



# Hot Monster Summer

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**Category:** Erotic, Romance, Adult

**Description:** I planned for s'mores, sunburns, and a peaceful summer by the lake.

A little solo soul-searching. A few regretful texts to my ex. Maybe a hot summer rebound. Not, uh... monster custody battles over who gets to eat me first.

(Literally. Probably. Hopefully.)

Turns out the “quaint cabin” I rented? Yeah, it’s smack in the middle of monster territory claimed by:

A Kraken shifter who collects vintage romance novels and thinks personal space is optional.

A forest troll with arms like oak trees and the world’s most dangerous smile.

A jealous Dire wolf shifter who claims I’m his mate.

I wanted time to wallow.

Instead, I got monsters fighting over who gets to roast marshmallows—and me—first.

Now my “healing girl summer” looks more like: one massive monster pile-on, three possessive idiots who don’t know how to share, and about a thousand ways this could end in very questionable decisions. Surviving the summer might require a lot of sunscreen, a lot of bad choices... and maybe letting myself get a little bit ruined.

Welcome to my Hot Monster Summer.

Where the men are feral, the cuddles are aggressive, and the s'mores are definitely very sticky.

**Total Pages (Source):** 56

# Page 1

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1

Lily

The rental listing said “quaint lakeside cabin perfect for soul-searching and solitude.” It neglected to mention “dilapidated shack that might collapse if you sneeze too hard,” or “located approximately eight million miles from civilization.”

But it’s perfect.

Nothing but me, the cheerful chirp of woodland creatures, and a whole lot of time to find myself or lose myself, depending on the hour and alcohol intake.

Just me, this questionable cabin, and more emotional baggage than a reality TV contestant.

Thirty years old and starting over.

Again.

I kill the engine of my ancient Honda and stare through the bug-scummed windshield at my home for the summer.

The cabin sits about twenty yards from the shoreline of a lake so blue it looks photoshopped. The kind of blue that should come with a side of tequila, not a remote wilderness address and a strict “no parties, no pets” clause.

The lake is way too big for my doggy-paddle skill set to cross, but cozy enough to see across to the opposite bank. The whole thing is framed in by trees that lean out like they're protecting it, or daring someone to disturb the peace. The narrow strip of sandy beach is dotted with smooth, sun-bleached driftwood.

As for the cabin...

The structure itself is... well, rustic is the polite word. It's made of weathered gray wood, has a slightly tilted porch, and has windows that have seen better decades. But the setting is undeniably gorgeous—dense forest behind, glittering lake in front, and not another human in sight.

“Welcome to Hot Mess Summer: Hermit Edition,” I mutter, grabbing my duffel bag from the passenger seat and making my way to the front door, digging in my pocket for the key the rental agency mailed me.

The lock sticks, requiring a precise combination of jiggling, cursing, and threats before finally giving way with a reluctant groan. The interior smells like pine, dust, and something vaguely... briny? Like ocean water, which makes no sense for a freshwater lake.

“Hello?” I call, though I know there shouldn't be anyone here. Just my trauma-induced paranoia checking in. “Any axe murderers or vengeful lake spirits present? Speak now or forever hold your peace.”

The cabin remains silent.

One main room with a kitchenette in the corner, a door leading to what I assume is the bathroom, and a ladder up to a loft sleeping area. A worn sofa faces a stone fireplace.

Rustic '70s charm cranked to eleven.

I drop my bag and flop onto the sofa, sending a cloud of dust into the air.

New low unlocked: making out with dust bunnies because they're the only action I'll see for three months.

I sneeze, then groan. "Lily, you've officially hit rock bottom. Nowhere to go but up, right?"

"I don't mind the rustic, dilapidated charm... but a little dusting before the new tenant shows up wouldn't hurt!" I yell, because it's not like I can call them. No cell reception, remember?

"It's just three months. You can do anything for three months."

That's my new mantra. Three months to heal. Three months to forget 'The Betrayal'—three months to focus on me.

After some dusting, I haul my suitcases inside and begin the process of making this old place feel like a temporary home.

I stock the refrigerator with the groceries I picked up at the last town I passed through—mostly comfort foods and enough boxed wine to question my liver's future. I make the bed with fresh sheets I brought, set up my laptop on the small desk by the window, arrange my collection of paperbacks on the bookshelf, and set up my easel and paint gear.

My "Healing Girl Summer" plan is simple:

Swim in the lake every day

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:36 pm*

Write the short story collection I've been putting off for years

Paint the three commissions I've managed to secure

Drink wine on the porch while watching sunsets

Think about my ex exactly zero times (starting now)

Maybe, possibly, hook up with a local if the opportunity presents itself (though given the remote location, this seems unlikely)

The cabin has no TV and spotty cell service—perfect for forcing me to focus on myself. I've even downloaded meditation apps that don't require an internet connection, though I suspect I'll use them exactly once before deciding that wine is a more effective form of mindfulness.

By the time I've unpacked and settled in, I'm sweaty, so I change into my swimsuit. If I'm going to wallow in self-pity, I might as well do it while floating in that gorgeous lake.

The water is surprisingly warm as I wade in, soft mud squishing between my toes. The late afternoon sun sparkles on the surface, and for the first time since 'The Betrayal', I feel something close to peace. I push off and float on my back, eyes closed against the sun.

“This is good,” I tell myself. “This is healing. Just me, nature, and absolutely no—”

Something brushes against my leg.

Something slick and... moving?

I shriek, flailing in the water, my peaceful float turning into a splash-panic-doggy-paddle toward shore. “Nope, nope, nope! I’ve seen this horror movie!”

I’m about ten feet from shore when something wraps around my ankle. Not seaweed. Not a fish. Something with... grip.

“What the f—” I’m yanked underwater before I can finish.

The world goes silent and blue. I thrash, my heartbeat thundering in my ears, my lungs already burning. Through the water, I see a shape—a humanoid—but... not quite right. Long, undulating tendrils extend from its form. Are those tentacles?

Just as black spots appear in my vision, I’m thrust upward, breaking the surface with a desperate gasp.

“What are you doing in my lake?” The voice is male, annoyed, and coming from right behind me.

I spin around, treading water, coughing and sputtering, water going up my nose, to find myself face-to-chest with the most beautiful man I’ve ever seen.

If you can call him a man.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:36 pm*

He's... well, there's a lot of him.

My first impression is a sculpted swimmer—Olympic-level, with shoulders like a triathlete and a V-shaped torso right out of a Marvel movie, only the coloring's wrong.

His torso is human-like, but his skin has a faint blue-green sheen. His eyes are solid black like a shark's, and from the water around him emerge what are definitely tentacles.

Long and thick, they glide around him where his legs should be. Each one is lined with suckers—dozens of them.

“What the actual fuck,” I wheeze, trying to catch my breath.

I blink rapidly, wondering if near-drowning has caused me to hallucinate. “Your lake?” I manage once I've caught my breath. “Pretty sure lakes are public property. The rental listing didn't mention any... tentacled co-renters.”

A smile curls his lips, revealing teeth that are too sharp. “Humans rarely acknowledge what they don't understand. This is my lake. Kraken territory has been for millennia.”

“Kraken,” I repeat dumbly. “Like the sea monster?”

“That's a rather reductive term,” he sniffs, crossing his arms over his chest. “But essentially, yes. I am Caspian, guardian of these waters, and you are trespassing.”

“I’m renting the cabin,” I say, treading water and trying not to stare at his impossibly broad shoulders. “So technically, I’m a paying guest, not a trespasser. And you just tried to drown me, which seems like an extreme response to a girl taking a swim.”

I’m still trying to wrap my head around what is happening.

Or who just happened?

“I wasn’t trying to drown you,” he says, looking almost offended. “I was inspecting you.”

“With your tentacles? Super appropriate. A handshake would’ve worked.”

One of said tentacles rises from the water between us, hovering like a snake about to strike.

This is insane! I should be freaked out.

Any sane person would be getting the hell out of the water by now.

Why am I not panicking?

I should be swimming for my life, getting back in my car, and driving straight back to civilization. Instead, I’m stuck here ogling every muscle and tentacle, unable to tear my eyes away.

I’m fascinated.

No, fascinated is an understatement. I’m downright mesmerized. And a little turned on?



What the hell, Lily?

Is this what rock bottom does to a person? I should be fleeing for my life, and instead, I'm considering the logistics of how interspecies make-outs could even work.

I mean, what is happening to me right now?

Total mental breakdown?

Repressed bad girl syndrome?

Tentacle-induced fever lust?

"You're not scared," he says, sounding surprised.

"I caught my fiancé, correction, ex-fiancé, balls-deep in my maid of honor, who also happens to be my sister. My fear response is temporarily out of order. Try again next month."

His mouth—full-lipped and far too kissable for a sea monster—quirks up at one corner. "Interesting."

## Page 4

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The tentacle between us moves closer, almost touching my cheek. I hold my breath, not in fear but in... anticipation? His gaze locks with mine, something predatory and curious in those eyes.

“You smell unusual,” he murmurs.

“It’s called ‘emotional trauma and three days without a shower.’ Latest fragrance from Disaster Girl: Summer Collection.”

He actually laughs, and the sound does things to my insides that I refuse to acknowledge.

The tentacle finally makes contact, a feather-light touch against my cheek that sends an electric current straight to places that haven’t felt anything but disappointment in years, replaced by a craving I almost forgot I had.

“Oh,” I breathe, eyes widening.

This is unexpected, to put it mildly.

His expression changes, something hungry flashing across his features. “Oh, indeed.”

And that’s my cue to retreat.

I push backward, breaking contact, and swim toward shore with as much dignity as a freaked-out, turned-on girl can muster.

“This lake isn’t big enough for both of us, Squidman!” I call over my shoulder, which, as far as exit lines go, ranks pretty low on the badass scale.

His laughter follows me to shore. By the time I reach the cabin, dripping and breathless, I’m already wondering how soon I can “accidentally” re-encounter my new neighbor.

Apparently, solitude and soul-searching have taken a backseat to whatever the hell just happened in that lake.

2

Caspian

She smells like sunlight and sorrow. Like warmth and something broken that wants mending.

I’ve lived in these waters for centuries, and never has a human’s scent called to me like hers.

Lily.

I heard her say it to herself as she unpacked her car.

A flower that grows in water—fitting for a female who has unknowingly wandered into a monster’s territory.

Into my territory.

Though I share these woods reluctantly with the others, the lake is mine alone. Or it was until she arrived with her sharp tongue and fearless eyes.

I sink beneath the surface, gliding through the cool depths to my dwelling—a cave system that extends from the lake bed into a partially submerged chamber where I keep my collection.

Humans think of Krakens as destroyers, wreckers of ships, and takers of lives. They never consider that we might appreciate beauty and crave knowledge.

My chambers are lined with salvaged treasures: jewelry, artifacts from sunken vessels, and a rather impressive collection of romance novels. There's something fascinating about human notions of love and desire.

So much yearning, so much complexity.

I read stories where women who pine for lost loves for decades, men who cross oceans for a touch, and idiots who throw away everything for a single, damning kiss.

I despise humanity's casual disregard for the world they invade, but I cannot help but envy their capacity for romance, for madness, for the kind of devotion that makes even the abyss seem less cold.

Not that I've ever experienced such things firsthand.

There might have been something once, a possibility I don't like to dwell on. He was far too stubborn, and I was far too proud.

## Page 5

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Besides, interspecies relationships never end well.

I used to live in the ocean, but things got complicated.

A dispute with my kind.

They said I was too interested in human matters and was getting reckless. They didn't appreciate the things I salvaged from the surface. I was exiled, forced to find a new domain.

The change from saltwater to freshwater was brutal. I didn't think I would survive at first, but now I can't imagine being elsewhere. The entire lake is mine, free from the rules of my kind. I can keep whatever I want without anyone telling me what I should or shouldn't do.

The closest I've come is territorial attachment—to this lake, these waters. To the fragile peace I maintain with the forest troll and the Dire wolf who claim the surrounding woods.

Until today. Until her.

I settle onto my reading ledge, but the words on the page blur and shift, replaced by the image of her face. The way she showed no fear. The audacity of her, calling me "Squidman" when she should have been begging for her life.

Something stirs within me—a yearning feeling I've suppressed for decades. My tentacles twist and curl with agitation, responding to my unsettled state.

She was warm beneath my touch.

Soft.

Her pulse quickened when my appendage caressed her cheek, but not from fear. No, that was something else entirely. Something that made my own blood run hotter.

This is dangerous.

Humans are temporary creatures, fragile and fickle.

They fear what they don't understand, and destroy what they fear.

The few who have glimpsed me over the centuries fled screaming or attacked. None have ever looked at me with the fascination and desire I saw in her eyes.

She's going to be trouble.

I should frighten her away.

For her safety.

Yet even as I think about this, I'm already planning how I can see her again.

A disturbance ripples through the water—a change in pressure, a shift in current. I sense him before I see him, the massive shadow passing overhead.

Kaelen.

The dire wolf rarely ventures into the lake, preferring to patrol the forest's edge. And when he does, he's not welcomed—not anymore.

That he's swimming now means he's caught her scent.

I'll let it slide for now.

I make my way out of my domain and surge upward, breaking the surface to find him already back on the shore, shaking water from his massive fur. He's all wolf in this form—seven feet of muscle, fangs, and power. Only his eyes retain human intelligence.

“You met her,” he growls, not a question but an accusation.

“She was in my lake,” I respond coolly, letting several tentacles rise menacingly above the water's surface. A reminder of boundaries. “The human is staying in the cabin.”

“I know. I scented her arrival.” His nostrils flare, and I recognize the same hunger that plagues me. “She smells different.”

“She's just another human,” I lie, even as my tentacles curl possessively at the thought of her. “Temporary. Insignificant.”

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Kaelen's growl rumbles across the water. "You're a poor liar, water-dweller. I smell your interest."

Before I can respond, a crashing sound comes from the forest. Birds scatter from the treetops as something massive moves through the underbrush.

Oren.

The forest troll rarely leaves his wooded domain.

"Human female," he rumbles as he emerges from the trees, his massive form dwarfing even Kaelen's considerable size. Moss and lichen cling to his bark-like skin, small flowers blooming across his shoulders. Despite his intimidating appearance, Oren is the most peaceful of us three—until provoked.

"In the cabin," he continues, eyes gleaming with an emotion I've never seen in him before. "Smelled her. Different."

This is unprecedented.

The three of us have coexisted for decades through careful territory management and minimal interaction. Now we're all drawn to the shore, to the proximity of one small human female who should mean nothing to creatures like us.

Yet here we are. Proof that her presence alone threatens our carefully constructed truce and existence.



“She’s leaving,” I say, though the words taste false. “I’ll make sure of it.”

“No, she’s not.” Kaelen’s response is immediate, his hackles rising.

“Stay.” Oren’s single word carries the weight of the forest he guards.

We stare at each other, centuries-old tensions suddenly sharpened by new rivalry. We’ve never fought over a female before—never fought over anything except territory and boundaries. But I recognize the look in their eyes, the same possessive hunger that flows through my veins.

“She’s human,” I remind them, and myself. “She’s fragile and temporary.”

“She’s compatible and you know it,” Kaelen insists, and Oren nods in agreement.

I make my decision before I’m even conscious of it. “We’ll watch her. From a distance. No interference.” It’s a practical suggestion, but even as I say it, I’m plotting how to ensure my next encounter with her happens before either can claim her attention.

