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The journey through the rotten woodland of Pucket Forest was an interesting one, even for Nessiesh. After encountering the Toll Man who required payment to enter this part of the woods, she and Kalen continued toward the grove.

Along the way, they needed to slosh through the swampy section that hadn't been marked on the map.

"I'm going to die of blood loss from all these buggers," Kalen complained, pulling leeches off him once they made it out.

He had taken off his pack and then his shirt. The blood-sucking creatures were all over him like clingy slugs. For most females, it might have been appalling to watch him removing them, but for a demon like Nessiesh, she was utterly captivated.

He thumbed over his shoulder. "Can you get the ones off my back?"

Suppressing her grin, she drew closer. Kalen turned his back to her and rested his head over his forearm that he had laid across a tree. Nessiesh admired his form. For a human, he was quite impressive, both in the mind and the body. Ever since hiring him to be her guide during her search, Kalen had grown on her. She feasted her eyes on him. His black hair lay over his perfect shoulders and part of his upper back. The muck outlined the curvature of every muscle. Mud had capped on those ratty trousers of his. Nessiesh nearly suggested he remove them.

"Can we move this along?"

Kalen's stern tone forced her to focus. She responded stolidly to hide her desire, "Fine."

The sexual tension had been building ever since crossing the Firelands weeks ago. She felt his longing for her as well. Until recently, she merely regarded Kalen as just a mortal with a pretty face. Never before had she wanted to be in the presence of any human, much less lay with them. But when fate forced her to rely on one, she found it fortunate to have found Kalen.

Nessiesh tapped each leech, inserting enough electricity into them to cook the creatures alive. In seconds, the shriveled-up leeches dropped.

She took a step back, brushing her hands as if they were dirty. "Done."

Kalen turned around, feeling his back the best he could. "Cheers."

Those eyes, she thought. I see a lifetime together in those eyes.

It can never be, reminded the voice of reason. Punishment for mating with mortals would be relentless—especially for Kalen.

Nessiesh clenched her teeth. *I know.*

* * *

They kept going until they reached a small, glossy meadow. In the middle of the field was a grove of oddly shaped trees that curved directly over the forest floor and then rose nearly upright into the air. Hundreds of birdhouses hung from their branches. There were so

many. Most were occupied by a family of noisy birds, fluttering to and fro from their little houses, feeding their young or flying off to fetch food.

“Hope they don’t shit on us,” Kalen said, slipping off his rucksack straps and placing the bag on the ground. “You think the next clue is in one of these birdhouses?”

“I do, but there are so many.”

Kalen recalled the last clue.

Suspended from the tree with the door closed is a house of the smallest.

“With the door closed.” He moved on. “Search for a birdhouse with a door.”

They began their search around the bent trees. Dozens of birdhouses hung from each one. Some birdhouses were old and weatherworn to the point that no bird occupied them. Others were sturdy and brightly painted as though they had been built that very day. Whoever had done this had been doing so for years, if not for generations. Even the ground was littered with broken birdhouses that had fallen some time back. Kalen crouched to check one and asked, “What are your plans when you find the book and lift the curse your master had placed over you?”

“Destroy her.”

Her words came out as a low growl that caused shudders to run up his spine. He took a beat to look at this demon woman as she searched. Kalen feared her. There was no doubt about that. She claimed she hired him, but in reality, she had forced him to help guide her through his world by threatening to rip him in half if he refused. Granted, she had paid him greatly, but even so.

Still, she was a remarkable thing. Beautiful, with curvy horns atop her head, pearl white fangs, and light purple skin. She had wit, too. A trait Kalen never knew demons had. Then again, he never spent time with one before.

Is it possible to fall in love with demons?

Nessiesh pointed up at a tree. “Look.”

He spotted a birdhouse with a closed door and approached the tree it hung from.

“I think that’s it,” he stated.

He seized a branch, ready to climb, but she beat him to it when she leaped high and grabbed hold of the top branch. She swung herself onto it and snatched the birdhouse. Nessiesh then rewarded him with—he daresay, a devil-may-care smile. “Silly man.”

Kalen snorted. “I am for you, love.”

Idiot! Watch what you say.

His embarrassment over his own words caused the heat to rise in his face. He grudgingly raised his chin to her, forcing a grin to try and cover up the fact that he had humiliated himself. He expected she would be laughing herself right out of the tree. Instead, to his utter surprise, her cheeks were fire red. Those charcoal-colored eyes of hers were wide, as if he had suddenly burst into flames.

“I, um, have to relieve myself,” he quickly lied and then hurried out of the grove, across the meadow, and vanishing into the forest.

Once he was safe within the cover of the trees, Kalen stopped and looked over to the grove. Nessiesh was opening the birdhouse to read the next clue inside.

“Who am I fooling?” he questioned softly to himself. “What kind of life could she and I have together? Unless I somehow became a demon or she a human.”

