I paused and trailed my gaze over his sleeping form. I was in love with Chris. I shouldn't have been surprised, but I was. So quickly I'd fallen in love with him. My fingers dragged over his smooth skin. My love. My mate.

Christopher snorted, dragging his face over my chest and spreading drool everywhere. "What time is it?"

"Not quite time to wake up." I could see my clock from our current position on his bed. We'd abandoned my bed after the mess we'd left behind.

"Good." Chris went boneless.

I rubbed my hand over his back and took a deep inhale of his sweet scent. "Are you alright? Sore? Did I hurt you?"

Glaring up at me, he said, "You would never hurt me."

I smiled, rubbing my thumb over his bottom lip. "Still, are you sore?"

He flopped back down on me. "Yeah, my ass hurts, but I'm okay."

"I'm sorry."

Chris bit me, making me yelp. He said, "Don't apologize. I wanted it and I sure as hell liked it."

Rubbing my cheek on the top of his head, I whispered, "I'm glad." We both fell silent for a few minutes until I commented, "Your birthday is coming up."

He grunted.

The true contrarian that he was, Chris didn't like his birthday, his Halloween birthday. He hadn't wanted to do anything last year, and I'd let it slide. But this year was different. I wanted to do something, even if it was small.

Kissing the top of his head, I asked, "What do you want to do?"

"Nothing."

"What do you want as a gift?"

"Nothing."

"So no books and no Halloween Ball the night before?"

Chris glared at me. "Those two things have nothing to do with my birthday."

I laughed.

"I will accept unrelated books on the day, and of course we're going to the ball. Last year, I had to drag you. You didn't even wear a costume or dress up."

That had been because I hadn't had anything special to wear. Last year, I'd had no intention of ever attending the ball. This year I was under no illusions. Chris would've forced me to go, even if we hadn't been sort of dating. Besides, last year had turned out a lot more fun than I would've thought possible.

"You have something to wear, right?" he asked, looking up at me again.

I kissed his forehead. "Yes."

"Good, because I'm going to look hot."

My thoughts raced back to the lace briefs he'd been wearing last night, and my morning wood twitched. I pushed the remembrance away. We didn't have time for sex, and right now, I was enjoying the simple intimacy of cuddling.

"I'm sure you will," I told him honestly. Chris looked amazing in anything. *Or nothing*, my mind unhelpfully supplied as my hands skimmed over his bare skin. Clearing my throat, I asked, "You don't want to do anything else? We could go to breakfast or take a drive."

His lips pursed. "A drive would be nice."

"We could find somewhere to picnic."

"Fine," he sighed. "You've convinced me."

Laughing, I rolled on top of him, and Chris wound his arms around my back, smiling up at me. I teased, "Did I? That didn't seem too hard."

"What can I say, sweetheart?" He shrugged. "I just like you."

My heart warmed. "I like you too."

He arched up and claimed my mouth in a sensual kiss. "Good," he muttered, "because I don't think I'm going to let you go."

Did he mean what I hoped he did?

Before I could ask, the alarm went off and Chris squawked, shoving me off while complaining about missing his morning workout.



I was sitting at a table in Mummy Mocha waiting for Chris. He'd insisted on another run after his team workout, something I was sure his coach would call reckless and dangerous, but Chris had refused to be swayed.

Once he was done, we were going to work on Hamlet for a little bit, then go to dinner. Unfortunately, my thoughts were locked on one thing.

Did Chris finally like me?

It had been a couple of days since he'd mentioned not letting me go, but I'd been unable to gather the courage to ask him exactly what he'd meant and he hadn't said. Still, it picked at me. I needed to know. I loved Chris, and I wanted him to love me in return.

A bright green coffee slid in front of me. "Coffee for your thoughts?" Seth asked.

I just flushed, my throat becoming strangled. I might have "known" Seth for over a year, but I still couldn't talk to him.

"Maybe just coffee?"

I averted my eyes.

"Hey, Seth," Chris called as he bounded over to us. He plopped onto my lap without preamble and pressed a sweaty kiss to my face. "Hey, sweetheart."

I squeezed him in greeting.

"What's up, Seth?" Chris asked.

"Just wondering what Jaxon was thinking about so hard," he replied with a huge grin.

I reflexively tightened my arms around Chris, who glanced at me. My main focus was on Seth, though. I didn't care for him smiling at my mate so broadly. He could go smile at someone else. Fingers threaded through my hair, and I finally turned my attention to Chris. His brows were furrowed; I didn't like that expression.

"I'm okay," I whispered.

"Okay." Turning toward Seth, Chris said, "I'm dying for a coffee."

He snorted. "You mean sugar with caffeine you can't taste."

"My favorite."

Seth chortled and moved toward the counter. Chris kissed me. "I'll be right back, alright?"

I nodded.

I kept my eyes on Chris as he made small talk with Seth and with Tanner when he came in. The entire time, I wanted to walk over to him and draw him into my embrace. I needed to find out how he felt, but I was too much of a coward.

Chris returned and sat back in my lap, completely uncaring about the sweat coating him or the people around us. I held him close. I didn't care either. I just needed him to be as close as possible at all times. I was sure that was completely practical and doable. I wanted to snort, but instead, I gave Chris another kiss.

"I should probably shower," Chris commented, then took a long drink of his coffee.

My cock twitched at the thought of a naked, wet Chris. We'd had sex this morning, but apparently, I needed more. I nodded. "Yep, shower."

His dark brown eyes twinkled. "Hmm, does that mean you'll be joining me?"

This time I did snort. The Creelin U showers were not built for people my size, let alone the two of us together.