Neither agrees verbally, but neither challenges me either. An uneasy new pact forms between us—observation only.

For now.

As they retreat—Kaelen to his den further to the north, Oren to his grove to the east—I linger in the shallows, watching the lights come on in her cabin. I catch glimpses of her moving about through the window, unaware of the three predators who’ve just negotiated her fate.

She thinks she came here for solitude. For healing.

Instead, she's wandered into the hunting grounds of three monsters who suddenly find themselves hungry for something other than prey.

I slide beneath the surface, already planning tomorrow's "accidental" encounter. The lake may be my territory, but Lily is my new obsession.

3

Lily

Morning at the lake is what Instagram influencers pretend their lives look like—misty water, golden sunlight filtering through pine trees, birds providing a natural soundtrack.

I'm determined to appreciate it properly, like a mature adult on a healing journey, and not spend the entire day wondering if yesterday's lake monster hallucination will make a repeat appearance.

I've got my journal, coffee, and resolution to embrace solitude.

No thinking about my cheating ex, my backstabbing sister, or suspiciously attractive tentacled guys.

Just me, nature, and emotional growth.

I'm practically a self-help book in progress.

## Page 7

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I settle onto the rickety dock, dangling my feet above (not in, thank you very much) the water. The wooden planks are already sun-warmed against my thighs. I open my journal to a fresh page and write the heading: “Day 2: Positive Thoughts Only.”

The page remains stubbornly blank after that.

“Turns out watching your relationship implode doesn’t give you profound insights,” I mutter, taking a sip of coffee. “Who knew?”

I try again.

“I am grateful for...” My pen hovers, searching for something—anything—genuinely positive.

“I am grateful for coffee. And that this dock hasn’t collapsed yet. And no one can see me talking to myself like a crazy person.” I sigh, closing the journal.

Self-improvement is exhausting.

Something breaks the lake’s surface about twenty feet out—a ripple too large and deliberate to be a fish.

I freeze, coffee mug halfway to my lips.

Maybe it’s a beaver.

Or a really ambitious duck.

Caspian rises from the water like some Renaissance painting of a sea god. Water sluices down his chiseled torso, catching the morning light. His black eyes fix on me with unsettling intensity.

“Good morning, little trespasser,” he calls, his voice carrying easily across the water.

“Still not trespassing,” I reply, trying to sound bored rather than breathless. “And I have a name. It’s Lily.”

“I know.” He glides closer to the dock, movements smooth and predatory. “I heard you talking to yourself yesterday. You do that a lot?”

Great.

Not only am I sharing my summer getaway with a sea monster, but he’s been eavesdropping on my trauma-induced monologues. “It’s called processing. Very healthy. Therapist recommended.”

He reaches the dock, resting his forearms on the edge near my feet but not touching. He’s breathtaking—there’s a faint scaling to his skin I hadn’t noticed yesterday, the too-perfect symmetry of his features, and the absolute blackness of his eyes. His tentacles undulate lazily in the water behind him.

“You’re not in the water today,” he observes. “Afraid?”

“Cautious,” I correct. “Nearly being drowned by a kraken tends to make a girl reconsider her swimming habits.”

His mouth quirks. “I told you, I wasn’t trying to drown you.”

“Right. Just ‘inspecting’ me with your grabby appendages.” I wiggle my fingers in air

quotes. “Totally normal lake behavior.”

“You’re not frightened enough,” he says, tilting his head. “Most humans would have fled by now.”

I shrug, trying for nonchalance despite my racing heart. “Maybe I’m not like most humans.”

“No,” he agrees, voice dropping lower. “You’re certainly not.”

One tentacle rises from the water, hovering near my ankle. Not touching, but close enough that I can feel the coolness emanating from it. My skin prickles with goosebumps that have nothing to do with temperature.

A crash from the tree line breaks our standoff. I whip my head around to see the underbrush parting and—oh, holy hell.

He’s enormous.

At least eight feet tall and built like a massive oak tree covered in moss and bark. His skin looks like tree bark but... alive, somehow, with small white and blue flowers growing in patches. His features are craggy but unmistakably humanoid—if humans were carved from ancient oak trees. His eyes are deep set, glowing a soft green. He moves with surprising fluidity for something so massive, stepping out of the forest and onto the shore.

“Uh,” I manage eloquently. “There’s... there’s two of you?”

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“Three, actually,” Caspian says dryly. “But Kaelen is probably watching from the woods. He’s less sociable.”

“The Dire wolf,” tree guy rumbles, his voice so deep I feel it in my chest. “Watches. Always watches.”

“And you are...?” I ask, trying to process the fact that I’m apparently surrounded by monsters.

“Oren,” he says, approaching the dock with slow, deliberate steps. His voice is deep, resonant. “Forest guardian.”

“Right. Caspian, lake guardian. Oren, forest guardian. And somewhere there’s Kaelen, presumably the... wildlife guardian?” I laugh weakly. “Did I accidentally rent a cabin in a supernatural nature preserve?”

“The cabin shouldn’t be here,” Caspian says, a tentacle now boldly wrapping around my ankle. The contact sends a jolt through me that I refuse to acknowledge. “This shore is my territory.”

“Forest. My territory,” Oren counters, now at the base of the dock. The wooden structure creaks ominously under his weight as he steps onto it.

I’m caught between them, the tree giant at one end of the dock, the sea monster at the other, and me in the middle.

“Maybe we could discuss territory disputes after I’ve had more coffee?” I suggest

trying to sound calm despite my pulse hammering in my throat.

“You’re not leaving,” Caspian says, another tentacle sliding up to circle my calf.

“Not leaving,” Oren agrees, taking another step that makes the dock groan.

“Okay, that sounds vaguely threatening, and while I appreciate the whole ‘ancient forces of nature’ aesthetic you both have going on, I’m just a human having a mental breakdown in a rental cabin—.”

The dock chooses that moment to give up its brave struggle against Oren’s weight. The wood splinters with a crack, and suddenly I’m airborne for a split second before plunging toward the water.

Bracing myself, I don’t hit it.

Caspian’s tentacles wrap around my waist, suspending me above the surface, while Oren’s massive hand catches my wrist. I hang between them, breathless and startled, one monster holding me from below, one from above.

“Got you,” Oren rumbles, his massive fingers surprisingly gentle around my wrist.

“Safe,” Caspian adds, tentacles secure but not constricting around my middle.

The moment stretches, bizarre and somehow intimate.

I’m literally dangling between two creatures who should terrify me, who are currently engaged in a silent battle of wills with me as the prize.

Yet instead of fear, I actually feel... wanted.

Something hot and unfamiliar uncurls in my belly.

“This is...” I swallow hard, looking from Caspian’s intent face to Oren’s glowing eyes. “This is not how I planned to spend my morning.”

“Plans change,” Caspian says softly, one tentacle daringly sliding higher up my thigh.

“Better plans,” Oren agrees, his thumb brushing the pulse point on my wrist.

I’m in trouble.

So much trouble.

4

Kaelen

They’re touching her.

Both of them.



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*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:37 pm*

Caspian with his slithering tentacles and Oren with his oversized hand. I bare my teeth, a growl building in my chest that I barely suppress. The human—Lily—dangles between them like prey, though her scent carries no fear. Instead, she smells of confusion and... arousal? The wolf in me recognizes that scent immediately, sending fire through my veins.

Mine, it insists. She should be ours.

I dig my claws into the earth, fighting the urge to charge from my hiding place at the forest's edge.

I've never been good at sharing.

I've watched her since she arrived yesterday, this small human female who's invaded our territory with her battered vehicle and sad eyes. Humans rarely venture this deep into our domain—the few who typically rent the cabin flee within hours, driven away by mysterious noises, strange sightings, or our more direct interventions, if necessary.

This one should be no different.

She is just another fragile, temporary creature to be frightened away for her own safety and our privacy. Yet from the moment her scent reached me, something changed.

Something awakened in me and my wolf.

She smells like flowers in the moonlight, like prey and predator somehow mingled

into one intoxicating essence.

Now I watch as Caspian's tentacles curl more boldly around her thighs, as Oren's massive fingers engulf her delicate wrist. Her pulse—I can see it fluttering in her throat even from this distance—races like a trapped bird. But still, no fear-scent.

Only heat and confusion and something like... wonder?

I'm too distracted by the sight of them touching her, my control slipping. A branch snaps under my paw, betraying my position. Three heads turn in my direction—two territorial rivals and one wide-eyed human.

"Kaelen," Caspian says, voice carrying across the distance. "Come join our discussion with Lily."

My name in his mouth sounds like an invitation I've never quite been able to refuse.

The tentacle creature knows exactly what he's doing—drawing me out, forcing me to reveal myself on his terms rather than mine.

He's a clever water-dweller, I'll give him that.

I hesitate, growling low. In this form—more wolf than man, massive and furred and fanged—I am intimidating even to other monsters.

What will the human think? Will her intrigue finally transform to fear when she sees me?

The thought brings both satisfaction and an unexpected pang of disappointment.

"The wolf," Oren rumbles, still holding her wrist, "is shy."

“I am not shy,” I snarl, stepping from the cover of the trees. “I am calculating.”

The human—Lily—gasps when she sees me.

I stand taller and let her take in my full form.

In this half-shifted state, I am seven feet of muscle and fur, with amber eyes and teeth designed for tearing. My claws dig into the soft earth as I approach, my gaze never leaving her face.

“So this is Kaelen,” she says, voice remarkably steady for someone suspended between two monsters while a third approaches. “The wildlife guardian, I presume?”

“I guard nothing but my own interests,” I reply, voice rough from this partially transformed state. Speaking is difficult with a muzzle, but I refuse to shift further toward human form.

Let her see me as I am—predator, monster, alpha.

Her eyes—a startling shade of green that reminds me of deep forest leaves—widen as I approach. “That’s... a refreshingly honest answer, actually.”

I reach the water’s edge, close enough to catch every nuance of her scent.

The subtle notes beneath the surface—vanilla from her morning coffee, the clean tang of the soap she bathed with, and beneath it all, her unique essence. My nostrils flare, drinking her in, and something hot and possessive coils tighter in my chest.

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“You shouldn’t be handling her like that,” I growl at my rivals. “She’s fragile. Human.”

“I’m actually right here,” she interjects, “and perfectly capable of—”

“She’s not as fragile as she appears,” Caspian interrupts, a tentacle boldly sliding higher up her thigh. My vision edges are red at the sight. “She didn’t flee screaming when she saw any of us.”

“Brave human,” Oren agrees, his thumb still stroking her wrist in a gesture too intimate for my liking.

I wade into the shallows, water soaking my fur, determined to join this little standoff. As I draw closer, her eyes track my movement, something like fascination in their depths.

“You’re all acting like I’m some kind of territory to be claimed,” she says, a hint of fire in her voice despite her vulnerable position. “I rented this cabin fair and square. If anyone’s trespassing, it’s you three.”

“Spirited,” I observe, now close enough to catch the other monsters’ warning scents—back off, they silently communicate. Not a chance, I answer with my own aggressive pheromones.

“Do you mind?” she asks, gesturing at her suspended state. “I’m getting a little tired of hanging here like bait.”

Oren gently pulls her upward, setting her on her feet on the broken dock. Caspian's tentacles reluctantly unwrap from her body, though one lingers possessively at her ankle. I move closer still until I'm standing right beside her.

She's small.

So small compared to us. Yet she stands before three predators with her chin raised and eyes defiant.

"So," she says, crossing her arms. "Three monstrous neighbors instead of the peaceful solitude I paid for. Great. Just great."

"You could leave," I suggest, though everything in me rebels at the thought. A test—will she run now that she's seen all three of us?

"Leave?" she echoes, tilting her head. "And miss whatever bizarre monster territorial dispute I've stumbled into? Not a chance. This is way more interesting than journaling about my feelings."

Then she shrugs.

"Besides that, it sort of defeats the point of being as far away from my ex and family as possible." She takes a step toward me, bold and unflinching, and I can see how it affects the others. Oren shifts his weight, and Caspian's tentacles twitch with what can only be impatience—or is it lust?

Then she smirks, that full mouth upturning in a way that sends a jolt through me. My rivals close in—Caspian moving from the water's edge, Oren from the dock—and I feel myself bristle.

Mine, the wolf persists, but she seems determined to test the limits of my restraint.

Of all our restraint.

“I’m not going anywhere,” she adds. “I mean, really, where am I supposed to go?”

She shrugs again with infuriating calm, like three monsters do not surround her. Like she’s not a vulnerable little morsel that could disappear with one swipe of my claws.

Something changes in me at her words—her fearlessness, her curiosity. The wolf wants to claim, to mark, to possess. But the man... the man wants to know her. To understand the mystery of this small human who faces monsters without flinching.

I make my decision then.

I won’t frighten her away. I can’t even if I wanted to. My wolf has staked a claim. So, I’ll draw her closer. I’ll make her look at me the way she looked at Caspian when his tentacles touched her, the way she looked at Oren when his massive hand held her wrist.

I’ll make her mine before either of them can stake their claim.

The hunt is on.

5

Lily

I should be packing.

That would be the rational response to discovering I’ve accidentally rented a cabin in monster territory, where three creatures are engaged in some weird territorial dispute with me as the prize.

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Instead, I'm hiking into the woods like the protagonist in a horror movie who clearly hasn't seen a horror movie. But after two days of tiptoeing around the cabin, jumping at every splash in the lake and every rustle in the underbrush, I need space to think.

Besides, I'm bored as hell.

The whole "find myself by journaling far away from civilization" plan seemed brilliant at first. But I'm already over it. All the quiet I thought I craved just makes me obsess over things I'd rather not obsess over.

So much for healing in nature.

Maybe getting tangled up with territorial monsters is exactly the kind of distraction I need.

Maybe I'll stumble on one of them... alone.

I'm not examining that particular impulse too closely.

The forest is beautiful, sunlight filtering through the canopy in golden shafts. The path—if you can call the faint trail I'm following a path—winds deeper into the woods, away from the lake and the cabin, and the air smells of pine and earth and something sweeter, like honey or sap.

"This is fine," I mutter to myself. "Just a normal girl-healing-from-heartbreak nature walk. No ulterior motives whatsoever."

I round a massive oak tree and freeze.

The trail opens into a small clearing, and in its center stands Oren. Or rather, he kneels, his massive form bent over a tiny sapling that he's carefully tending. His huge fingers, which could easily crush my skull, delicately pat the soil around the base of the young tree. He's humming—a deep, resonant sound that seems to make the very earth vibrate.

He's so absorbed in his task that he hasn't noticed me yet.

I could back away quietly.

Should back away quietly.

Instead, I step on a twig, announcing my presence with a snap that might as well be a gunshot in the quiet clearing.

Oren's head lifts, those glowing green eyes finding mine instantly. "Lily," he rumbles, my name in his mouth like stones rolling down a mountainside.

"I was just... exploring," I say, suddenly awkward. "Sorry to interrupt your... gardening?"

"Not gardening. Healing." He gestures to the sapling. "Lightning strike killed mother tree. Planting child."

He rises to his full height, and I have to tilt my head back to maintain eye contact.

I can see now that what I first thought was bark-like skin is actually smooth, covered in tiny patterns—swirls and whorls like the rings of a tree, interspersed with moss and lichen that seem to be growing right on him. Small flowers—bluebells and tiny white



stars—bloom along his shoulders and down his arm.