“A demon becoming human?” laughed someone behind him. “No respectable demon would stoop so low.”

Kalen turned and his heart rate sped. Hisil, the gargoyle, stood yards away between a pair of tall trees.

Dammit! They found us!

Hisil spread his wings, a sinister smirk creased across his face. Kalen didn't fancy the way he was looking at him, for he was fully aware of what Hisil wanted to do with him.

“This is where our search ends,” Hisil declared. “We're taking the demon cunt back to her master and as for you—”

He paused to stare at Kalen lustfully. “I'm going to have a bit fun with you before I pull that pretty head off your shoulders.”

Regardless of Hisil's exquisite handsomeness, Kalen wasn't going to let the thing violate him. He reached behind him and pulled out the bottle of Elementa oil while unholstering his pistol. Kalen knew he'd miss but fired anyway. Hisil had already leapt into the air, scraping against the branches above. Hundreds of leaves showered down. Kalen popped the cork to the Elementa oil, ready to use it when he was knocked over from behind by a massive wing. He landed hard on his side. The bottle rolled away from his grasp. As he reached for it, his wrist was seized by a marble white hand.

“You don't need that,” Hisil whispered into his ear.

* * *

The moment after Nessiesh read off the clue, the suspension of danger crept into each of her vertebra. She leapt from the branch she sat on, seconds before it shattered to bits. Birds flew in all different directions, abandoning their young.

Nessiesh flipped once and landed on her feet. She saw as the sawdust that was once the branch, drifting downward. Up in the sky, a figure flew swiftly.

“Ling,” she grunted.

And where there was Ling, there was his brother, Hisil.

After bursting through the branch, Ling had flown a long way before sharply turning in mid-air and flying straight at her with speed that outmatched a bullet.

If Nessiesh possessed her full power, a gargoyle would be nothing to her. Alas, her abilities had greatly been diluted by the blasted curse done by her master before the bitch had sent Nessiesh off on a mission to reclaim her strengths, adding a couple of gargoyle hunters on her tail for added fun.

There was much at stake, for if Nessiesh was caught and brought back to her master, she would forever be cursed, never to regain her powers again.

Before Ling plowed into her, Nessiesh leaped at the last second. Mounds of dirt burst upward when the gargoyle slammed into the earth. Nessiesh landed nearby, but the shaky ground, caused by the impact, stole her balance. She began falling backward, yet never touching the ground. The surface exploded directly behind her, and she suddenly found herself being zipped skyward. A strong, pale arm held her to Ling's side. His mighty, grey wings whipped the air loudly as she and he rose higher. Clumps of dirt fell away from the gargoyle, creating a thick dust trail as though the bastard was a comet.

"You've lost, Nessiesh," Ling told her. "Submit!"

Nessiesh had no intention of doing any such thing. With her free hand, she unsheathed her emerald bladed dagger. The very one she recently bartered from a witch only days ago. The blade, the witch promised, was crafted from a gem that held special elements designed to kill just about anything—including gargoyles.

Nessiesh gripped the handle tight and, with a powerful thrust, jammed the dagger into Ling's eye. The strike was a good one.

The gargoyle howled and when he let her loose to pull the blade out, Nessiesh latched onto his arm. She beat him to the weapon and ripped it out before proceeding to stab him repeatedly in the face. To save himself, Ling turned to stone. In the moment he did so, Nessiesh went for another strike and the emerald blade broke against her attacker's solid exterior. They plummeted straight down. With her weapon now useless, Nessiesh expected Ling to transform back, but he never did. The components of the blade had burrowed into his system and must have killed him.

The ground was coming up quickly. Nessiesh clambered onto Ling's back and held onto the still wings that were in mid flap. She calculated the precise time and when it came, she bounced off the statue. While airborne, the noise of the gargoyle crashing echoed in her ears. She landed directly on her feet and gazed over at the broken pieces that were once Ling.

Breathing heavily, Nessiesh went over at the heap of shattered stone bits. She sneered at it and then realized she was in some other field of the forest.

"Kalen."

Ling's brother would have been around, which meant he had gone after Kalen.

Nessiesh ran in the direction she hoped was the right way.

* * *

Hisil had Kalen on his back with hands pinned over his head. The gargoyle was a very muscular creature, and mostly naked save for slacks that were torn from the knee down. Kalen didn't care for the extremely large bulge between his legs.

When Hisil caught him eyeing it, he chuckled. "Enjoying the sight? Perhaps if you please me, I'll allow you to live and be my slave."

Kalen was seized by the throat and held down while Hisil unfasten his own slacks, freeing his fully erected cock. The sheer size of it would have caused Kalen to gulp if Hisil

wasn't borderline strangling him. He knew that if the gargoyle fucked him with that thing, it would kill him.