"Fine," he sighed, then pressed his forehead against mine, staring at me. "Does that mean you'll put off Hamlet for a bit after my shower?"

I pursed my lips in mock thought. "I mean, he is already dead."

"And fictional."

"So I guess he can wait."

He grinned, sending my heart racing. Chris muttered right against my lips, "Damn right he can, the whiny bastard."

My resulting laughter was cut off when Chris sealed our lips together, claiming me.

CHAPTER THIRTY

CHRISTOPHER

I scrubbed a hand through my hair. I was having a bad day. I couldn't even say why. I'd talked with my parents, but they hadn't said anything even close to pressuring me. I'd talked with both Carter and Samantha, who were doing great. Jaxon and I were in a good place. He hadn't brought up dating officially, even though everyone thought we were together.

Literally, nothing was wrong, but... I wasn't okay.

I walked into my dorm room and instantly spotted Jaxon at his desk. Without talking, I headed over to him, straddled his lap, and rested my head on his shoulder. His arms wrapped around me.

"Baby?"

I couldn't respond. The weight on my shoulders was too much. Or maybe it was my chest. My lungs felt like they were grinding into my spine, not allowing even a single inhale. I buried my face in the crook of his neck and just breathed in his earthy scent, allowing it to relax me as much as it could.

Rubbing his cheek on the top of my head, he whispered, "I've got you."

And he did.

Jaxon kept studying as I camped out on his lap, running a hand over my back. I stayed on his lap until he had to leave for a class, and only then did I slide off. He kissed me before he left and promised to come back soon. I moved to his bed to curl around his pillow.

This was ridiculous. There was nothing wrong. I didn't get why I was upset right now or why I was having a bad day today. I rolled slightly to

pull my phone out of my pocket, staring at it. I didn't even know who to call or if I even wanted to talk to anyone. I pressed my face into Jaxon's pillow. Why was I so damn afraid? He kept saying he wouldn't leave and nothing would change. Why couldn't I believe him?

Sighing, I pushed on Dan's contact. He'd been texting me, just checking on me. I hadn't responded.

"Hey, Chris," Dan said. "What's up, man?"

"I'm..." I swallowed. Why was it so fucking hard just to say I wasn't doing well right now?

"Do you need me to come to you or call someone for you?"

A sob built in my chest. "Why is this so hard to talk about?"

"Because people, life, and ableism all make it hard."

"I don't even know what's bothering me."

"That can happen, Chris," he said, his voice radiating kindness.

"Well, that fucking sucks."

Dan burst into laughter. "It does. A lot."

I sighed.

"Have you talked to someone?"

"Like a therapist?" I asked, closing my eyes and rubbing my temple.

"Yeah, or a doctor, or one of your siblings, or Jaxon."

I shook my head, then realized he couldn't see me. "No."

"Chris, I'm happy to talk with you, but why haven't you talked to Carter or Sam?"

"I don't know." That was a fucking lie. I did. I didn't want to bother them. I didn't want to have one more thing set me apart.

"I know how close you are to them, and how much they love you."

"I know."

"Well, you can keep talking with me. I will always be here if you need to vent. But..."

"But I should tell my siblings," I said with a sigh. I closed my eyes. Dan was right.

"Do you want me to call Carter?" he asked.

Dan had his number, as well as Samantha's. He could call them for me. And I needed to do this. I needed to talk to Carter and Sam. It would probably make me feel better, and both of them would support me. Taking a deep breath, I asked in a small voice, "Can you call them and tell them I need them in my dorm room?"

“Of course. Without even talking to them, I know they’ll be there in a few minutes.”

And Dan was right.

Less than five minutes later Carter was pounding on my door and shouting in Korean, “Chris! Are you okay? So help me, I will break down this door if you don’t respond in two fucking seconds. Chris!”

“I’m alive, Carter.” I groaned as I stood up. “Don’t break anything.”

“Open the door,” he snapped, but I could hear the worry. Carter had always been overprotective of Sam and me; time hadn’t dimmed that. At all.

The second I pulled the door open, Carter shoved his way in. His hands clamped onto my shoulders as his eyes scoured me. He turned me one way, then the other. He asked, “Are you sure you’re not hurt?”

Samantha was the one who responded. “While Dan did make it sound rather dire, clearly Chris isn’t dying. Calm the fuck down.”

Carter shot her a glare.

I ignored their sniping at each other and just stared at them. A soft, comfortable warmth bloomed in my gut and spread throughout my limbs. My siblings didn’t banish my anxiety or fix anything, but suddenly I didn’t feel so alone. No matter what happened, Carter and Samantha would stand right beside me. I would never be without them.

“I’ve been struggling,” I confessed, and both of them fell silent. I rubbed the back of my neck. “I’ve...”

“What’s wrong?” Sam asked, coming to my side and resting her hand on my arm.

My eyes closed, and I moved toward Jaxon’s bed, snagging his pillow and wrapping my arms around it. His scent helped me calm down a bit. I looked at my siblings and told them about my panic attacks and the complete and total dread I had for the future. By the end of it, I was lying on Jaxon’s bed and Carter and Samantha were sitting on my bed.

“And then when I think about Jaxon possibly leaving me...” My breath immediately caught in my throat. I shook my head as I gripped his pillow. “I can’t handle anything without him.”

Sam’s eyebrows were furrowed. “Why do you think he’d leave?”

“Why would he stay?”

“Because he’s obsessed with you,” Carter said as he stood up. He crouched in front of me. “Whether friendship or romance, Jaxon isn’t going anywhere. You are way too important to him.”