“That’s... actually really sweet,” I say, genuinely touched. “You’re not what I expected.”

His head tilts. “Expected monster. Got monster.”

“Yeah, but a monster who plants trees and has flowers growing on him?” I gesture to the blooms on his shoulder. “Not exactly the terrifying forest troll vibe.”

“Still dangerous,” he says, but there’s something almost like a smile in his voice. “Could break you.”

“But you won’t,” I say with surprising certainty.

“No,” he agrees. “Won’t break. Want to protect.”

He takes a step closer, and I notice he smells like fresh earth after rain, like growing things in soil. It’s intoxicating in a way I never would have imagined.

“Can I ask you something?” I don’t wait for a response. “Why are you three so interested in me? I’m nothing special. Just a regular human having her quarter-life crisis in a rental cabin.”

Oren considers this, his eyes never leaving my face. “Smell different. Special. Like...” He searches for words. “Like forest after fire. New growth. Strong.”

“That’s... poetic.”

## Page 12

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“Not just troll,” he says, “Forest guardian. Ancient. Watch trees grow, die, grow again. Many cycles.”

“How many cycles?” I ask, suddenly curious about exactly how old he is.

“Many,” is all he says, but the look in his eyes speaks of centuries.

He reaches out one massive hand, hesitating inches from my face, asking permission without words. I should step back. I should maintain boundaries with the ancient forest monster who could snap me like a twig.

Instead, I nod.

His fingers, rough but warm like sun-heated stone, brush my cheek with astonishing gentleness. A small wildflower falls from his wrist onto my shoulder, and he stares at it with something like wonder.

“Beautiful,” he murmurs, and I’m not sure if he means the flower or me.

His thumb traces my jawline, tilting my face up toward his. I should be terrified. Instead, I’m leaning into his touch, my body betraying all rational thought.

“Your eyes,” he rumbles. “Like new leaves in spring.”

“Are you... Flirting with me?” I ask, breathless. “Because I’ve got to say, you’re surprisingly good at it for someone who talks like they’re rationing words.”

That almost-smile again. “Words. Overrated.”

So much for monster.

Oren is turning out to be the best—and most unexpected—company I’ve had in ages.

He shows me how to recognize animal tracks gracefully tracing the outline of a deer print. We hike through the forest, his pace slow so I can keep up. I expect him to be silent, but he surprises me by talking about his beloved forest and its inhabitants. His words are deliberate and thoughtful.

He points out how the light changes as the sun shifts, marking time without a watch or a clock.

“Forest knows,” he says when I comment on it. “Just listen.”

We stop by a stream to rest, and Oren sits beside me, the earth beneath him dipping with his weight. I think of the last time I sat this close to someone, and the memory needles at me until I shove it away. I’m far from that now—a world ago, surrounded by trees and light, and one strange, intriguing forest monster.

Oren dips his fingers into the water and lifts out a smooth stone, placing it in my palm. “For you,” he says, his eyes meeting mine with what I can only interpret as sincerity. The stone feels warm when his hand touches it, as if it holds the sun and the earth on its surface.

“Thanks,” I manage, my voice sounding small and human compared to his. “I’ve never seen anyone like you,” I admit, unsure if I’m talking about his size, age, or how he looks right through me.

“Never seen anyone like you either,” he replies. The sincerity in his voice makes my

chest tighten. When was the last time someone looked at me like Oren does?

Never, if I'm being honest with myself.

"Oren," I start, then realize I don't know how to finish that sentence. What do you say to an ancient forest guardian who's just given you a warm stone and made you feel more cherished in one afternoon than your ex did in three years of dating?

Oren simply nods, like he understands, and we sit there in comfortable silence.

We eat lunch, sharing the fruit and snacks I brought in my backpack. I offer him some granola, and he pops it into his mouth like a kid trying candy for the first time. He makes a face, and I laugh—a sound that feels so right here among the trees.

Then the afternoon stretches ahead of us, shimmering in the undergrowth, and we move again, deeper. He leads me to a patch of earth that looks no different from any other, but when he presses a massive hand to the ground, red mushrooms sprout up like magic, vibrant against the green. When I reach for one he stops me.

"Not safe," he cautions.

"Right," I say. "Wouldn't want to poison myself before anyone gets the chance to murder me in this haunted forest."

I swear I hear him chuckle—a deep, resonant sound. "Forest not haunted," he says. "Just old."

He shows me how to plant seeds, digging small holes with his fingers. Somewhere between the planting and the cover-up, I realize the hole in my chest doesn't feel quite as raw as it did this morning. I don't know if it's the earth or the company, but it's a relief I didn't expect.

This day has healed my soul more than any app ever could.

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I move closer without realizing it until my hand curls into his larger one. I'm not sure why I do—not entirely. But I want to. There's something about Oren that makes me feel safe and heard.

And then he's leaning down, impossibly large yet gentle, and pressing his mouth to mine. His lips are softer than they look, warm and tasting of honey. The kiss is tender and questioning, giving me every chance to pull away.

I don't.

Instead, I reach up, standing on tiptoes, and wrap my arms as far around his neck as they'll go, which isn't far. His massive arms encircle me, lifting me off the ground until we're face to face, and the kiss deepens.

“Wow,” I breathe against his mouth, feeling dizzy with sensations. Unlocking some part of me I didn't know was caged.

“My forest flower,” he says, the word vibrating through his chest and into my own where we're pressed together.

When he pulls back, his eyes glow brighter, and his pupils dilate. “Want more,” he says roughly. “Want all.”

God help me.

Five days ago, I was swearing off men, and now I'm making out with a forest troll in a sun-dappled clearing like some twisted fairy tale.

“This is...” I start, trying to think clearly despite my racing pulse and the heat pooling low in my belly. “I barely know you. I didn’t come here for this,” I say, though my body disagrees with that statement.

“No,” he agrees, finally setting me back on my feet, though his hands linger at my waist. “Came for healing. Can give healing. Different kind.”

I step back, needing space to clear my head. “I should get back to the cabin.”

“Will escort,” he says immediately.

“No, I... I need to think. Alone.” I touch my lips, still tingling from his kiss. “This is a lot to process.”

He nods, “Will wait. Patient. Trees teach patience.”

As I turn to go, he adds, “Others will smell me on you. Will know.”

The thought sends a forbidden thrill through me. “Is that a warning or a promise?”

“Both,” he rumbles, that almost-smile returning. “Come back to forest, soon.”

Walking back to the cabin, I feel like I’m floating, my lips still carrying his taste, my skin warm where he touched me.

This is insane.

And the craziest part? I’m already wondering when I can sneak away to the forest again.

Caspian

She reeks of him.

Forest and earth and growing things—Oren's scent clings to her skin like a claim as she emerges from the treeline.

My tentacles writhe beneath the water's surface, agitation making it impossible to maintain my usual composure.

I've been patrolling the lake's perimeter since dawn, waiting for her to appear, to choose the water—to choose me—over my rivals.

Instead, she went to the forest.

To him.

The knowledge burns like fire in my veins, a sensation I haven't felt in decades.



## Page 14

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Jealousy.

How quickly this human woman has upended centuries of carefully maintained indifference.

I sink beneath the surface, letting the cool darkness soothe my frayed nerves.

Logically, I understand there's no formal claim on her. She's not a territory to be marked, not property to be owned. She's human—intelligent, autonomous, and temporary.

Yet the primal part of me—the ancient kraken instincts that lurk beneath my more civilized facade—roars with possessive fury.

When I resurface, she's standing on the shore, gazing out over the water. Her fingers touch her lips unconsciously, and I know with sudden, devastating certainty what transpired in the forest.

He kissed her.

Perhaps more.

The thought makes my skin flush hot despite the cool water.

I could retreat to my underwater dwelling and surround myself with my collection of treasures—the books, the salvaged artifacts, the small, beautiful things I've gathered over centuries to combat the loneliness. I could pretend this human doesn't matter,

that her choice of the forest troll over me is inconsequential.

Instead, I glide toward shore, my approach deliberately creating ripples that catch her attention.

Her eyes—those fascinating green eyes that remind me of the deepest parts of my lake in summer—widen when she spots me. There’s a flush on her cheeks that wasn’t there this morning, a new awareness in her gaze.

“Caspian,” she says, and my name on her lips warms me. “I was just—”

“Visiting Oren,” I finish for her, not bothering to hide my knowledge. I emerge from the water, allowing my form to shift slightly more human, with fewer visible tentacles, though still present. A calculated move to seem less monstrous. “I can smell him all over you.”

Her blush deepens, but she lifts her chin defiantly. “Didn’t realize I needed permission to walk in the woods.”

“You don’t.” I move closer, letting my tentacles drift behind me in what I hope appears casual rather than predatory. “The forest is his domain, as the lake is mine. You’re free to go where you please.”

“But?” she prompts, hearing the unspoken qualification in my tone.

“But I find myself displeased that you sought him out first.”

She crosses her arms. “I didn’t ‘seek him out.’ I went for a walk. He happened to be there.”

“And then he happened to kiss you?” The words escape before I can stop them,

sharper than intended.

Her eyes widen. “How did you—.” She stops, realization dawning. “Right. Monster senses. You can probably smell that, too.”

“Among other things.” I’m close enough now to catch every nuance of her scent—the base notes that are uniquely Lily, the lingering traces of Oren, and her arousal. The knowledge sends heat through my core. “You enjoyed it.”

“That’s none of your business,” she says, but her words have no real heat. If anything, she sounds curious about my reaction.

A growl from the treeline draws both our attention. Kaelen emerges, his massive form even more wolf-like than usual, hackles raised and amber eyes burning.

Stalking toward us. “The Troll touched what’s ours,” he snarls.

“Not yours,” I correct, emphasizing the singular deliberately.

Lily throws up her hands. “Okay, seriously? I’m standing right here. And I’m not a chew toy for you three to fight over.”

Kaelen circles closer, his movements predatory. “She chose him first,” he growls, clearly speaking to me rather than Lily.

“I didn’t choose anyone,” Lily interjects. “It was just a kiss. One kiss that I’m apparently never going to live down because you all have sniffing abilities.”

One kiss. Just one.

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The knowledge soothes something in me, though the jealousy still simmers. She hasn't given herself entirely to Oren. There's still time to show her that water can be more enticing than earth, that my domain—my touch—offers pleasures the forest troll cannot provide.

“The wolf is right about one thing,” I say, moving closer to her, close enough that my tentacles could reach her if I allowed them to. “You’ve experienced what the forest offers. But you haven’t yet explored the depths of the lake or what I could show you there.”

Her pulse quickens visibly at my words, a small vein in her throat fluttering. “Are you... are you competing for me? Because that’s—”

“Primal?” I suggest. “Monstrous?”

“I was going to say ‘flattering but weird,’ but sure, those work, too.”

Kaelen growls again, moving to place himself between Lily and me. The message is clear—if I pursue her, I’ll have to deal with him and Oren.

So be it.

“When you’re ready to experience what the water has to offer,” I tell her, ignoring Kaelen’s warning posture, “come to the dock at midnight. I’ll be waiting.”

“I haven’t agreed to anything,” she points out, though her scent betrays her interest.

“No,” I acknowledge. “But curiosity is written all over you, Water Lily. It’s one of the things that makes you different from other humans.”

I retreat to the water, sliding beneath the surface with one last look at her flushed face and Kaelen’s hostile stance. Let the wolf think he’s protected her from me for now. Let him guard her on land while he can.

I’ll prepare something special in my underwater domain. Something to show her that the troll’s forest offerings pale compared to the wonders I can provide.

And when—not if, but when—she comes to the water’s edge, I’ll bind her to me with treasure, the likes of which her human form has never imagined.

The hunt for Lily’s affections has now been thrust into high tide.

7

Lily

This is ridiculous.

I’m standing in front of the cabin’s foggy bathroom mirror at 11:45 PM, after draining a glass of my boxed wine, debating what one wears to a midnight rendezvous with a kraken.

The black one-piece swimsuit seems too practical, the red bikini too “I’m definitely here for underwater monster sex,” and going naked feels presumptuous even though skinny-dipping was kind of implied.

I settle on the bikini with a light sundress over it—the aquatic equivalent of sexy-but-could-be-casual underwear. As if anything about this situation is casual.

I kissed a forest troll two days ago, then got jealousy-sniffed by a dire wolf, and now, I'm sneaking out to meet a kraken for a midnight swim.

This is not the "healing from heartbreak" retreat my therapist recommended.

Or maybe it is?

They say the best way to get over someone is to get under someone else... Fingers crossed that also applies to monsters.

"You're just curious," I tell my reflection, trying to justify the absolutely insane decision I'm making. "Exploring new experiences. Very healthy. Very normal post-breakup behavior."

My reflection doesn't look convinced.

The cabin creaks around me, the old wood settling for the night. I can see the lake gleaming under the moon through the window, its surface mirrorlike and inviting. Somewhere out there, Caspian is most likely waiting. And somewhere in the woods, I'm pretty sure Kaelen is watching. As for Oren... I'm not sure where he goes at night, but I can still feel the ghost of his kiss on my lips.

"This isn't choosing," I mutter, smoothing down the sundress. "This is just... gathering data."

Before I can talk myself out of it, I slip out the cabin door and pad barefoot down to the shore. The night is warm, fireflies dotting the darkness like earthbound stars. Only moonlight illuminates the dock's path, a surprisingly skillful vine repair Oren completed earlier today.

Caspian is already there, his upper body emerging from the water at the end of the

dock, tentacles lazily swirling in the dark water around him. He looks ethereal in the moonlight; his slightly faint blue-green skin seems almost iridescent, and his black eyes reflect the stars.

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“I knew you’d come, eventually,” he says, satisfaction evident in his voice.

“I’m curious,” I say, stopping several feet away. “Don’t read too much into it.”

His smile is knowing, almost blinding. “Curiosity is a powerful motivator. One of my favorite human traits.”

I hesitate at the edge of the dock, suddenly aware of how vulnerable I am—alone, at night, with a creature who could drag me to the depths in seconds. Yet fear isn’t what makes my heart race.

“What did you want to show me?” I ask, trying to sound casual.

“Something no human has seen before,” he says, extending a hand—perfectly formed but with faint webbing between the fingers. “Do you trust me?”

“That seems like a leading question when posed by a mysterious lake monster.”

He laughs, the sound rippling across the water. “Fair enough. Let me rephrase—will you come into the water with me, Lily? I promise to return you safely to shore.”

I take a deep breath and pull the sundress over my head, revealing the red bikini underneath. His eyes widen slightly, drinking in the sight of me, and something primal and female in me preens at his obvious appreciation.

“If you drown me, I’m going to be very annoyed,” I warn, taking his extended hand.



“Noted,” he says dryly, and then he’s pulling me gently into the water.

It’s warmer than I expected, pleasantly so. I gasp as his arm curls around my waist, supporting me.

“I’m going to take you under,” he murmurs, face inches from mine. “But you won’t drown. Trust me.”

Before I can question what he means, his mouth is on mine, and it’s nothing like Oren’s kiss. Where the forest guardian was warm earth and honey, Caspian is cool silk and salt. His lips move expertly against mine, and when his tongue slips into my mouth, I taste something strange and sweet.

Then he’s pulling me under, our lips still connected, his tentacles wrapped securely around me. I should panic—I’m underwater, can’t breathe—but something is happening. The sweet substance from his kiss seems to be changing me, allowing me to... breathe? Not exactly breathe, but I don’t feel the need for air.