He was forced to sit up on his knees. Hisil slowly grabbed him by the back of the head. "Put it in your mouth and show me what a good plaything you can be."

Kalen wasn't going to let this happen. With his hands now free, Kalen snared Hisil by the testicles and squeezed as hard as he could. Gargoyle or not, that sort of pain was the same for any male. While Hisil hollered, Kaylen seized the moment and rolled away, grabbing the bottle of Elementa oil as he did. He had one chance.

Hisil came for him, his lustful sneer was replaced by a deathly snarl. Kalen clambered to his feet and threw the bottle as hard as he could. It shattered when Hisil tried swatting it away. The oil had an instant reaction. Moss sprouted all over the gargoyle, followed by flowers and mushrooms. Roots and vines manifested, twisting around Hisil, and planting themselves into the ground. Hisil yelled and thrashed against his bonds, but nothing he did helped. The surface beneath him liquified into quicksand and very quickly he was being pulled down, screaming as he went. Kalen watched with a stone-cold expression as the fiend was swallowed in by the earth.

"I'll find you again!" the gargoyle vowed just before his head vanished. "I'll not die like this! I-!"

The grains went over his head and, like that, Hisil was gone.

Kalen's legs nearly buckled. Never in his life had he been so afraid.

He left the forest to see Nessiesh rushing through the meadow toward the tree line where he was. He hurried toward her.

* * *

"Kalen!"

Nessiesh was beyond relieved. Not only had she found Kalen, but had found him *alive!* The terrifying thought of losing him had traveled with her as she made her way back to the grove. It scared her so much, she nearly fell into a panic. It wasn't like her to care for anything or anyone, but here she was, fretting over this human!

The moment Nessiesh reached him, she greatly sensed his trepidation.

"Did the other attack?" she asked, meaning Hisil.

Kalen nodded. "A-aye. He's gone now."

Nessiesh almost asked for more detail when he said, "We should leave."

Having found and read the next clue, Nessiesh agreed.

They traveled until night chased away all manner of daylight. They made camp. For the entire evening, Kalen had said little. Nessiesh suspected what had happened between him and Hisil. She didn't believe an actual rape occurred, for most likely Kalen would be unable to walk if it had.

She eyed him from over the fire. He was so beautiful, even in his traumatized state.

Law be damned.

Nessiesh stood and came around to him. He looked up with knitted eyebrows.

“What is it?” he asked softly.

Nessiesh crouched beside him, leaned over, and gently kissed him on the mouth. The taste of him was so sweet she wanted more but waited for his reaction.

Kiss me, idiot.

As though he heard her thoughts, Kalen pressed his lips to hers. The heat of arousal fired up within him. Nessiesh felt it as strongly as her own. In that moment, nothing mattered—not the consequences or the downfall for crossing this line. She only wanted him.

Nessiesh continued kissing him as she gently pushed him onto his back and then proceeded to unfasten his trousers. Never had she seen Kalen this way, and when she did, she was not disappointed! The moans coming from him as she stroked his shaft caused her to move, as if she was making love. She leaned over and wrapped her lips around his manhood, and slowly moved them up and down over it. He arched his back in response and moaned even louder. The power she had over him was so thrilling, her own sex was aching to receive him. Yet she wanted to savor everything. If she was going to run the risk of getting them both killed, she would at least make it worth it.

She undressed and then slowly walked over to him on all fours. She didn't have to instruct him on anything, he just did the things she wanted. His mouth was on her breast as they combed over his face. He bit on her nipple and sucked it. His hand cupped the other, stroking it madly. Her hips lowered to where the tip of his penis touched the lips of her sex, but she kept from letting him enter her. There was something she wanted to give him—the sense of dominance over her. It would not only give her pleasure, but perhaps it would repair his damaged soul.

She crawled on until her lower half hovered over his face. His tongue eagerly found its way inside her. Now it was her turn to moan. His hands clutched onto her buttocks, licking her deeper. He touched on a certain spot that shot intense pleasure into her. After several moments of doing this, the rush of sexual bliss charged through her. Her scream echoed for miles.

From between her thighs, Kalen said plaintively, “I suppose you're finished.”

Nessiesh crawled on and stopped once she pasted over him. She looked over her shoulder at him, her eyes inviting him to her. Kalen accepted, undressed all the way, and came up behind her. His grip on her hips was a strong one. She raised her rear higher. He spreads her legs wider with his knees and eased himself in. The penetration was slow going, causing her to quiver. He went in deep and slowly withdrew before moving in her again. It would seem he, too, was relishing the moment.

Soon, his thrusting increased. Nessiesh clung to the cool earth, moaning, and even calling out his name.

How is a human making me feel this way?

He carried on viciously for many long, lustful moments, until his grunting grew louder. He was about to climax, and so was she . . . again! They howled as they both reached their peak.

The moment it was done, it marked their doom.

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