I took a deep inhale. “Really?”

My sister rolled her eyes. “Yes. Gods, you’re stupid sometimes.”

I flipped Sam off; she just laughed. Ignoring her, I turned back to Carter. Trying to gather what little courage I had, I told him, “I think I’m in love with Jaxon.”

He just smiled. “Of course you are.”

“So Jaxon, that’s what’s making your anxiety so bad?” Sam asked.

That would be an easy out, but it wasn’t true at all. “He isn’t the reason. He’s part of it, but it’s more the whole future.” I sighed, rolling to my back to avoid Carter’s probing gaze. “I don’t know what I want to do with my life. I haven’t even picked a damn major.” I peeked at both of them. “You both know what you want. Neither of you have any issues and are shifters in a world full of monsters. Here I am, the only human in the family, and I have no idea what to do or what I want, and now, I have anxiety.”

Carter snorted. “That’s bullshit.”

“Complete bullshit,” Samantha added, then continued, “You know why I’m a sports education major? I wasn’t good enough to play soccer on the college level and it fucking broke my heart. I’m doing this to have some connection to the sport I love.”

My mouth dropped open. “I-I didn’t know.”

“Also, I have no idea if I want to do anything with this damn degree or if I’m just clinging to something I should be letting go.”

“Sam—”

Carter butted in. “And I’m hardly perfect. I’m stressed all the time. People think of me as smart, but honestly, I’m not. Dad and Mom have high expectations. I’m constantly stressed about failing a test or class. I don’t even know what I’m going to do with this degree. I know Dad and Mom are hoping I’ll go to law school, but I’m not sure I want that.”

I looked at Carter as he scrubbed a hand through his hair. He met my gaze. “Honestly, you always seem to just float through life. I figured you hadn’t picked a major because you were just waiting for inspiration or something.”

I gave a small laugh. “Inspiration? What kind of inspiration?”

“I don’t know,” he replied with a chuckle. “A queer peach god to descend from the heavens and bless you with a mandate or something.”

Sam and I burst into fits of laughter. She socked Carter in the shoulder and said, “You’ve been reading too many manhwas.”

“Not possible.”

I gave my two siblings, my closest friends, a good look. I always thought we’d shared basically everything, but just like me, they had been keeping stuff shoved down, hiding their stress. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

Sam joined Carter next to Jaxon’s bed. Both of them grabbed my hands. She said, “I’m sorry too. I didn’t know either.”

Carter pulled both of us into a tight hug, and I clung to my older brother. I whispered, my voice cracking, “I need help.”

He pressed a kiss to my forehead. “I will always help you.”

Tears burned the backs of my eyes for several long seconds before sliding down my cheeks. “Will you come with me to talk to Dr. Lee?”

“Of course,” Carter said.

I grabbed Sam’s hand. “You too. I need you too.”

She wrapped her arms around both of us. “I’ll be right there with you.”

“Okay.”

Together, wrapped around each other, the two people I trusted most in the universe walked me to the health center so I could get help.



Talking to Dr. Lee hadn’t been easy, but it had been good. He’d referred me to the school’s counselor, who I would start meeting with once a week. I’d decided against medication for now, but after I’d met with the therapist a few times, I might change my mind. But for now, I was okay with just seeing how things went. While part of me was still embarrassed that I even needed to talk to someone—internalized ableism, Dan had assured me—I was even more proud of myself for taking the next step that I’d needed.

When I finally returned to the room, Jaxon was there. He opened his arms, and I instantly raced into them. I tucked my face into the crook of his neck and just breathed. I loved him. I was in love with Jaxon. I kissed his neck, then smiled at the subsequent shiver. I was still scared of losing him, but I would try to believe, even if Jaxon and I were officially together, that nothing major would change between us, that we’d still stay in each other’s lives no matter how our romance turned out, that we would be together forever.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

CHRISTOPHER

I glanced in the mirror and grinned. My outfit was beyond hot. I expected heart eyes from my soon-to-be-if-I-was-brave-enough-to-actually-tell-him-my-feelings boyfriend. I stepped out of the bathroom and froze, my jaw dropping. Jaxon. Holy hell. He was in a tux. Like, an actual fucking tux with tails. A full penguin tux. I couldn't believe how good the deep black looked against his skin, and his waistcoat was dark red. He looked phenomenal. I wanted to strip him out of those clothes and fuck him senseless.

It was like I blinked and was across the room, mashing my mouth to his. Jaxon's tongue swept over my lips. Instantly, I opened. Clutching the back of his neck, I attempted to get as close as possible to him. My leg, with a bit of a struggle in my current outfit, hooked around his, and it still wasn't enough. He skimmed his hands over my sides, tracing the bare skin over my ribs. Each brush of skin-on-skin contact made me shiver. Before long, my prick was hard and throbbing.

Putting my hands around the back of his neck, I tried to jump up, but I couldn't. I squeaked as I started to fall back, but Jaxon easily caught me and stabilized me until I was soundly on my feet again.

With harsh breaths, I said, "This outfit is not built for this."

"This?"

I gestured at the tight pants, then made a mock jumping motion. Jaxon released a low, rumbling laugh that did not help my boner situation

whatsoever. He ran his warm gold eyes over me. I thrust my chest out in response and placed my fisted hands on my hips. His brow furrowed; I blinked. I thought I looked beyond good. Did he seriously not like my outfit?

“Who are you?” he asked.

“No one. I’m just hot. Or do you not think so?”

His large hands settled on my hips, tugging me closer. Jaxon placed a warm kiss to my cheek, which made my pulse throb. Maybe we could skip the ball. Sex was sounding a lot better than dancing right now. He said, his voice husky, “You look very sexy.”