I open my eyes underwater to find his black ones watching me intently. He’s transformed more fully into his element—more Kraken than man now, his beauty, alien and otherworldly. His tentacles pulse with bioluminescent light, creating a rippling glow around us as he pulls me deeper.

The lake bottom comes alive with light as we descend—patches of glowing algae, small luminescent fish darting away from our approach. It’s like swimming through a galaxy, and I’m so captivated I almost miss the structure taking shape before us.

It’s a cave entrance adorned with collected treasures that catch and reflect the bioluminescent light—shells, polished stones, even what appears to be salvaged jewelry. Caspian guides me inside, where the underwater cave opens into a chamber that’s partially above water.

He releases me as we break the surface in this hidden grotto, and I gasp, this time from wonder. The cave ceiling is studded with crystals reflecting the water's light, creating a private aurora borealis. Smooth stone ledges rise from the water, covered with what appear to be cushions and fabrics.

“Your lair?” I ask, treading water, trying to process the beauty around me.

“My sanctuary,” he corrects. “No one else has seen it before.”

I’m touched by the gesture and what it might mean he’s sharing this private space with me. “It’s beautiful.”

His tentacles shift beneath the water, and I feel one brush against my leg. “Not as beautiful as—”

“—a monster’s version of first base?” I interrupt, splashing a little water in his direction. But the teasing doesn’t hide the way my heart flutters.

He laughs, the sound filling the space. “Unfiltered and unpredictable. I like that about you, Lily.” He swims closer, his expression softening. “You’re different from anyone I’ve ever met.”

“Different because I’m human? Or different because I’m crazy enough to sneak off with a sea creature?” I joke, though his words stir something deep and vulnerable inside me.

“Different because you’re here,” he says simply, meeting my eyes with an intensity that makes my pulse race.

I look around, taking in the treasures he’s gathered, the glow of the water reflecting off the cave walls. “So, what does a kraken do all alone out here?”

One tentacle loops lazily around my waist, pulling me toward him. “I wait,” he says, a hint of loneliness creeping into his voice. “I watch. And sometimes, I hope.”

I blink at the unexpected honesty. “That sounds... lonely.”

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His silence is all the confirmation I need, and something in me aches for him, for the solitary existence he describes. It feels strangely significant that he's sharing this with me and letting me see this side of him.

Tentacles lift me gently onto one of the cushioned ledges, and he follows, pulling himself from the water to sit beside me. "It's less lonely now," he admits, his voice a low rumble.

"I'm sure you say that to all the reckless women you drag to your secret cave," I tease, trying to lighten the unexpected weight of the moment. But how he looks at me, with those deep, searching eyes, makes breathing hard.

"I don't," he says, brushing a wet strand of hair from my face. The touch is so gentle and tender.

I'm about to say something sarcastic because that's what I do whenever I feel this exposed, but he's already diving beneath the surface. He reemerges with a necklace unlike anything I've ever seen—opal shells woven together with strands of gold. He drapes it over my head, the shells cold against my skin, and I'm speechless.

"It's beautiful," I finally stammer, my voice more breathless than I'd like. "But I don't—"

He's gone again, cutting off my protest with another offering, this one even more dazzling. A tiara encrusted with precious stones; it looks like it belongs on the head of an undersea goddess. Caspian carefully settles it on my hair, ignoring my wide-eyed disbelief as he arranges it.

“You don’t need to give me things,” I manage, though I can’t stop my fingers from tracing over the treasures.

“Oh, but you do need them,” he counters, eyes twinkling.

He disappears once more, determined to shower me in riches.

The next piece is an impossibly intricate diamond bracelet. Then, another necklace, the largest yet, with an enormous emerald.

“Matches your eyes,” he says, his voice low and full of something that makes me shiver.

“I can’t possibly wear all this,” I finally manage. “I’ll never make it to the surface.”

“Then I’ll keep you here,” he says, not even pretending to be joking.

“You don’t have to give me anything to impress me, you know,” I say, gesturing to our glittering surroundings.

“But I want to,” he replies. He reaches behind a rock, pulls out a sword, and places it in my hands.

A freaking sword.

It looks old and expensive, like everything else I’m already wearing.

The blade is impossibly light despite its ornate design—silver inlaid with what looks like flowing water patterns that seem to be moving.

"This is..." I turn the sword, watching light dance along its edge. "This is ancient, isn't

it?"

"Forged by water spirits three thousand years ago," Caspian says, his voice reverent, "it was lost in a shipwreck, and I liberated it. The blade will never dull, never break."

I nearly drop it. "Caspian, I can barely handle a butter knife without injuring myself."

His laugh is warm, tentacles curling around my ankles playfully.

I should protest more, but the girl inside me—the one who's been overlooked for so long, the one who lost herself in her past relationship—can't help but feel giddy right now.

"Caspian..." I start, trying to find words.

There's a wicked gleam in his eyes. "You doubt my intentions, so allow me to be more specific." He slips a string of perfect pearls around my neck. "These suit you."

I open my mouth to protest, but he's already draping another one.

"Thank you," I say, sounding less overwhelmed than I feel. "I love them. I do. But you don't have to buy my affection. I'd rather have something real... something that means more."

His expression shifts, going from confident to something that looks vulnerable.

"You want"—he hesitates, a bit unsure and hopeful—"something personal?"

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“Yes, I’d love that,” I say.

“I enjoy romance books,” he admits, almost shyly. “Human emotions are so vibrant, so strange. I envy them.”

I study him, stunned by the admission. “You want to feel that way?”

His tone is wistful, yearning. “One day, perhaps I will. You make me hope.”

"What kinds of romance do you read?" I ask, genuinely curious now. The image of this powerful kraken curled up with a paperback is oddly endearing.

"All kinds," he admits, a tentacle absently caressing my ankle as he speaks. "Historical, contemporary, paranormal, courtesy of the last renters, who stayed less than a day before we scared them off—though I find the monster romances rather inaccurate." His mouth quirks up. "We're far more civilized than most authors give us credit for."

I laugh, the sound echoing off the cave walls. "So you're telling me this whole 'drag the maiden to my underwater lair' thing isn't standard monster protocol?"

"Standard protocol would involve significantly less jewelry and considerably more terror," he says dryly. "I prefer the modern approach—seduction through literature and luxury."

"And how's that working out for you?"

His black eyes fix on mine. "You're here, aren't you?"

The weight of all the treasures he's draped on me suddenly feels less overwhelming and more... meaningful. As if he's trying to tell me something he doesn't have the words for.

"What's your favorite?" I ask softly. "Romance book, I mean."

He's quiet for a moment, considering. "There's one about a woman who falls in love with the sea itself. She gives up her life on land to be with something most would consider a monster." His tentacles shift restlessly. "The author understood that love isn't always convenient or safe. Sometimes it requires transformation."

My breath catches. "That sounds beautiful."

"It is," he agrees, then adds quietly, "I've read it seventeen times."

The vulnerability in that admission makes something flutter in my chest. Here's this ancient, powerful creature who's been alone for centuries, finding solace in love stories he's never experienced.

"Maybe," I say carefully, "you don't have to just read about it anymore."

His eyes widen slightly, hope flickering across his features like the bioluminescent patterns on his tentacles. "Lily..."

Before he can finish whatever he was going to say, I lean forward and kiss him. This time, I'm the one initiating, and the surprised sound he makes against my lips sends heat spiraling through me.

His tentacles wind around me more securely, pulling me closer as the kiss deepens.



Unlike our first kiss, this one tastes of possibility rather than magic—salt and desire and something that might be the beginning of my own monster romance.

When we break apart, both breathing hard, he rests his forehead against mine.

“Every inch of you pulls me in,” Caspian rumbles, his tentacle curling around me in a way that makes my heart race. “I could drown in you and still want more.”

The words steal my breath. What do you even say to that? 'Thanks'? 'Cool'?

So I don't say anything at all.

We sit there, close and quiet, the strangeness of our connection settling around us. It's the kind of moment that I know I'll replay in my mind a thousand times—intimate, and raw, and leaving me wanting more.

Finally, he speaks. “I should return you to shore before the wolf loses what's left of his mind.”

I sigh dramatically. “I'm not sure I'm ready to return to the land of sniffing and growling.”

His smile is warm. “Then come back to me tomorrow, and the next night, and every night until you want nothing else.”

The offer sends a thrill through me, makes me imagine what it might mean to be his, even as a tiny part of me hesitates at its intensity. “Caspian, I—”

“Think about it,” he says, as if sensing my uncertainty. “You won't hurt my feelings if you need time. I have a lot of that to spare.”

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I nod, grateful for the space he's offering. "Okay," I say softly. "I'll think about it."

He scoops me into his arms, carrying me back to the water with an ease that makes me feel weightless, even though I must weigh a ton with all the jewels and the freaking sword. I cling to him as we slip beneath the surface, the motion smooth and effortless. I let him pull me deeper, reveling in its freedom and the strange comfort of being with him.

When we near the shore, he pauses, pulling me close and cupping my face with his hand. "Until the next time," he murmurs, and his lips find mine with a sweetness that makes my head spin. The kiss is careful and lingering, simultaneously a promise and a request. It leaves me breathless, wanting more.

He releases me gently into the shallow water, waiting until I'm standing on solid ground before letting go completely.

For a moment, I just stand there, the water lapping at my ankles, the memory of his touch still tingling on my skin.

Then I hear it.

A howl pierces the air, echoing through the night. Caspian's expression darkens.

A moment later, Kaelen's wolf-like form bursts through the forest, fury evident in every line of his body.

"You took her," he snarls at Caspian, reaching the shore's edge.

“She came willingly,” Caspian retorts, tentacles rising defensively around me. “Unlike some, I don’t need to stalk my prey.”

“She is not prey,” Kaelen growls, his massive form moving more into the water, soaking his fur. In the night light, he looks like a creature from ancient mythology—half-man, half-wolf, all predator. “She is mine.”

“I’m getting really tired of that possessive pronoun,” I interject. “Still not property. Still making my own decisions.”

“Decisions?” Kaelen huffs, “The water-dweller enchanted you. He lured you. I know all about his moves.”

“I invited her,” Caspian corrects, one tentacle possessively wrapping around my ankle. “And she accepted.”

“Because I wanted to,” I add.

Kaelen’s nostrils flare, catching something in my scent. His eyes narrow. “You like his touch.”

The accusation sounds almost wounded, which catches me off guard. I expected anger and territoriality, but not hurt.

“I...” Words fail me because, well, he’s not wrong.

The forest trees rustle again, and a third figure emerges.

Oren.

“All here now,” he rumbles, “All want Lily.”

“Great,” I mutter. “Monster intervention. Just what this night needed.”

But as I look at the three of them—Caspian sleek and dangerous in the water, tentacles glowing slightly. Kaelen, powerful and primal on the edge, amber eyes burning. Oren, massive and steadfast, flowers still clinging to his moss-covered shoulders—I realize something terrifying.

I feel a pull toward them. It’s more than curiosity and lust, although the attraction is undeniable.

Oren’s gentle strength and ancient wisdom. Caspian’s elegant danger and hidden depths. Kaelen’s primal passion and protective instinct.

They all offer something different. Something that I never knew was missing in my life.

“You’re all ridiculous,” I say, trying to maintain some semblance of sanity in this insane situation. “I’m not some prize to be won.”

“No,” Oren agrees, surprisingly. “Not prize. Blessing.”

“Partner,” Caspian adds, his tentacle tightening slightly around my waist.

“Mate,” Kaelen growls, the word sending an involuntary shiver down my spine.

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They're competing for me, these three ancient, powerful beings. Me—just-dumped, emotionally messy, completely ordinary human me.

And the craziest part?

I'm not even trying to defuse the situation.

I'm basking in it.

What does that say about me?

That after being betrayed by the man I thought loved me, I'm now entertaining the attention of three literal monsters?

That instead of being repulsed by their possessiveness, I'm... flattered? Aroused, even?

"This isn't normal," I say, more to myself than them.

"Normal is overrated," Caspian murmurs.

Looking at the three of them, feeling the spark of desire each one ignites in different ways, I make a decision that would horrify my therapist, my mother, and probably every self-help book author in existence.

I'm going to see where this goes. All of it. Because beneath the snark and the confusion, there's one truth I can't deny anymore.

I don't just tolerate their attention.

I crave it.

God help me, I crave them.

8

Oren

I stand in my grove—the heart of my forest, where the oldest trees whisper their secrets—trying to recenter myself after I had followed her scent to the shore's edge. The thought of her alone with him stirred something in my core.

Lily's presence has unbalanced me in ways I've never experienced.

Humans come and go, brief flickers of light in my long existence. Why does this one burn so brightly that I can see nothing else?

I place my palm against the oldest oak, feeling its steady pulse beneath my touch. The tree has stood for millennia, witnessing countless seasons, and weathering storms that felled its younger neighbors. I have guarded these woods since before humans built their first settlements nearby, watching their villages grow and fade, and observing their brief lives from a distance.

Until Lily.

Her kiss still lingers on my lips, more intoxicating than the rarest forest bloom. Her scent—sunshine and new growth and something uniquely her—has embedded itself in my senses. The small flowers that grow along my shoulders and arms have changed since her arrival, blooming brighter and straining toward her as if she carries

the sun within her small form.

“Different,” I murmur to the silent trees. “Special.”

It’s more than her fearlessness, though that alone sets her apart. Most humans who glimpse me flee in terror or fall paralyzed with fear. She looked at me—truly saw me—and touched me with curiosity rather than revulsion. Her fingers traced the moss patterns on my skin as if they were beautiful rather than monstrous.

But it’s more than that.

She carries a wound within her—betrayal by her kind, her chosen mate—yet refuses to be defined by it. Her spirit remains unbroken, her heart guarded but not closed.

She responds to gentleness with genuine warmth, to beauty with unfiltered wonder. She sees the forest as I do—not as resources to be used, but as life to be honored.

The problem, of course, is that the others see her worth as well.

With his clever words and knowledge, Caspian offers her wonders beneath the water’s surface. Kaelen with his primal passion, his protective ferocity barely contained beneath his wolf-skin.

Both are powerful in their domains.

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Both are determined to claim her.

A small sapling at my feet curls toward me, sensing my disquiet. I kneel, touching its tender leaves with careful fingers. “Too young to understand,” I tell it. “Human female. Temporary. Fragile.”

But even as I say the words, I know they’re a lie. There is nothing temporary about how she has rooted herself in my thoughts. Nothing fragile about the way she stands her ground against three ancient monsters.

I have lived alongside humans watching their brief lives with the detached curiosity one might feel for butterflies—beautiful but ephemeral, gone before you truly learn their patterns. I have never wanted to bind one to me, to keep them beyond their natural time in my forest.

Yet with Lily, I find myself thinking of ways to convince her to stay.

To make her mine.

“Not right,” I tell the listening trees. “Her choice. Always, her choice.”

But if it is her choice. If she were to choose me. What then? Humans are not meant for immortality and are not designed to bond with creatures like me even if she is somehow compatible. The thought of watching her age, wither, and die, while I remain unchanging, sends a pain through me sharper than any axe blade.

Unless...



There are ways. Ancient magics tied to the forest's heart, rituals as old as the earth itself—possibilities I have never considered for any human before.

But first, she must choose. Freely, fully, with complete understanding of what such a choice would mean.

I straighten. I will show her the true heart of my domain, share with her the wonders I have shared with no one before—not the surface beauty of sunlit clearings and gentle streams, but the deep magic that pulses beneath the forest floor.

I will show her the truth of what I am—not just a guardian and protector, but an ancient being with wants and needs long suppressed. I will let her see how deeply she has affected me and how thoroughly she has awakened feelings I thought had turned to stone centuries ago.

I begin gathering what I need—rare flowers that bloom only in moonlight, crystals that have absorbed the forest's energy for millennia, herbs that open the senses to deeper awareness. I will create a sacred space where I can show her my truest self, where I can mark her with more than just my scent, more than just a kiss.

Kaelen and Caspian make their claims with displays of strength, with possessive touches and dominant postures. I will show her something different—the vulnerability beneath my bark-like exterior, the tenderness that only she has uncovered.

I will respect her, her right to choose any of us—or none. But I will ensure she understands precisely what choosing me would mean.

Not possession, but partnership. Not dominance, but devotion.

The trees around me seem to stand straighter, sensing my renewed purpose. Small

creatures of the forest edge closer, curious about my activities, about the unusual energy emanating from their ancient guardian.

“Soon,” I tell them, carefully arranging my gathered treasures. “Bringing special one. Human woman. Lily.”

The name feels like a prayer on my lips, a sacred syllable that changes the very air around me. The flowers on my shoulders bloom brighter at the sound, and I know then that I am already far past the point of turning back.

She has taken root in the core of my being, and whatever grows from this strange seed—be it joy or pain—I will nurture it as carefully as I tend my most precious saplings.

Let the others make their claims with water and fangs. I will show her the steadfast heart that beats beneath ancient bark, and hope she finds something worth choosing.

9

Lily

Two days later, I wake up to sunlight streaming through the old cabin windows, with the distinct feeling of being watched.

A quick glance outside confirms my suspicion—amber eyes peer in from just beyond the porch, disappearing in a blur of gray fur when I make eye contact.

Fantastic.

I’ve got a dire wolf stalker, a kraken who kissed me underwater, and a forest troll who makes flowers bloom when he touches me.

My rebound phase is a little out of control.

I roll out of bed with a groan, wondering if there's a self-help book titled "So You're The Object Of Multiple Monster Affections: Now What?"

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Coffee first.

Existential monster crisis second.

On the bright side, I haven't thought of my cheating ex or my backstabbing sister once in the last week.

Progress?

I shuffle to the kitchenette and get the percolator going, trying to pretend this is all normal.

I make my way to my deck with my coffee, and what greets me outside is beyond beautiful.

My entire porch is covered in flowers.

Not store-bought bouquets, but wildflowers—lilies of the valley, bluebells, daisies, violets, and dozens of varieties I can't even name—arranged in intricate patterns. They form spirals and whorls across the weathered wood, creating a carpet of color so vibrant it brings tears to my eyes.

“Holy shit,” I whisper, crouching to touch a perfect circle of tiny white star-shaped blooms. They're rooted in soil that wasn't on my porch yesterday.

Oren.

My heart does a stupid little flutter thing that I immediately try to squash.

A low growl from the tree line confirms I still have an audience. Kaelen's massive form paces at the forest's edge, clearly displeased by Oren's gift.

"Good morning to you, too, stalker wolf!" I call out, waving sarcastically.

I see his hackles rise, a warning he doesn't bother to hide, but he doesn't retreat. Instead, he sits on his haunches, eyes locked on me with an intensity that should be terrifying, but somehow... isn't.

I look back at the flower carpet and sigh. "This is getting out of hand."

As if on cue, the lake's surface ripples, and Caspian's head emerges. Even from this distance, I can see his smirk.

"Good morning, my water Lily," he calls, voice carrying easily across the water. "I see the troll is courting you."

"You could call it that," I mutter, knowing he can probably hear me, anyway.

I'm trapped in some bizarre monster wooing ritual, complete with jealous stare-downs and territorial marking via flora.

And I'm totally into it.

I spot movement at the forest's edge—not where Kaelen is glowering, but further along the tree line. A flash of moss-green and the unmistakable bulk of Oren, partially hidden behind an ancient oak.

He's watching for my reaction to his gift.

My cheeks warm as our eyes meet across the distance. He doesn't approach; he stands there, like the surrounding trees, patient and still.

I find myself stepping barefoot onto the flower carpet, careful not to crush too many blooms. "It's beautiful," I call out, loud enough for him to hear.

A ripple of movement passes through the forest canopy near him—trees swaying despite the lack of wind. His doing, I realize. Maybe his version of a 'you're welcome.'

Screw it.

Before I can overthink it, I'm walking toward the forest, ignoring Kaelen's warning growl and the splash from the lake that suggests Caspian is not happy with my reaction.

As I approach, Oren steps fully into view. Today, his bark-like skin seems to glow with vitality, more vibrant greens and brown than before. The flowers on his shoulders have multiplied, little bursts of color against his mossy frame.

"Liked gift?" he rumbles, hope evident in those beautiful eyes.

"It's incredible," I admit, stopping a few feet away. "But how did you grow them overnight? On wood?"

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“Forest magic,” he says, as if that explains everything. Maybe it does. “For you. Special.”

I’m caught off guard by how touched I am. When was the last time someone did something so thoughtful for me? My ex’s idea of romance was remembering to pick up his dirty socks on the floor.

“Thank you,” I say. “No one’s ever... grown me a flower carpet before.”

He reaches out one massive hand, hesitating for permission. When I nod, he gently touches my cheek with fingers that could crush boulders, yet feel as light as butterfly wings against my skin.

“Have more to show,” he says, his eyes holding mine. “Special place. Tonight.”

“Special place?” I echo, my heart skipping. “Like... a date?”

His head tilts, considering the word. “Yes. Date. Forest heart. Sacred.”

The radiance of his smile has my heart doing a little flip while his voice sends a shiver through me. Whatever he wants to show me, it’s clearly important to him.

Before I can respond, a snarl rips through the morning quiet. Kaelen stalks toward us, his wolf form shifting with each step until he’s more man than beast by the time he reaches us, though still covered in gray fur, his features more angular, his teeth still sharp.

“Enough,” he growls, positioning himself between me and Oren. “The troll has had his turn. The water-dweller too.”

Oren doesn’t back down, but he doesn’t escalate, either. He simply stands there, solid as a tree, waiting.

Kaelen turns to me, those amber eyes burning with something that makes my insides liquify. “It’s my turn now.”

“Your turn?” I repeat, trying to sound indignant rather than intrigued. “I’m not a carnival ride.”

“No,” he agrees, his voice dropping lower. “You’re more. Much more.”

The scent hit me like a musky, wild, overwhelming wave. My knees weaken, and I have to lock them to keep from swaying.

“What is happening?” I gasp, feeling heat flood my core, my nipples tightening against my thin sleep shirt.

Kaelen’s nostrils flare, scenting my response. A satisfied growl rumbles from his chest. “Nothing you don’t want.”

“Monster pheromones,” Oren explains, looking concerned. “Wolf stronger. More direct.”

“That’s cheating,” I manage, though the accusation sounds weak even to my ears. My body responds to Kaelen’s scent like it’s been hard-wired to do so, every nerve ending suddenly hyper-aware and desperate for contact.

“It’s hardly cheating,” Kaelen rumbles, moving closer until I can feel the heat



radiating from his massive form. “It’s perfectly natural. Primal, even. If you weren’t compatible, you wouldn’t be so undeniably affected.”

His hand—larger than human but smaller than Oren’s—reaches for me, clawed fingers surprisingly gentle as they trace the line of my jaw. “I’ve been patient. I’ve watched you with them. Now, it’s my turn for you to be mine.”

The possessiveness should piss me off. Instead, it sends another pulse of heat between my thighs.

“I haven’t agreed to anything,” I remind him, though my breathy voice betrays me.

“Your body agrees with me,” he murmurs, inhaling deeply at my neck. “Your scent is all the proof I need.”

Oren shifts behind Kaelen, obviously unhappy but still controlled. “Her choice,” he reminds the wolf. “Always her choice.”

“And she will choose,” Kaelen says, eyes never leaving mine. “After she’s experienced what I have to offer.”

A splash from the lake draws our attention. Caspian stands waist-deep in the shallows, tentacles writhing behind him like angry snakes.

“Resorting to chemical warfare, wolf?” he calls, voice deceptively light despite the tension in his stance. “How predictable.”

Kaelen bares his teeth in what might be a smile or a threat. “Jealous, water-dweller?”

“Careful,” I cut in, finding my voice despite the fog of arousal clouding my brain. “The last guy who got possessive of me nursed a broken nose.”

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This seems to amuse Kaelen. “Good. You’re fierce. The perfect mate.”

“Not your mate,” I remind him, stepping back to create some breathing room between us. The distance helps clear my head marginally. “And using your pheromones or whatever is seriously unfair.”

“Nothing is fair about the way I want you,” he says simply.

Despite my exasperation at his tactics, I can’t deny the pull I feel toward him—so different from what I feel for Oren or Caspian, but no less powerful.

Where Oren makes me feel cherished and Caspian makes me feel desired, Kaelen makes me feel... claimed. Like I’ve always belonged to him, even before we met.

It’s terrifying and thrilling at once.

“Tonight,” Kaelen says, not a question but a statement. “You’re mine.”

“Promised me,” Oren interjects, stepping forward. “Forest heart. Tonight.”

“I haven’t actually agreed to either—” I start, but Kaelen’s growl cuts me off.

“Tomorrow then,” he concedes to Oren, though his eyes flash with displeasure. “She’s with me tomorrow.”

“And what about what I want?” I ask, crossing my arms over my chest, trying to ignore how my body still hums from Kaelen’s pheromones. “Don’t I get a say in this

monster scheduling conflict?”

“Of course,” Oren rumbles after a moment, flowers on his shoulders drooping slightly. “Your choice. Always.”

Kaelen looks less convinced, but nods reluctantly. “Choose then.”

I glance between them—tree giant radiating ancient patience, wolf-man practically vibrating with barely contained desire—and realize I’m actually considering their offers. Both of them. Because apparently getting cheated on has completely demolished my common sense.

“I’ll go with Oren tonight,” I decide, watching Kaelen’s eyes narrow. “He asked first. And tomorrow...” I can’t believe I’m saying this, “I’ll go with you, Kaelen.”

Kaelen's entire demeanor shifts, and I swear I see his tail give a little wag before he catches himself and tries to look fierce again.

"Did you just wag your tail?" I ask, not able to stop the grin on my face.

"I did not," he growls, but his tail betrays him with another small wag.

“And what about me?” comes Caspian’s voice from the water’s edge, tentacles swirling in agitation.

I turn to face him, feeling a blush creep up my neck. “Day after tomorrow? I mean, if you want...”

His smile is slow and predatory. “Oh, I want.”

“Great,” I mutter. “I’ve got a monster date schedule now. Very normal post-breakup

behavior.”

“Not normal,” Oren agrees, surprising me with what might be humor. “Better.”

Kaelen steps closer, his heat enveloping me, that intoxicating scent making my head swim again. “Tomorrow,” he growls softly. “I will show you what real wanting feels like.”

Before I can respond, he captures my mouth in a kiss that’s nothing like Oren’s gentle exploration or Caspian’s cool silk. This is pure fire, pure possession. His lips are firm, demanding, his tongue invading my mouth with a confidence that makes my knees buckle. One clawed hand tangles in my hair, the other grips my hip with just enough pressure to hint at the strength he’s holding back.

When he finally releases me, I’m gasping, my lips tender, my body trembling with a need I can barely contain.

“You taste delectable,” he murmurs against my ear. “Better than I even imagined.”

“That’s... that’s not fair,” I pant, aware of our audience but too aroused to care.

“Told you,” he says, satisfaction evident in his voice. “Nothing fair about need.”

He steps back, his eyes burning into mine. “Tomorrow you will be mine,” he repeats, then turns and shifts mid stride bounding back toward the forest, throwing one last warning glance at Oren.

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I stand there, trying to collect myself, very aware of Oren's steady presence behind me and Caspian's watchful gaze from the water.

"I should... I should go back to the cabin," I manage, voice still unsteady from Kaelen's kiss. "I need a cold shower. Possibly more therapy."

Oren nods, understanding. "Until tonight," he rumbles. "Will come for you at sunset."

"I'll be waiting," I reply, unable to stop the smile on my face.

As I walk back to the cabin on shaky legs, I can feel all three gazes following me—Oren's patient and steady, Kaelen's burning with promise from somewhere in the trees, and Caspian's calculating from the water's edge.

Three monsters, each wanting me in their own way.

And I'm loving it.

10

Lily

I've cycled through approximately seven outfits by sunset before settling on a simple sundress.

What exactly does one wear to visit the "heart of the forest" with an ancient troll?

The sundress seems appropriately woodland fairy, which feels right somehow.

Oren appears as the sun touches the treetops, materializing from the forest edge as if he grew straight from the soil.

Tonight, he looks different—more vibrant somehow. The moss covering parts of his bark-like skin and the flowers along his shoulders have transformed into night-blooming varieties, pale and ethereal in the fading light.

“Ready,” he asks.

“Yes, I’m looking forward to it,” I reply, stepping off the porch to meet him.

Something shifts in his expression—a softening around his eyes, a slight curl at the corner of his mouth, forming the most beautiful smile.

It completely transforms him.

“Lovely,” he says, gesturing to my dress.

“Thanks,” I respond, oddly touched by the simple compliment. “You look... glowy. Is that normal?”

“Special night,” he explains. “Forest heart awakens at sunset. Connects to me.”

He extends one massive hand, palm up in invitation. When I place my much smaller hand in his, the touch sends a warm tingle up my arm, not entirely unlike Kaelen’s pheromones, but gentler, more like sunshine than fire.

“What was that?” I ask, startled.

“Forest magic,” he says, curling his fingers carefully around mine. “Recognizes you now. Safe.”

The fact that an entire forest knows who I am should probably freak me out more than it does.

Oren leads me into the trees. The path we follow isn’t one I’ve seen before—it seems to appear just ahead of us and fade behind, as if the forest itself is creating a way forward only for us.

As we walk deeper, the woods change.

The trees grow larger and older, their trunks wider than cars, their canopies so high I can barely see the tops. The spaces between them pulse with soft bioluminescent light—mushrooms, flowers, and even some leaves give off a gentle glow that illuminates our path.

The air, too, feels thicker somehow and charged with something I can only describe as magic.

“This is incredible,” I breathe, watching as tiny lights that might be fireflies or might be something else entirely dance around us.

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“Hidden,” Oren explains, guiding me around a massive root that rises like a wall before us. “Protected. Last of old magic places.”

We walk for what feels like both minutes and hours, time seeming to stretch and compress in this enchanted space. Finally, the path opens into a clearing unlike anything I’ve ever seen.

At its center stands the largest tree I’ve ever encountered—a massive oak with a trunk so broad it would take fifteen people holding hands to encircle it. Its bark glows with the same subtle luminescence as Oren’s skin, and its branches reach up and out like protective arms, creating a cathedral-like canopy above.

The ground beneath our feet is carpeted with rich green moss that pulses with soft light in time with what feels like a heartbeat. Small flowers bloom and close again as we watch their life cycles accelerated to minutes instead of days.

“Forest heart,” Oren says reverently, his deep voice dropping to a quiet murmur.

“It’s alive,” I murmur, sensing immediately that this is more than just a tree. “I can feel it...”