He touched my exposed ribs, and I flushed. I was wearing a black button up shirt with a white cravat that was pinned with a skull, but the shirt only went down to my ribs. Over it was a long jacket that buttoned over my shirt, also leaving my midriff bare. My leather pants hugged my frame and were tucked into knee high boots.

A flush rushed to my cheeks. “Thanks, big guy.” Running my gaze over him, I commented, “You look fucking hot, if me mauling you as soon as I saw you wasn’t evidence enough.”

He blushed, and I kissed the color, which seemed almost silvery blue in this light. I did love his iridescent skin. It was always changing depending on how I looked at him. My soon-to-be boyfriend wasn’t just a monster, he was magical. My boyfriend. That thought alone made me smile instead of panic. I was getting better. I was starting to believe him when he said nothing fundamental would change with us. My almost-boyfriend who I was in love with. I hadn’t said yes yet, but he’d say yes, right? He hadn’t changed his mind about me. He couldn’t have.

I took a deep breath. Trust. I needed to trust him and stop trying to control everything.

Jaxon bent down and pressed his lips to mine while his fingers played with my bare skin. I groaned into the kiss, going up on my toes to get closer to him. After a second, I said, “Maybe we should just stay here.” I dragged my fingertips down his arm as I batted very long, very fake eyelashes at him.

Jaxon groaned. “I would love that, but if we miss the ball, you’ll be sad later.”

He wasn’t wrong, but I was very horny at the moment. Still... I did love dancing. “Fine, we go, we have fun, then come back to our room and fuck.”

Oh, he laughed like it was a joke, but I saw the bulge in his pants and the way he shifted closer to me, licking his lips. Yep, I couldn't wait to fuck him again. No matter how many times we did it, I couldn't seem to get enough of him. I didn't think I ever would, and I was more than okay with that.

After one last kiss, and a groan, on my part, I took Jaxon's hand and led him outside. People were running around the campus in costumes, finery, or monster forms, laughing and screeching. More than one person had a red cup that I *highly* doubted was filled with punch. Jaxon was glaring at the cups, no doubt hating the plastic, which made me smile. It was just so him, and I was really into him.

Yeah, that still scared me, but I was forging forward. I was going to trust that Jaxon wanted me as much as I wanted him. Yep. I could do it.

I tugged him toward the dance, pausing at a booth decked out with red velvet drapes, fairy lights, and candles to take a picture with Jaxon, who blushed the entire time. Not giving him even a second to think about it, I dragged him onto the dance floor and wrapped my arms around him. His arms curled around my waist as we moved to the music. He was still rather robotic in his movements, but he was looser than last time. Jaxon was learning. In no time, he'd be a fabulous dancer. I was sure of it.

We were hardly the only new couple on the dance floor either. I spotted Mort Rain, better known as Mothboy, dancing with the music major transfer student who had that horrid bird familiar who'd made me crash into Tate. I still hadn't quite forgiven Reginald, even though that wasn't Arie's fault. I saw Aaron dancing with a group of frat bros. One of them, Caleb, was with some human I was only vaguely familiar with. I caught sight of Tate and Luc dancing so close together they might as well be one person.

Floating chandeliers hung overhead, giving the ballroom a magical air. The DJ was playing a nice variety between fast and slow tunes. A table covered with a red velvet cloth had dark red punch in a crystal bowl and little plates with cakes on them. It felt slightly prom-like to me, with the selfie stations and whatnot, but I wasn't mad about that. I'd been a huge fan of school dances in high school and that hadn't changed with time.

Dean Yaga was even here, nodding in time with the music on her floating pedestal. I spotted the bright pink Crypt Keeper, Mrs. Crimpton, sticking out in the sea of dark colors, chatting with the dean. Carter was near them,

chatting with Dan. I didn't see my sister or Penelope, but I was positive they were around. Neither of them were the type to miss a party.

I turned my focus to the man before me and couldn't help the gentle smile that bloomed. I cupped his cheek, rubbing his skin with my thumb. He was so damn special. Why hadn't I noticed how much I liked him last year? I'd always cared about Jaxon, from the instant I'd first seen him, but why couldn't I have seen the true depths of my feelings? Maybe I had, but it had scared me. That was possible. Look at me now, terrified to tell him I was in love with him when I knew he cared about me in return.

"What?" he asked.

"Nothing," I replied. Now wasn't the time. I didn't want an audience the first time I told him I loved him.

Jaxon nuzzled my forehead. "I'm so happy to be here with you."

My pulse pounded. "I'm happy to be here with you too. I wouldn't want to be here with anyone else."

"Good, because I don't want to share you with anyone else."

It was like my heart was trying to break out of my chest. "I'm so glad it's you."

"Me for what?"

"Everything." Hand on his shoulder, I simultaneously pulled him down and went onto my toes so I could press a kiss to his lips. This kiss was slow, unhurried, and full of emotion. It was as if I could feel his heart beating in time with mine. In this moment, we were existing as one. I never wanted to be away from him. This might have been fast, and yet it had been a long time in the making.

Apparently, my romantic heart had been waiting for Jaxon and he sure as hell had been worth the wait. He was worth my fear. He was worth taking a chance on. He was worth being brave for. Jaxon was worth everything.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Jaxon

I scoured my appearance again. My hair was neatly braided, I was wearing my favorite hoodie, and while I was a more sickly shade of lavender-blue than my usual darker purple, my skin was blemish free. All in all, I looked good. It was Chris's twenty-second birthday, and I wanted him to enjoy it. It was Sunday morning, so he had no practice. He had gone for a run as soon as he'd woken up.