Oren nods, something like pride in his expression. “Oldest living thing. Source of forest magic. Source of me.”

That gets my attention. “What do you mean, source of you?”

He leads me closer to the great tree, and as we approach, the moss beneath our feet



glows brighter, as if welcoming us.

Or welcoming him.

“Not always this form,” he explains, gesturing to his massive body. “Once, long ago, just forest spirit. Formless. Tree gave body. Gave purpose. Guardian.”

The implications sink in slowly. “You’re... you’re part of the tree? Part of the forest?”

“Yes. No. Both.” He seems to struggle with the explanation. “Spirit bonded with forest. Tree gives form. Human shape, but not human. Tree flesh but not tree.” He touches his chest where a heart would be. “Same life force. Connected.”

My mind reels with this revelation. Oren isn’t just a forest troll or guardian—he’s somehow an extension of the forest itself, given physical form through this ancient tree.

“How old are you?” I ask, though I’m unsure I want to know the answer.

“Tree remembers ice age,” he says simply. “I remember less. Still... many human lifetimes.”

Thousands of years. Maybe tens of thousands. The concept is too vast for me to comprehend truly.

“Why show me this?” I ask, suddenly aware of how significant this revelation must be. “Why trust me with something so... sacred?”

Oren’s eyes glow softly in the twilight as he guides me closer to the great tree. “Because you see,” he says simply. “See me.”

How long has he existed, watching humans come and go, feared or hunted but never truly seen? The loneliness of such an existence suddenly hits me, making my chest ache.

“I want to understand,” I whisper, touching the ancient tree’s glowing bark. The moment my fingers make contact, a jolt of energy courses through me—not painful, but overwhelming, like touching a live wire carrying not electricity but pure life force.

Images flood my mind: glaciers retreating, forests spreading across barren land, humans appearing with stone tools, metal, and machines. Through it all, Oren watches, protects, and exists in solitude as the world changes around him.

I gasp, pulling my hand away. “I felt... I saw...”

“Tree memories,” Oren confirms. “Shares with you. Accepts you.”

He takes my hand again, his touch anchoring me as the lingering images settle in my mind. “No human touched heart tree and seen. Not in many lifetimes.”

“Why me?” I ask, genuinely bewildered. “I’m nobody special.”

“Wrong,” he rumbles, stepping closer until I have to tilt my head back to meet his gaze. “Very special. Brave heart. Kind soul. See beauty where others see monster.”

The flowers on his shoulders seem to lean toward me, and I realize with a start that tiny new blooms are appearing where my shadow falls across his moss-covered skin.

“You make flowers grow,” I observe, gently touching one of the new blooms.

“You make flowers grow,” he corrects, his voice softer than I’ve ever heard. “I

respond to you.”

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Oh.

The simple confession steals my breath more effectively than Kaelen's pheromones or Caspian's underwater kisses. This ancient being, this forest embodied, blooms for me.

"Oren," I whisper, not sure what else to say.

He cups my face with his enormous hand, his touch impossibly gentle. "Would show you more," he murmurs. "If willing."

"More of the forest?"

His eyes glow brighter. "More of me."

The air between us changes, thickens with something that isn't quite Kaelen's aggressive lust but is no less potent. It smells of rich earth after rain, growing things, ancient wood, and life itself.

"Yes," I breathe, without hesitation.

Oren leads me to the base of the great tree, where the roots have formed a natural hollow filled with soft moss that pulses with gentle light. He sits, drawing me down beside him, the space intimate yet open to the star-filled sky above through gaps in the canopy.

"The moss..." I murmur as it caresses my skin through the thin fabric of my dress.

“It’s moving.”

“Living carpet,” Oren explains, his voice a deep rumble that I feel more than hear. “Responds to emotion. To desire.”

As if to demonstrate, the moss beneath us pulses with a wave of light that follows the trail of his massive finger as it traces the outline of my leg, never quite touching but close enough that I can feel the heat of him.

“It’s beautiful,” I whisper, watching the light dance across the moss wherever his shadow falls.

“You’re beautiful,” he counters, and the simple directness of his words makes my heart flutter.

I reach up, tracing the contours of his face—the ridges that resemble tree bark, the hollows where moss grows soft and velvety, the places where tiny mushrooms sprout like freckles across his cheekbones. He closes his eyes at my touch, a tremor running through his massive frame.

“Long time,” he murmurs. “Never touched. Gentle.”

The confession breaks something open inside me.

I rise on my knees, bringing our faces level, and press my lips to his. The kiss is different from our first—deeper, more certain. He tastes of honey and earth and something that makes my head swim. His mouth moves against mine with tenderness, and I feel small flowers blooming against my palms, where they rest on his shoulders.

“Lily,” he breathes against my lips, my name a prayer. “Want to show you pleasure. Forest way.”

“Yes,” I whisper back, though I have no idea what that means.

He lays me back against the moss, which cradles me like it was made for my body. Perhaps it was. The stars shine lazily overhead as Oren’s massive form hovers above me, blocking out patches of sky. His eyes glow like twin pools of mossy green.

“Trust?” he asks, one enormous hand hovering over me.

“Trust,” I confirm, the word coming easily.

When it comes, his touch is so gentle it almost tickles—fingertips brushing across my collarbone and down my arms, leaving trails of light in the moss beneath me and tiny flowers blooming in their wake. The flowers grow from nothing, springing along my skin wherever his fingers trace, their petals brushing against me with whisper-soft caresses.

“Oh,” I gasp as the sensation intensifies. The flowers multiply, their touch becoming more deliberate. They grow along my legs, their silken petals sliding under the hem of my dress, teasing the sensitive skin of my inner thighs.

“Forest pleasure,” Oren explains, his voice deeper, rougher. “Life force. Creation.”

The flowers continue their exploration, impossibly climbing higher, their petals brush against the most intimate parts of me, and I gasp as a wave of pleasure unlike anything I’ve ever felt courses through me.

It’s not just physical—it feels like my entire being is connected to something vast and ancient, like the forest itself is caressing me, awakening nerves I didn’t know existed.

“Oren,” I breathe, arching into the sensation. “This is—I’ve never—”

“Different,” he agrees, his massive hand hovering just above my body, somehow controlling the flowers that continue their sensual assault. “Natural magic.”

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The flowers are more intense now, their touch more deliberate, finding places that make me moan and writhe against the glowing moss. I'm vaguely aware that my dress has been pushed up around my waist, that the night air kisses my exposed skin, but I'm beyond caring. The pleasure builds like a tide, washing through me in waves that sync with the pulsing light of the moss beneath us.

Oren watches me with reverent intensity, his eyes glowing brighter as my pleasure mounts. Small flowering vines curl around my wrists, not restraining but anchoring me as the sensations threaten to sweep me away entirely.

"Beautiful," he murmurs, leaning down to press his mouth to mine as another wave crests. The kiss catches my cry of pleasure, swallows it into his magnificent being.

I feel myself approaching some threshold, some peak that promises to be unlike any climax I've ever experienced. The flowers between my thighs pulse with light and life, their touch both impossibly gentle and overwhelmingly intense.

"Forest holds you. Safe," Oren whispers against my lips.

I surrender to the sensation, and the world explodes into light behind my eyelids. The pleasure crests and breaks, radiating outward from my core to the tips of my fingers and toes. I cry out, back arching off the moss, as the orgasm ripples through me—but it doesn't stop, doesn't fade. It transforms, becoming something more that feels like my very essence is connecting with the forest around us.

In that moment of transcendence, I feel everything—the ancient heartbeat of the great tree, the subtle consciousness of every plant in the clearing, the distant awareness of



creatures moving through the woods, and Oren—his spirit a vast, ancient presence intertwined with it all.

When I finally float back to myself, gasping and trembling, the moss beneath me is blooming with hundreds of tiny flowers that weren't there before. They form a perfect outline of my body, a living imprint of the pleasure I just experienced.

“What just happened?” I whisper, my voice unsteady.

Oren's expression is one of wonder as he gazes at the flower outline surrounding me. “Life response,” he says, sounding awed. “Your pleasure created.”

I struggle to sit up, still shaky from the most sensual orgasm of my life. Oren's arm supports me, warm and solid against my back.

“That was... I don't even have words,” I manage, watching as the flowers continue to bloom and shift around me, responding to my aftershocks of pleasure. “It was like... like I could feel the entire forest.”

“Connected,” Oren confirms, his massive thumb brushing away a tear I didn't realize had fallen. “Forest magic,” Oren says, his voice a tender rumble. “Different for humans. More intense.”

I laugh shakily. “You think? That was like... ten orgasms rolled into one cosmic experience.”

His mouth curves in that subtle beautiful smile I'm starting to love. “Pleased you.”

“That's an understatement.” I touch one of the flowers that bloomed from my pleasure, marveling at its perfect form. “I didn't know something like this was possible.”

“Many impossible things—” he murmurs, brushing my hair back from my face with gentle fingers, “become possible with you.”

The sincerity in his voice makes my heart stutter. This isn’t just monster lust or territorial posturing. There’s something deeper here that scares me more than any physical danger could.

“Oren...” I begin, not even sure myself what I’m trying to say. The words seem to tangle in my throat, refusing to take shape.

He seems to understand. “No need for words. Just be. Here. Now.”

That alone makes me want him even more.

I don’t wait for him to make the next move. Before I know what I’m doing, I’m straddling him, using the body that’s just gifted me with so much pleasure to speak the words I can’t. His eyes glow with surprise and something more profound, and for a moment, I’m afraid that I’ve misunderstood him, that he doesn’t want this after all. Then his hands are on my waist, his touch as gentle and reverent as the moss beneath us, and I forget how to breathe.

I’m still wearing my dress, him... nothing as usual, except for the strategically placed moss that now barely covers his impressive cock. I can feel every inch of him, feel the warmth and power radiating off his body, and it spurs me on, gives me the courage to move against him, to press myself closer. The fabric of my dress rides up, and I can feel him between my legs, hard and enormous, and definitely not human.

Only then does it hit me—just how big he is. Not just his height, but... all of him. Not even remotely human, and almost certainly too much for me to handle.

I stop moving, suddenly unsure, suddenly afraid.

Oren's eyes soften with understanding. "Compatible," he assures, a tender rumble. "Magic compensates. Trust, Lily."

Trust.

I shift my hips, testing, feeling the impossible size of him against me. Even that slight movement sends heat rushing through my body.

He's large, probably the size and girth of my entire forearm. Textured, with bark-like, ribbed skin that feels soft to the touch.

I want this.

I want him.

I want magic to make us fit.

The moss beneath us pulses in time with my movements, each motion leaving a trail of glowing flowers in its wake. Their petals brush against my skin with a thousand silken caresses.

Oren watches me, his eyes bright, his fingers tightening around my waist as if he's holding on for dear life. "Lily," he breathes, my name a plea, and a promise all at once.

I remove my dress and panties and position myself, hovering over this beautiful and kind giant. And then it happens—just like he said, magic compensates. I slide down on him, slowly, impossibly, stretching and filling me in a way that should be painful, should be terrifying, but it isn't. It feels like the most natural thing in the world, and I cry out, not in fear, but in shock, relief, and overwhelming pleasure at the feel of his ribbed-like texture.

Oren's eyes widen, and his breath hitches. I can feel his ecstatic pleasure as if it is my own. Our bodies relax, melting into each other, as he fills me completely.

"Perfect fit," Oren whispers, his voice rough and beautiful.

He moves beneath me, inside me, slowly at first, as this is surely new for him, too. I let out a soft moan, grinding myself down along his length. His rhythm increases, matching the pulsing moss and the pounding of my heart; we are the very heartbeat of

the forest. He fills me again and again, each thrust sending shockwaves of pleasure through my entire being, each movement blooming with flowers that trace the outline of our joined bodies.

I lean forward, pressing our chests together, and the contact makes us both gasp. It's like touching a power source—all the energy, emotion, and raw, electric life force of the heart tree crackling between us. I feel his emotions, his strength, and the weight of his ancient, unending eternity, and it undoes me completely.

The sensations build and build, an entire forest's worth of life and magic crashing over us in waves. It's unlike anything I've ever felt or imagined or dreamed, and I know he's holding back, making it easier, softer, less intense than it could be. But this is all I can take right now. The connection is so much deeper than physical. It feels as though our very souls are touching. The feeling is exquisite.

"Oren," I cry out, my voice cracking, body stretching deliciously, everything inside me shattering.

He kisses me with impossible tenderness, his mouth gentle and sweet on mine, until the whole world dissolves into light and pleasure. The feeling of him holding me as I fall apart assures my body that it is safe for me to completely let go. My head falls back as I ride out the most stunningly beautiful orgasm, waves of pleasure sending me to unforeseen heights, until I am overwhelmed by the pure bliss.

Just as I am cresting the wave, I feel his body tense beneath me, and his cock pulses thick inside me pumping me full of his sweet, honeyed nectar. I feel his release dripping down my thighs as he lets out a deep, rumbling moan that vibrates through my body drawing out and intensifying my pleasure.

When the world comes back into focus, the stars are spinning overhead; the moss is a glowing, breathing carpet beneath us, and Oren is cradling me against his chest, still

holding me like I'm the most precious thing in the forest. We're breathless and covered in tiny, perfect flowers.

I let out a shaky laugh, half delirious and entirely happy. "Magic," I whisper, leaning my forehead against his chest.

He brushes the hair back from my face, his touch infinitely tender. "With you," he says, the wonder in his voice as deep as the forest, "everything."

We lay there, still joined, connected, and buzzing with life. I don't know how long it is before he finally slides out of me, before I finally collapse against him, completely spent and completely content.

I lean against his solid form, watching the stars through the canopy as my breathing returns to normal. The moss beneath us continues to pulse with gentle light, synchronized now with our heartbeats.

"Will you show me more of the forest heart?" I ask after a while, curiosity overcoming my post-orgasmic lethargy.

"Yes." He helps me to my feet, then assists me with my dress, straightening it delicately for such massive hands. "Much to see. Much to learn."

We spend hours exploring the sacred grove. Oren shows me ancient stones carved with symbols, trees that have witnessed millennia pass, and pools of water that reflect more than just what stands before them. Throughout it all, he treats me not as a fragile human or a temporary amusement, but as an equal worthy of sharing these secrets.

When he finally leads me back toward the cabin, the night is deep, the moon high overhead. My body still hums with residual pleasure, my mind expanded by glimpses

into a world I never knew existed.

“Thank you,” I tell him as the cabin comes into view. “For showing me your world.”

“Our world,” he corrects gently. “Always been. Few humans remember how to see.”

He stops at the forest’s edge, not approaching the cabin directly. I know without asking that he’s respecting territorial and personal boundaries.

“Tomorrow night,” I say, remembering my promise to Kaelen. “I—”

“Wolf’s turn,” Oren confirms, no jealousy in his voice, only a kind of acceptance. “Different pleasure. Different connection.”

“Does that bother you?” I ask, slightly apprehensive.

He considers this, his glowing eyes thoughtful. “Not bothered,” he finally says. “Ancient ones understand. Different kinds of love. Different bonds. Wolf offers what I cannot. Water-dweller too.”

His words strike me. Love? Is that what this is becoming?

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"I understand," I say softly, though I'm not sure I entirely do.

The idea that love—if that's what this is—doesn't have to be exclusive, possessive, singular... It's foreign to everything I've been taught about relationships.

"Three of us," Oren continues, his deep voice thoughtful. "Lonely long time. You..." He touches my cheek with one massive finger. "Wake something."

"You're saying I don't have to choose between you three?" I ask.

His smile is knowing. "Why choose? Forest has many trees. Lake has many currents. Pack has many wolves. Same ecosystem."

"That's not how human relationships work," I protest weakly.

"Not with humans now," he points out. "Monster rules, different. Heart rules, different."

He leans down, pressing a gentle kiss to my forehead. "Tomorrow, wolf show ways. Next day, water-dweller. Then decide what heart wants."

I nod. "Whatever happens, I'll remember tonight," I tell him, standing on tiptoes to press one last kiss to his moss-covered cheek. A tiny flower blooms instantly where my lips touch.

"Forest remembers," he rumbles, touching the new bloom with wonder. "I remember too. Go now. Rest."



I walk the last few yards to the cabin alone, feeling his eyes on me until I close the door behind me. Inside, I collapse onto the bed, my body still humming with forest magic, my mind reeling with everything I've experienced.

My ex was safe and reliable, with a strong emphasis on safe. We met on a dating app, where excitement peaked at his proper grammar and splitting the check exactly down the middle.

The sex? More polite than carnal, more "meh," than satisfying.

The man you're supposed to spend the rest of your life with should be a lot more than just safe and dependable, not that mine was in the end. And guess what, Brad? My "unreliable" Honda makes me feel more alive than you ever did.

Catching them together might be the best thing that ever happened to me; it forced me to abandon my DIY denial project and take a hard look at what I was settling for.

It led me here and tomorrow is Kaelen's turn.

The wolf.

The most primal and aggressive of my three supernatural suitors. After experiencing Oren's gentle forest magic, I wonder what the wolf has in store.

Part of me is terrified.

A larger part can't wait to find out.

11

Lily

Morning brings a strange gift to my doorstep—a freshly killed rabbit arranged on a bed of leaves.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” I mutter, staring at the dead animal. “Really, Kaelen?”

A low chuckle comes from the tree line. Kaelen steps into view, more man than wolf today, covered in gray fur, his eyes gleaming with satisfaction.

“It’s a traditional offering,” he says, approaching the porch. “It shows I can provide.”

“I have a refrigerator,” I point out. “And groceries.”

He scoffs, clearly unimpressed with modern conveniences. “Not the same. This,” he gestures to the rabbit, “is personal. It was hunted just for you.”

Despite my initial disgust, I’m oddly touched by the gesture. Macabre as it is.

“Thank you,” I say finally. “But maybe next time... chocolates?”

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His laugh is a rumbling growl that sends an inappropriate shiver all the way to my toes. “Tonight,” he says, moving closer, his movements fluid and predatory. “I will show you the wolf ways.”

The way he says “wolf ways” makes my mouth go dry. After Oren’s magical forest pleasure, I can only imagine what Kaelen has planned.

“I’ll be ready,” I reply, trying to sound casual rather than eagerly anticipatory.

His nostrils flare, catching my scent. “You’re already keen,” he observes with smug satisfaction. “Good.”

He's gone before I can formulate a snarky response, melting back into the forest.

I spend the day in a state of jittery anticipation, trying to distract myself with painting and writing, but constantly glancing at the clock. After last night with Oren, I have no idea what to expect from Kaelen.

The wolf is more primal, aggressive, and dangerous than the gentle forest guardian.

That thought shouldn’t send a thrill through me, but it does.

By sunset, I’ve changed outfits at least a dozen times, finally settling on jeans and a simple tank top. Practical enough for a trek to wherever his “den” is, but not so practical that it screams, “I’m definitely not expecting wolf sex.”

I’m just putting on my sneakers when a howl cuts through the twilight, long,

haunting, and unmistakably calling to me.

“Dramatic much?” I mutter, but my heart races all the same.

Outside, the forest has transformed with the setting sun. The trees cast long shadows, and the first stars appear in the darkening sky. I follow the direction of the howl, moving into the trees with more confidence than I probably should.

The path is different from the one Oren showed me—this one leads away from the heart of the forest, curving around the edge of the lake and up toward rockier terrain. As I walk, I feel eyes on me, tracking my every move. Other creatures too small rustlings in the underbrush, a flash of fur between trees, curious gazes following the human who walks boldly into wolf territory.

Another howl, closer now, guides me onward. The trees thin as the ground slopes upward, giving way to a rocky hillside with scrubby pines. A cave mouth opens on the side of the hill, illuminated by what appears to be firelight from within.

“Hello?” I call, stopping at the entrance.

“Come,” Kaelen’s voice rumbles from inside. “Welcome to my den.”

I step into the cave, blinking as my eyes adjust.

The space is surprisingly cozy—a large fire pit in the center casts dancing shadows on the walls, plush furs cover the floor, and shelves carved directly into the rock hold an eclectic collection of items that span what must be centuries. Old books, antique weapons, carved figurines, and more modern items like a vintage record player share space with natural treasures—perfect feathers, unusual stones, and a deer skull with magnificent antlers.

And there's Kaelen, standing at the back of the cave, watching me take in his domain. He's shifted form again—still massive but more human-like now, his gray fur limited to his chest and arms. His face is handsome in a fierce, wild way, and his amber eyes glow in the firelight.

"I'm happy you came," he says, satisfaction evident in his voice.

"I said I would." I run my hand over one of the furs. "Nice place you've got here. Very... primal chic."

He huffs what might be a laugh. "The others showed you their domains. It's only fair you see mine as well."

I continue exploring, fascinated by his collection. "How long have you been gathering these things?"

"Centuries," he says, moving closer, his movements fluid and predatory. "I keep what catches my eye."

The way he says it, looking directly at me, makes it clear I'm now part of that category.

"I brought you something," he says, reaching behind a rock ledge and producing a bottle of wine and what appears to be meat on a wooden platter. "Humans need cooked meat."

"You cooked?" I ask, genuinely surprised.

"I've lived alongside humans for centuries," he reminds me, setting the food on a flat stone near the fire. "I've learned a few things."

The meat is venison, seasoned with herbs I don't recognize, but that perfectly complement the rich flavor. The wine is clearly expensive, though I don't ask where a wolf-shifter gets vintage cabernet. We eat in companionable silence for a while, the crackling fire and distant forest sounds the only backdrop.

“So,” I say finally, setting aside my empty plate, “you wanted to show me your ‘wolf ways.’ What exactly does that entail?”

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His eyes flash in the firelight, a slow smile revealing teeth slightly sharper than human. “So impatient, my little mate.”

“Not your mate,” I remind him, though the word sends a thrill through me.

“Yet,” he adds, rising to his full height and extending a hand to me. “First, let’s go for a ride.”

He reaches for me, his hand engulfing mine, leading me back out into the night. Once outside, he transforms in a bone-creaking instant, shifting into his massive dire wolf form. His fur is thick and luxurious, and he’s easily large enough to carry a human on his back.

“Hop on” his voice echoes in my mind, an insistent mental command that doesn’t leave room for refusal.

I climb onto his back, clinging to his fur as he bolts into the trees.

The sensation is incredible and exhilarating. Every muscle in his enormous body propels us forward with unstoppable force. I hold tight, the wind whipping through my hair, laughter spilling uncontainably from my lips as we charge through the moonlit forest.

We race across open clearings, steep hillsides, and ravines, jumping and weaving through the dark.

Gone is the girl with the failed engagement and soap-opera family who, despite her

betrayal, wanted me to be happy for my sister.

Gone is the mundane world with its heartbreak.

It's just me and my wild ride, the night and the forest, and the unbelievable freedom of holding on tight while something terrifying and wonderful carries me into the unknown.

Joy bursts out of me as a scream of exhilaration tears from my lungs.

The thrill is incredible, a sensation that races through me, filling every part of my being. The sense of speed and wild abandon makes me feel alive.

He loops me around the edge of the lake, my laughter mixing with the wide arc of his voice in my mind. "Free?"

"Yes!" I shout, knowing he hears, feels, and shares my unfiltered exhilaration. I realize in this dizzying instant that my choices are not just between these three incredible beings, but a choice to embrace all that life can be when you stop playing by its boring rules.

He carries us to a rocky hillside with a final push of speed, slowing to a confident trot as we approach a familiar cave mouth.

He lowers himself to the ground, letting me slide off before he resumes a more human shape. His eyes are smug as he catches my breathless face.

"That was incredible," I tell him. My smile feels like my face is going to split open.

"I'm happy you enjoyed that, mate. There's more I want to show you."



He takes my hand again, leading me past the furs and fire through a narrow passage that opens into a second chamber. This one is smaller and intimate, with a pool of steaming water at its center. The ceiling opens to the night sky through a natural chimney, with stars visible through the gap.

“Hot spring,” Kaelen explains, his voice low and rough. “Natural heat from the deep earth.”

“It’s beautiful,” I breathe, watching the steam curl toward the sky.

“Join me,” he says, and before I can respond, he’s shifting more into his human form.

He’s magnificent—powerful muscles rippling beneath fur that thins as it transforms into smooth skin, leaving his lower abdomen and thighs mostly bare of fur. And between those thighs...

Well. He’s proportional to his considerable height, let’s put it that way, but that’s not the only thing that catches my eye.

His cock hangs thick between his legs, crowned with a golden hoop and studded with three gold bars. As he begins to stiffen, I imagine what those bars will feel like sliding along my clit.

“Um,” I manage eloquently, heat flooding my cheeks.

His grin is wolfish, knowing. “Shy now? Even if it’s what you want?”

“I guess you can smell that, huh?” I mutter, embarrassed, but not nearly enough to dampen my interest. “Fine.” I pull my tank top over my head, trying for boldness, though my fingers tremble slightly. “Wolf ways, right?”

His eyes darken as I undress, tracking my movement. When I'm completely naked, he doesn't pounce as I half-expected. Instead, he extends his hand again, helping me into the hot spring with gentleness.

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The water envelops me, hot enough to make me gasp, but not uncomfortable. Steam rises around us, creating a dreamlike haze in the starlit chamber.

“This is... incredible,” I sigh as the heat penetrates my muscles, melting away tension I didn’t even realize I was carrying.

Kaelen slides into the water across from me, his eyes never leaving mine. “Wolves understand pleasure,” he says, his voice deeper in the enclosed space. “It’s not just about mating. It’s about a deep connection and pack bonds.”

“I’m not your pack,” I point out, though I’m having trouble concentrating with his powerful body so close to mine beneath the water.

“You could be,” he counters, moving closer until our knees touch beneath the surface. “If you choose me.”

There’s that word again—choose. Though Oren said I might not have to. These creatures, these monsters who could simply take what they want, all seem fixated on my choice.

“What would that mean?” I ask, curiosity overcoming my nervousness. “Being pack?”

“Belonging,” he says simply. “Protection. Loyalty.” His hand finds my ankle underwater, thumb tracing circles on my skin. “Pleasure.”

His touch moves higher, tracing my calf, the back of my knee, sending shivers

despite the water's warmth.

Before I can stop myself, the question tumbles out. "Why don't you already have a pack?"

The words hang between us, and I think I've crossed a line. "I mean, why don't you have other female werewolves to choose from? Surely there are some around..."

His eyes flash, and I feel the tension ripple through the water. But instead of snapping, he just sounds... tired. "It's a long story."

"I'm not going anywhere," I say, wanting to know more about the creature who seems so intent on making me his.

He hesitates, then the words come out in a low growl. "We were hunted." The words hang heavy in the steam between us. "My pack. My... family."

His hand stills on my leg, and I see something I never expected in those amber eyes—raw pain.

"Humans," he continues, voice rough. "With silver weapons and fire. They came at night."

My heart clenches. "Kaelen, I'm so sorry."

"I fought, but there were too many." His jaw tightens. "They set fire to the forest. To flush us out."

I reach for his hand underwater, twining my fingers with his. He looks surprised by the gesture but doesn't pull away.

"I couldn't save them." The admission seems torn from him. "I heard their howls as the flames took them."

"That's terrible," I whisper, genuinely horrified. "When did this happen?"

"Two centuries ago." His eyes meet mine, ancient and haunted. "I've been alone since. Other wolves have passed through, but none have stayed."

The revelation transforms him in my eyes.

His possessiveness, his territorial nature—they're not just monster traits. They're the reflexes of someone who lost everything once and is terrified of losing again.

There's a raw edge to his voice. "I've been alone ever since."

My heart aches for him. "Kaelen..."

"Well, that's not entirely true. There might have been a possibility of something with the water-dweller long ago."

"Caspian?" I ask, intrigued.

Well, this is new information.

He nods, "But the kraken is too proud. Now I have you." His eyes meet mine with an intensity that borders on feral. "If you'll let me."

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His smile returns, predatory and hungry.

His hand slides higher, caressing my calf and the back of my knee; his touch is electric, even through the steamy water. My voice is embarrassingly breathy when I speak again. “And what does a wolf mate get that a pack member doesn’t?”

His smile is slow, dangerous in the most delicious way. “Everything.”

Before I can process that, he’s moving, water surging around us as he closes the distance. But instead of kissing me as I expect, he nuzzles into my neck, inhaling deeply. The sensation of his face against that sensitive spot makes me shiver.

“Your scent,” he growls against my skin. “Drives me wild.”

His large and strong hands find my waist beneath the water, lifting me effortlessly until I’m perched on his thighs, our faces level. This close, I can see the different shades of amber in his eyes, the perfect curve of his mouth, and the droplets of water clinging to his eyelashes.

“Wolf ways begin with scent,” he explains, his voice a rumble I feel against my chest. “Then taste.”

His tongue—hotter than human—traces the curve of my neck, and I moan at the sensation. It’s different from Oren’s gentle exploration or Caspian’s cool silkiness—something primal and raw in Kaelen’s touch sets my nerve endings on fire.

“Then what?” I breathe, tilting my head to give him better access.

“Then claiming,” he growls against my throat, the vibration of his voice sending shivers down to my toes. His hands tighten on my waist, pulling me closer until I can feel the hard press of him against my inner thigh. “If you allow it.”

His teeth—sharp but carefully controlled—graze my shoulder, and I moan embarrassingly loud, the sound echoing in the cave. The sensation is electric, a dangerous edge of pain that heightens the pleasure.

“So responsive,” he murmurs approvingly. “You’re the perfect mate.”

“Still not your mate,” I remind him, though the protest sounds weak even to my ears.

His laugh is a hot rush of air against my wet skin. “Tonight you are.” One hand slides up my ribcage to cup my breast, thumb brushing across my nipple in a touch so deliberately light it’s almost cruel. “Tonight, you’ll know what it means to be claimed by the wolf.”

Any clever retort I might have made dissolves into a moan as his mouth replaces his hand, hot and demanding on my breast. His tongue circles my nipple before he takes it between his teeth, applying just enough pressure to make me arch against him, seeking more of that exquisite edge between pleasure and pain.

The water swirls around us as he shifts, lifting me higher until I’m practically straddling him, the hard length of him pressing insistently against me. His hands cup my ass, supporting my weight effortlessly as his mouth continues its torturous attention to my breasts.

“Kaelen,” I pant, threading my fingers through his wet hair, half-wanting to pull him away, half-wanting to press him closer.

He growls in response; the sound vibrates through my chest. “Say it again.”

“Kaelen,” I repeat, my voice breathy and desperate even to my own ears.

“Mine,” he rumbles, finally capturing my mouth with his.