Chris and I had stayed late at the Halloween Ball, dancing, drinking, and laughing. It had been a great night. I'd enjoyed my time with him, though I had enjoyed coming back to our room more. Chris had slowly undressed me, then bent me over my desk chair and fucked me within an inch of my life.

Today, though, I could feel the difference in him. Chris hated his birthday so damn much, but I was going to do my best to make this the best one he'd ever had.

Thankfully, Carter had allowed me to borrow his car, after several threats on my life if I dared return his "baby" with a single scratch on her. It was a damn ancient station wagon, but from how he acted, you'd have thought it was a Ferrari or something. After threatening me about his car, Carter had then threatened me about driving recklessly and hurting Chris. I had to spend nearly an hour convincing Carter that his car and his brother would both be safe in my hands.

I checked the backpack sitting on my desk chair for the thousandth time. It was well-stocked and perfectly cold with the ice packs. The coffees were in cozies, so there was no danger of them melting before Chris returned.

Everything was ready, and I was terrified.

I was going to ask him about what he'd said over a week ago. I was going to ask him if he liked me as much as I did him. I was going to tell him that I was in love with him. I was going to tell him he was my mate. I was going to ask if he wanted my mate bite. I was going to confess to him. On his damn birthday.

I wanted to puke.

The last two weeks since the blood moon had been great. We slept in the same bed. Yes, we'd been having sex, but it was more than that. A lot of the time we talked about homework, fellow students' drama (like, holy crap, the sheer amount of new human-monster couples), and general life stuff, like my parents going on a pure mushroom diet for three days or Chris's grandmother in South Korea demanding to meet me in person and see my knees (yes, my knees) since Carter and Sam had said so much about me.

Other times, especially when it was late, we would lie side by side and talk about the future. My hopes for Bro-tein. Chris's fear he would never find something he loved to do. What we both hoped we'd be doing in the summer, or in two years' time, or five years.

There was a new intimacy between us that I'd never experienced before, and I absolutely adored it. I reveled in it, basked in it, loved it, and was also utterly terrified of it.

Long-term commitment wasn't something I feared, especially when it came to Chris; he was perfect for me. However, now that I'd been with Chris, had this closeness, felt what it was like to be in love with my soul mate, I couldn't stop the bone-deep dread that I would lose it. If Chris wanted to go back to being friends or if he didn't love me in return, I would die. I wouldn't survive. Yes, I would still be his friend, but something inside of me would be irrevocably shattered. And hearing him talk about someone else or seeing him with someone other than me would destroy me further.

Now that I'd experienced the best thing in my life, I knew that life wouldn't be the same without him.

The door opened, and I grinned as Chris walked in. He was in shorts and a tank top, despite the chilly weather, and he was covered in sweat—sweat I

wanted to lick off him. If I did that, we'd never leave the room, so I refrained.

He walked straight toward me, and I wrapped my arms around him, drawing him close. "Good workout?"

"It was fine."

I fought a frown at his tight tone. There wasn't a smile in sight and he looked like someone had been murdered. I knew it was from his birthday. He'd been like this last year. I didn't know the exact reason why he hated his birthday, but he was allowed to. I just wanted him to have a good time today.

"The team surprised me on my run. They had balloons and everything for me. Even a huge gift card to Mummy Mocha. Apparently, Aaron told them about my birthday, and I take the same route for every run, so I guess it was easy to surprise me."

"How did he know?"

"Sam's big mouth."

My brow furrowed. I hadn't been aware of Sam being friends with Aaron. Sure, the Kim siblings tended to be friends with everyone, but Sam and Aaron? That was new.

He must have seen my confusion because he said, "She slept with some harpy who happens to be a huge fan of Mort Rain, who's in Alpha Claw Omega, and the harpy's sister knows Shorely, who of course is frat bros with Aaron. So Sam mentioned it to the harpy, who mentioned it to her sister, who told Shorely, who told Aaron, who told the team."

I blinked. Well, that was a telephone game of the Kim sibling network, birthday edition.

"Yeah."

Rubbing his arms, I said, "We don't have to go on the drive. We can just hang out here." I might have planned a lot and I might have really wanted to have an actual date with Chris, but his comfort came first.

"No," he instantly replied. "I want to go."

"It'll be fun."

Chris smiled, and I swore sunlight grew within me. He cupped my face. "It's always fun with you."

I swallowed. "I always have fun with you too."

"Let me shower and get changed." When Chris shucked off his shorts, I turned away with a flush on my cheeks. I didn't want to get distracted.

Only a handful of minutes later, we were in Carter's car, heading for a remote location that Sam had assured me would be perfect.

"I can't believe Carter let you borrow his car." Chris snagged my hand, beaming as he looked out the window.

"Me either. Though I don't think I realized quite how much he loves his car."

He burst into laughter. "He loves *loves* it! I don't quite get it, but he does."

"He did tell me we couldn't have sex in the back."

"Ohmygod, of course he did."

Not that I would've wanted to have sex in Chris's older brother's car, but his absolute insistence that we didn't made me wonder if *he* had sex in the back of his car. It did have a rather large truck space—more than enough for a couple of sleeping bags or an air mattress. Perhaps that was why he liked this car as much as he did.

I pulled Chris's hand to my mouth and pressed a kiss to the back of it. "Don't worry, I didn't bring you out here to defile your brother's car."

"Well..." He grinned, his eyebrows wiggling. "I wouldn't say no."

My gut lurched. "I do have a blanket and lube."

His smile turned warm. "I am definitely on board with that."

"Fine with me."

Keeping my hand tight in his grasp, Chris turned up the music and kept his eyes on the passing scenery. The trees were lovely this time of year, and the day was nice and sunny. The weather was perfect for this outing. Also, I was utterly and completely alone with my mate. Nothing made me more content than just being with Chris.

I parked on a pullout and asked, "Ready?"

Chris nodded.

I snagged the backpack before taking his hand and leading him toward a small track in the woods. I hadn't ever been to this particular vantage point, but Sam had insisted it was romantic. For not having been at Creelin U long, she sure had gotten around. I watched my step while Chris kept an ongoing commentary of the trees, bushes, animals, bugs, and whatever else flitted through his thoughts. All of it made me grin, but it wasn't enough for me to risk looking at him.

While I wasn't opposed to hiking or physical exertion, I didn't spend much time in nature and I really didn't want to twist my ankle. So no matter

how adorable Chris was being, I was going to keep my focus on the ground.

“Oh,” Chris gasped, and I finally looked up. We were on the edge of a cliff that overlooked a deep valley covered in trees. I pressed a kiss to his cheek. His voice was almost reverent when he said, “This is lovely.”

Tracing his perfect face with my eyes, I replied, “Yes, utterly lovely.”

It was quick to set up my relatively simple picnic. Blanket, food, drinks, and a flameless electrical candle that was romantic and yet safe for the outdoors. I took fire safety seriously, of course.

Chris sat right next to me, then grunted and repositioned on my lap. “That’s better.”

Winding my arms around him, I completely agreed. This was significantly better.

I grabbed an apple slice and lifted it to his lips. Chris took it from me, his lips brushing my fingertips. I shivered at the gentle touch and pulled him even closer to me. And yet it wasn’t enough. If I could, I would crawl inside of Chris and never leave. Just set up camp. Stay right inside of him forever.

Not healthy, but hey, I wanted to be connected to Chris forever.

He gave a long, contented sigh after we finished eating. We hadn’t spoken much, just simply enjoyed the fresh air. Chris reached back and threaded his fingers through my hair. My eyes closed. Fuck, that was nice.

Twirling one of my braids around his finger, he said, “This has been the best birthday ever.”

I wanted to crow in success. Instead, I asked, “Why don’t you like your birthday?”

He sighed, but this one sounded more sad, so I pressed a kiss to his temple. “I think... Well...”

“You don’t have to tell me.”

Chris looked over his shoulder at me, and our eyes connected for a moment before he faced forward again. “It’s not some huge secret. It’s honestly stupid.”

I kissed the top of his head, not saying anything. I sincerely doubted it was stupid.

“When I was younger I loved my birthday, but when I had to repeat freshman year...” He turned his face into my chest. “I was already older than most of my classmates because my birthday is at the end of October, and my parents said I wasn’t ready to start kindergarten—being the late

bloomer I am—so I had to wait a year to start. Then I had to repeat a year for failing.” He shook his head. “I just feel so behind everyone.”

“You’re not.”

“I am,” he said in a rush, his fingers gripping my hoodie. “I’m twenty-two, in my second year of college, and have never had a job, let alone even an idea what major I’m going to pick. I have no idea what I’m doing. I only play soccer because I like it and am marginally good at it. So, my birthday just feels like a massive reminder that every year I’m falling behind.”

“You’re not.”

“Easy for you to say, mister business owner who knows exactly what he wants.”

I huffed a laugh. “Fine. *I* know what I want to do, but you’re not falling behind. Look at the school doctor. Dr. Lee has reinvented himself, and he’s not the only one. We have older than typical freshmen and transfers. Like those orc twins. The Moth Boy who wants nothing more to do with television. It’s never too late to do something different with your life.” I nudged his chin up so I could see him. “Chris, you are not falling behind.” I kissed him. “You’re perfect where you are.”

“On your lap?”

Chuckling, I replied, “I’m not mad about that, but I was more talking about in a general sense.” I kissed his ear. “There’s no rush. None. And I will be with you through it all, Christopher Kim.”

A flush rushed over his cheeks. “You promise?”

“I promise. Nothing is going to make me leave you. You’re it for me,” I confessed.

Chris turned around, almost kneeling me in the crotch. His brows were furrowed as he stared at me. Slowly, he asked, “What do you mean by that?” Before I could say anything, he continued in a rush, “I know you said we’d be friends forever. That nothing would change, but...” He swallowed. “But what you just said sounds more romantic. More... mate-like... maybe... perhaps...”

I stopped his rambling with a kiss as I gathered every ounce of courage I possessed. Cupping his cheeks, I said in a thick voice, “I’m in love with you.”

His mouth dropped open.

“I love you, Chris. I never thought I could feel about someone the way I feel about you. I love you so fucking much, I can’t believe it. And you’re

my mate, if you'll accept me. I want to spend the rest of my life with you."

He just continued to stare at me, his eyes wide and his mouth agape.

Pain plucked at my heart. "Babe, I need you to say something. Am I making a fool of myself?"

"No," Chris blurted right before he crashed his mouth into mine. "Fuck, big guy," he moaned against my lips. "You are so damn romantic."

Clasping his hips, I asked, "Is that yes, you like me?"

"No."

Tears instantly burned the backs of my eyes as a shattering rang in my ears.

He smiled. "I love you, Jaxon Bolder."

"Chris," I warbled.

Nuzzling my cheek, he whispered, "I was afraid of us changing because I can't live without you, Jaxon. But I also can't help being in love with you either. Though knowing you love me and want me..." He shook his head, his hair tickling me. "It makes me unafraid. It makes me brave. You make me brave." He claimed my mouth with his. "I want to spend my life with you. Loving you. Making you laugh. Being with you."

With a low groan, I yanked him as close as possible. "I want it all. Every moment, good or bad. I want everything, Chris."

"Good." He possessed my mouth again, and I melted into his confident movements. His voice low, he promised, "I'm never letting you go."

EPILOGUE ONE

CHRISTOPHER

NINE MONTHS LATER

“Is there something wrong with my knees? You can be honest with me,” Jaxon suddenly said, making me look up from my computer.

Blinking, I stared at him for a moment. Where in the actual fuck had that come from? I leaned back on my parents’ couch in sunny California and replied honestly, “I have never, not once, thought there was something wrong with your knees. They are lovely knees.”

“Your grandmother has said, multiple times, that my knees are cute.”

I burst into laughter and yanked Jaxon down on the couch next to me. My grandmother and grandfather were visiting from South Korea, and she was very taken with my boyfriend. My grandfather liked Jaxon as well, but he wasn’t as effusive with his affection. He was more normal with my boyfriend. I smiled. That word still made me so damn happy. Taking his hand, I snuggled against his side. “The knee thing makes sense.”

“Oh, is it a Korean thing?”

“Uh, no. Not at all. It’s my grandmother’s thing. She’s obsessed with knees. Like, when I was born, she said my knees were tragic. Now, you’d

think she would've been more concerned about the whole Halloween Wave, her son, daughter-in-law, and her one other grandchild at the time being turned into cat shifters, but nope. My knees were the problem."

His eyes narrowed and he remained silent for a moment. "You have very nice knees."

I chuckled. "She says age has tempered them, whatever the hell that means." I shook my head. "She did say she knew she was going to marry my grandfather because of his knees."

"What?"

"Mind you, they were six years old, but she says it's all in the knees. She told my grandfather when they were fifteen that his knees were special and the two of them were meant to be. He thought it was adorable and started to like her. So, I guess, his knees did get them together." I shrugged. "At this point, we're all so used to her having opinions on people based solely on their knees. Like, it's normal for her to predict which celebrities are nice based on their knees. I don't know. It's just her thing."

"So my knees are fine?"

"Your knees are perfect," I answered, kissing his arm. My eyes fell closed as I took a deep breath, inhaling his musky, earthy scent. Nine months of us officially dating and the joy hadn't worn off. Sure, we were a bit less frantic for each other, had occasional fights, but there was still no one else I would rather spend time with.

"What are you doing?"

I bit my lip. I hadn't really talked to him about my vague dream that seemed impossible. But if anyone would get it, he would. "I was just researching."

"Book or person? And do I need to be concerned? Is this going to turn into a whole board that you need to plan? Gods, I hope no one has asked for your romantic help. I don't want to see your pin board again."

Laughing, I shook my head. Jaxon had never really gotten over my "serial killer board" as he'd called it. I liked to research. Sue me. "No, you don't need to worry. My corkboard is staying packed up. For now."

"Thank the monster god."

I bit his arm, making him yelp. "I'm not that bad."

"Yes, you are."

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“Anyway, I was sort of playing with maybe the idea of, you know.”

“I don’t know.” Jaxon shifted so he was facing me. “What’s going on, babe?”

In a rush, I said, “I want to go into marketing.”

“What?”

Taking a deep breath, I repeated at a much slower rate, “I want to maybe go into marketing.”

Jaxon nodded. “That makes sense.”

“It does?”

“Yeah, babe, it does. You like to research. You’re very good at marketing my Bro-tein already. You love people and making connections. You actually like social media.” Jaxon kissed the top of my head. “It just seems like you.”

I flushed. “I like the idea of it. A lot.”

“That’s important.”

“I could be a business major too.”

He chuckled. “So we could be in a lot of classes together.”

So I wanted to be with my boyfriend all the time. I wasn’t going to apologize. Besides, being a business major would be good for what I hoped would be a good marketing career. “Are you going to let me market Bro-tein?”

“Of course. I’ll take all the help you want to give me.”

“Is it weird I want to work with you?”

He easily picked me up and placed me on his lap. I snuggled closer as he wrapped his arms around me. Jaxon gave me a kiss on my temple, then said, “Nope, because I want to work with you.”

“You do?”

“I want to be beside you all the time.”

“Forever?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“Good. Because you’re mine and I’m not letting you go.”

Jaxon replied, “I wouldn’t want you to anyway.”

Resting my head on his shoulder, I held him close with a wide smile. I’d truly lucked out with him.

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EPILOGUE TWO

Jaxon

FIVE YEARS LATER

“Question, big guy,” Chris said the instant I stepped into our home office.

I paused, my arms full of boxes of Bro-tein I needed to deliver in the morning. “Yeah, babe.”

“How do you say our new vanilla cinnamon Bro-tein is like a hot person rolled in a pan of cinnamon rolls without actually saying that, because that sounds disgusting.”

I burst into laughter. Chris always had the oddest questions when it came to his new marketing schemes. “We both know how you feel about food mixed with sex.”

A flush burned his cheeks as he finally turned away from the computer to look at me. He took a couple of boxes from me as he muttered, “It sounded like a good idea.”

“You were excited about it.” A couple of years ago, Chris had really wanted to lick chocolate and caramel sauces off me and have sex. Well, he’d lasted all of ten minutes before he had a near panic attack from the

stickiness. Something about the texture had really bothered him. We'd stopped partway to take a shower. After that, he'd ruled out any food involved in our bedroom activities.

"I don't mind cum stickiness, but food..." He shuddered, making me smile.

After I put my boxes down as well as stacking the ones Chris was holding on top, I curled my arms around him and drew him close. He held me in return, looking up at me. I bent enough to place a long kiss on his perfect lips, the touch making my pulse pick up slightly. It didn't matter that we'd been together for years; it didn't matter that we were officially mates; it didn't matter we were married; no one had ever or would ever stir my blood like Chris did. I was still deeply in love with him, and every day I fell even more in love with him, which shouldn't be possible.

"I'm still struggling with marketing this new product. It's good for protein coffee or mixes, but... I can't seem to find a good tag line," he commented.

"You'll figure it out." He always did.

"Mhhhm."

The last five years hadn't always been easy, but slowly our company—because it was ours—had taken off. Bro-tein made enough to support both of us. It wasn't enough for us to live richly, but we got by. Also, without Chris, I would've never gotten here. I had no doubt that in the future, Bro-tein would continue to do well.

I kissed his temple. "Carter and Sam still coming to stay with us?"

He nodded. "Yep. They would never pass up a free meal and a free couch."

I laughed, partly because it was true and partly because they mainly came to see Chris. They loved their brother. Carter and Sam had both moved back to California after college, though Carter now lived in South Korea most of the time. Chris and I did not live in a cave, as I would prefer, but we did live in a lovely little house that was surrounded by woods. It wasn't far from Creelin U, as they were one of our main buyers. And we'd both fallen in love with the area.

"I missed you," he whispered.

Heat rushed to my cheeks. "I missed you too." It might have been only a few hours, but I really didn't like to be separated from him.

Chris hooked his hands behind my neck and jumped up. I grabbed him easily, my hands supporting his firm ass. While he no longer played soccer, except for a weekend league that he did for fun, and exercised a healthy amount, he still ran and was still a morning person. Best part about running my own company was setting my own hours, so early mornings were no longer required, though sometimes Chris did convince me to leave the warm bed.

“I *missed* you,” he repeated, placing kisses on my neck before sucking on my jaw.

My cock twitched and began to fill at a dizzying rate. “Did you?”

“*Mmmhmmm.*” He pressed another sucking kiss to the sensitive skin behind my ear. “I’ve been wearing a plug today.”

My gut lurched, and a growl rumbled in my chest. Chris didn’t bottom often, as I preferred to, and it took a great deal more prep for him to take me than the reverse. However, every once in a while, he would surprise me by being prepped and ready for me.

“After you left this morning looking so hot, I really wanted you to fuck me tonight,” he continued.

I was just wearing my button-up work shirt. I didn’t wear it often over my branded t-shirt, but perhaps I should start. Squeezing and kneading his ass, making him moan, I said, “I have no problem with that.”

“Good,” he whined as he rocked against my stomach.

I quickly left the office and headed toward our bedroom as I claimed Chris’s mouth. He moaned into me, his fingers twining with my hair. I smiled gently as I placed him on our bed. He traced his fingertips over my face and whispered, “I love you.”

“I love you too, my baby, my husband, my mate, my life.”

AFTERWORD

Creepin U: Season 2! I never thought I would be a part of this awesome collab, but I'm so grateful that I got the opportunity to be. It was so fun to meet and work with the other amazing authors involved.

So writing this book. When I got the invite, I hadn't really thought of anything besides the fact that I wanted this to be a fun story, and the monster I wanted to use was an ogre. But finding Chris and Jaxon's story wasn't hard. I had so much fun writing their college romance. Also, the Creepin U universe was exciting and interesting to write in.

College is a common time for people to discover they have anxiety, often related to their future. That was when I found out I had anxiety and began having panic attacks. I wanted to convey that with Chris's character, while still keeping the story light and funny. However, I did still desire to be authentic in his character, in his anxiety, and in how he rejected having anxiety at first before seeking help.

With Jaxon being an ogre, I wanted to make him big in height as well as in weight. I wanted him to be plus size, not just a buff, hulking monster (not that there's anything wrong with that, just wasn't the story I wanted to tell). Also, I didn't want there to be anything negative from him being a big/plus size man. Bigger bodies exist, and plus-size people are just as attractive. They deserve love stories and happy endings without those stories focused on losing weight.

As always, I have a horde of people to thank!

Grace Park: Thank you so much for sensitivity and beta reading my book! I cannot thank you enough for your kind words, thoughtful comments, and poignant suggestions.

Adie Hart: Thank you for editing my book! I swear you find typos like no one else. You smoothed sentences, caught consistency errors, and found missing words. I appreciate you and your friendship.

CD Rachels: Thank you for inviting me to write in this amazing world!

Adrienne Lothy: My dear friend, I wouldn't have been able to write this book without your continued support. You always love my characters and encourage me when I need it. Thank you so much.

Sam Northman: Oh, the British half to my soul, thank you for beta reading this book, giving me encouragement, and supporting me. Your friendship means the world to me.

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CREEPIN U: SEASON 2

READ ALL THE CREEPIN U: SEASON 2 BOOKS!

Boy Meets Monster by Leslie McAdam
Shadows and Stone by Kota Quinn
First Kiss with a Mothman by CD Rachels
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Anchored to You by Ashley Rayne
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mars Quinn is many things (a potato masquerading as a human—quite possibly), but first and foremost, he's an obsessed cat dad to his horde of cats. As a transmasc author with mental and chronic health issues, he tries to write characters who face similar things. All in all, he's a boring hermit who never leaves his house unless forced. Usually, you can find him on his couch writing, reading, or gaming.

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