The kiss is a pure claim. His tongue invades, his teeth nip at my lower lip, and his grip on me is almost bruising in its intensity. He tastes wild, like pine and smoke and something untamable. I kiss him back with equal fervor, meeting his aggression with my own, biting his lip hard enough to make him growl again.

“You’re fierce,” he approves when we break apart, both breathing hard. “That’s good.”

His hands shift, one supporting my back while the other slides between us, finding the slick heat between my thighs with unerring accuracy. The first touch of his fingers makes me cry out, oversensitive and desperate.

“So slick,” he murmurs, satisfaction evident in his voice.

“Shut up and touch me again,” I say, trying to grind against his hand.

He laughs, a deep rumble that vibrates through me. “Demanding little thing. I like that.”

His fingers circle my clit with maddening precision, building pressure without giving me the direct contact I crave. Every time I try to shift to get more friction, he anticipates the movement, keeping me on the edge of pleasure without pushing me over.

“Please,” I finally whimper, abandoning pride in favor of release.



“Please what?” he asks, his voice rough with desire but his control absolute.

“Please... make me come,” I pant, clutching his shoulders for support.

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“Not yet,” he murmurs, withdrawing his hand entirely.

I make a sound of frustration that turns into a surprised gasp as he lifts me out of the water in one fluid motion, carrying me back to the main chamber of his den. He lays me on the plush furs. The contrast of my wet skin against the soft pelts sends a shiver through me.

Kaelen stands over me, water streaming down every ridge of his sculpted muscles. Steam emanates from him in the cool midnight air, and as he looks down at me on his bed of furs, his erection juts proudly from his thatch of grey hair. The firelight catches on the droplets clinging to his fur, and glints off the golden crown of his cock, making him look like some ancient deity of lust and wilderness.

“Do you know what wolves do when they find their true mate?” he asks, his voice deeper than I’ve heard it before.

I shake my head, transfixed by the sight of him.

“They claim them,” he says, lowering himself over me. “Mark them so all others know they’re taken.” His mouth finds my neck again, teeth grazing the sensitive spot where my pulse hammers. “Would you like that, Lily? To be claimed by the wolf?”

The question is serious beneath the heat of the moment. He’s asking permission—this powerful creature is giving me the choice, but I’m too far gone.

“Yes,” I breathe, completely transfixed by this wild wolf shifter.

His growl of approval vibrates against my skin as he positions himself between my thighs, the hard length of him pressing against my entrance but not yet pushing inside. His control is impressive and maddening.

“Say it,” he demands, eyes locked on mine. “Say you want to be claimed.”

“I want to be claimed,” I repeat, arching against him in invitation. “By you, Kaelen.”

The instant I say his name, it’s like a switch flips.

Kaelen’s eyes blaze with need, and I feel it even before he moves—a surge of pheromones so intense it hits me like a physical force.

It’s everywhere, inescapable, saturating the air with raw lust until every inch of me is desperate for him, for his touch, for his cock.

“Please,” I gasp.

My head is spinning, my body is electric with want, and his sheer size makes my mouth water with desperation.

I need him inside me like I need air.

“You want my cock, mate?”

“Yes, please Kaelen.”

He presses the ring of his cock to my entrance, gently swirling and teasing me. He dips into me half an inch and I can feel myself stretching around him. I whimper when he slips back out.

“Please Kaelen, I need all of you. Fill me, Kaelen, claim me like I’m your mate.”

The sound he makes is hardly human—a primal growl of satisfaction as he finally pushes inside me in one smooth thrust. The sensation is an overwhelming, delicious pleasure. I feel each rung of his golden ladder.

“Fuck,” I gasp, clutching at his shoulders.

“Mine,” he growls, beginning to move with powerful, measured strokes. Each thrust drives me deeper into the furs, and each withdrawal leaves me aching for more. His pace is relentless but controlled, building a rhythm that has me panting and clawing at his back. My eyes roll back in my head as I lose myself to this primal pleasure.

His teeth graze my neck, my shoulders, my breasts—not breaking skin but promising the possibility with each nip.

Each thrust sends shockwaves of pleasure through me, his powerful body moving like a predator that leaves me breathless.

I feel a swelling heat at the base of his cock nudging firmly against my clit, sending spirals of pleasure in time with his pace. I look to where our bodies are joined and see that the base of his cock has swollen into a thick, pulsing knot.

My mouth hangs open in shock, and as he follows my lust-filled gaze, his face cracks into a devilish grin.

“Do you want it?” he asks. “We will be locked together in climax.”

“Will it even fit?” I ask nervously.

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“Your body knows how to adjust.”

Meeting his eyes, I know I can trust him. He could never harm me. I place my hand on his cheek and nod.

“Mine,” he growls again, his rhythm becoming more insistent, more demanding. “Say it.”

“Yours,” I gasp, the word torn from me by pleasure so intense it borders on pain. “God, Kaelen—”

He shifts, lifting my hips higher, the new angle making me cry out as he hits spots deep inside that send white-hot sparks through my entire body. His control is incredible—each thrust perfectly measured to bring me closer to the edge without sending me over.

“Not until I say,” he commands, somehow reading my approaching climax in my scent or my breathing or the way my body clenches around him. “Not yet, little mate.”

I whimper in frustration, my nails digging into his shoulders as he continues his relentless pace. The pleasure builds and builds, a coiling tension that threatens to snap with each powerful thrust. Yet somehow he keeps me suspended on that exquisite edge.

“Please,” I beg, beyond pride now, beyond anything but the desperate need for release. “Please, Kaelen.”

His eyes flash with satisfaction at my begging.

Kaelen pushes the girth of his knot into me with a gentle delicacy, stretching my pussy until I'm sure I will burst. The stretch is almost too overwhelming but the initial sharp sting transforms into a feeling of fullness. The world around me ceases to exist as he holds still inside of me, waiting for my body to accept him. I can see the amount of control it takes, and this renews my fervor.

Once he's adjusted and seated deep, I jerk my hips, thrusting against him, and the sensation is unreal.

"Together," he growls, shifting again to press his body fully against mine, chest to chest, his face buried in my neck. "Now, Lily. Come for me now."

His teeth find that sensitive juncture of neck and shoulder, and he clamps down; the dual sensation shatters me completely—my climax crashes through me with such force that I scream, my body arching off the furs as wave after wave of pleasure pulses outward from my core.

Kaelen follows immediately, his powerful body tensing above me, pulsing inside me, a guttural howl tearing from his throat as he finds his own release. The sound echoes through the cave, primal and triumphant, a claim that resonates in my very bones.

For long moments afterward, we lay tangled together, his weight pressing me into the furs, our breathing gradually slowing. I feel marked by him—not just physically, but somehow deeper, as if his claiming has altered something fundamental within me.

"Lily," he murmurs, his voice gentler than I've ever heard. He rolls to his side, taking me with him, his cock still locked inside me, cradling me against his chest. "My Lily."

I should correct him and remind him I'm not truly his, that tomorrow I'm meant to see Caspian, and I haven't made any choice. But in this moment, with his heartbeat strong beneath my ear and his scent surrounding me, I can't bring myself to break the spell.

"That was incredible," I finally manage, my voice hoarse from screaming. "Is that typical wolf claiming, or did you add some special touches for the human?"

His chest rumbles with laughter beneath my cheek. "Both. Wolves are passionate, but we can be creative when the situation demands it."

"Creative is one word for it." I trace lazy patterns through the fur on his chest, marveling at how soft it is despite its rugged appearance. "I think you broke something in my brain."

"Good." His satisfaction is palpable as he strokes my back, his claws retracted now, just the pads of his fingers running gently up and down my spine. "You should be marked in all ways. Body. Mind. Soul." As the swelling in his member subsides, he slowly slips out of me, and I feel our combined pleasure release, dripping from my heat. My body shudders at the loss of him.

I lift my head to look at him, struck by the intensity in his eyes. "You're serious about this mate thing, aren't you? It's not just sex for you."

His expression softens, something vulnerable flickering across his features. "Wolves mate for life, Lily. When we choose, we choose completely."

"But I'm human," I remind him. "Temporary. I'll age and die while you just keep on... wolfing."

"There are ways," he says cryptically, echoing what Oren had implied. "If you chose

to stay. To become truly mine.”

The weight of that possibility settles over me—becoming something more than human, binding myself to this ancient, powerful creature. It’s too much to process after the mind-blowing sex we just had.

“I need to think,” I murmur, pressing my face against his chest again. “This is all happening so fast.”

“Time means little to ones like us,” he says, his hand continuing its soothing strokes along my back. “But I understand. Humans need time for processing.”

I laugh at his choice of words. “Yes, we do. Especially when we suddenly find ourselves the object of affection for three supernatural beings who’ve apparently been hiding in the woods all this time.”

His arms tighten around me. “Tomorrow, you see the water-dweller.”



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It's not a question, but I answer anyway. "Yes. I promised."

His growl is soft, but unmistakable. "His touch will not erase mine. You'll still smell of wolf when you enter his domain."

"Is that why you...?" I gesture vaguely at my body, which feels thoroughly claimed in every possible way.

His smile is unrepentant. "Mostly because I couldn't help myself. You're intoxicating. But I'm not interested in sharing you with anyone, especially not him. You're mine, and I'm not letting go." His voice is a low growl, the possessiveness clear. "Not now. Not ever."

We lie together in comfortable silence for a while, the fire crackling. My body gradually cools despite his furnace-like heat. Eventually, he shifts, pressing a kiss to my forehead.

"I should return you to the cabin before dawn," he says reluctantly. "Humans need sleep."

"This human definitely does," I agree, feeling the pleasant muscle ache. "But maybe a little more hot spring time first? I think I need to soak some of these wolf-induced aches."

Kaelen's laugh is a warm rumble against my skin as he effortlessly lifts me back to the steaming pool. "As my mate wishes."

The water welcomes us like lovers, enveloping my tender body in soothing heat. I sink into it gratefully, resting my head against the smooth stone edge. Kaelen settles beside me, his powerful arm around my shoulders, drawing me against him.

“This is nice,” I murmur, feeling more relaxed than I have in months. “I could get used to this.”

His chest rumbles with satisfaction beneath my cheek. “That’s the idea.”

We soak in silence, watching the stars wheel overhead through the cave’s natural skylight. His fingers trace idle patterns on my shoulder, occasionally straying to the spot on my neck where his teeth had grazed most insistently.

“I didn’t break skin,” he says suddenly, as if reading my thoughts. “Though I wanted to.”

“Why didn’t you?” I ask, curious.

His expression turns serious. “True marking is permanent. Not something to be done without full consent and understanding.” His fingers brush my neck again. “When—if—I mark you properly, you’ll know exactly what it means.”

Something warm unfurls in my chest at his words. For all his primal aggression, there’s an honor to him.

“Thank you,” I say softly, kissing his jaw. “For giving me time.”

“You’re worth waiting for,” he replies simply.

Later, dressed and somewhat put back together, Kaelen walks me to the edge of the clearing where my cabin sits. The pre-dawn light casts everything in shades of blue

and silver, making the world seem dreamlike and unreal.

“Tomorrow night,” he says, his voice a low growl as he pulls me against him one last time. “You’ll smell of water and... him.”

“Jealous?” I tease, tilting my face up to his.

“Yes,” he admits without shame. “But also curious.” His eyes hold mine. “You’re experiencing things no human ever has. Three ancient beings, three different kinds of magic. It makes you even more unique.”

His words give me pause. I hadn’t thought of it that way—each encounter somehow changes me, marking me beyond the physical.

“Rest now,” he says, kissing my forehead gently. “You’ll need your strength for the water-dweller.”

With that cryptic warning, he melts back into the forest, leaving me to stumble to my cabin on wobbly legs. The wolf has thoroughly claimed my body, but my mind is already wondering what the Kraken will show me next.

12

Lily

Late morning light filters through the old cabin windows as I stumble toward the shower, my muscles pleasantly sore in places I didn’t know could get sore. As I soap up, I notice small bruises forming on my hips where Kaelen’s hands had gripped me. Little purple reminders of just how thoroughly I’d been claimed.

“So much for taking time to heal,” I mutter, but there’s regret in my voice.

I should probably be more concerned that my biggest worry has shifted from “will I die alone” to “how do I explain clawmarks to a gynecologist,” but who am I kidding? I’m loving every minute of it.

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After toweling off, I catch sight of myself in the mirror—flushed cheeks, bright eyes, hair still damp and wild.

I look... different.

Not just well-fucked (though definitely that), but somehow more vibrant, more alive than the heartbroken woman who arrived at this cabin less than two weeks ago.

“What are you doing, Lily?” I ask my reflection, which offers no answers, just a knowing smile.

Three monsters.

Three incredible dates.

And tonight, it's Caspian's turn.

The thought sends an anticipatory shiver through me that has no business existing after the thorough satisfaction Kaelen provided.

I spend the day in a strange limbo, trying to distract myself with cabin chores and painting while my mind drifts to what awaits me tonight.

Will Caspian sense Kaelen on me the way Kaelen detected Oren? Will he be jealous? Possessive? The thought shouldn't excite me as much as it does. And if I'm being honest, I'm curious to learn more about Kaelen and Caspian's history, and what exactly transpired between them. Though I know it's none of my business, I can't

help but be curious.

By late afternoon, I'm too restless to stay indoors. I wander down to the lake's edge, carefully staying on the shore. The water laps gently against the rocks, deceptively peaceful. Somewhere beneath that placid surface, an ancient being is waiting for me.

"I know you're watching," I call out, sitting on a sun-warmed rock and dangling my feet above—not in—the water.

A ripple appears about twenty feet out, then another, until Caspian's head emerges from the depths. Even from this distance, I can see his knowing smile.

"Observant, my Little Water Lily," he calls back, gliding closer with that unnatural grace. "Anticipating our evening?"

"Maybe," I reply, aiming for nonchalance, but probably missing by a mile. "Just killing time."

He reaches the shallows, rising further so his chest is visible above the waterline. Those tentacles I remember so vividly swirl beneath the surface, occasionally breaking the water's surface in sinuous, teasing movements.

I have definitely not been fantasizing about them all day.

"You reek of wolf," he observes, nostrils flaring delicately. "I can smell him from here."

I blush, "Is that going to be a problem?"

His smile is enigmatic, neither pleased nor displeased. "It's interesting." He moves closer, water sluicing down his torso. "I wonder what my mark will smell like,

layered over his.”

“Who says I’m still coming?” I challenge, though we both know it’s an empty threat.

His laugh is like water over stones. “Your eyes say it. Your scent. Your curiosity.” He’s close enough now that I could touch him if I leaned forward. “Humans are delightfully transparent, especially when they want something.”

“And what exactly do I want, according to you?”

His black eyes gleam with something ancient and knowing. “To experience everything. To taste all the flavors of the forbidden. To know what it means to be touched by creatures who want to pleasure you, to please you and to possess every inch of you.”

The accuracy of his assessment steals my retort.

He’s right, damn him.

I do want to know and to experience. And not just physically—though God knows that’s a significant part of it—but to understand these three beings who’ve suddenly turned my world upside down.

“Midnight,” he says, already retreating into deeper water. “Wear nothing you wish to keep dry.”

With that parting shot, he disappears beneath the surface, leaving me flustered and more impatient than ever for nightfall.

I arrive at the dock precisely at midnight, wrapped in a light robe with nothing underneath. The moon hangs heavy in the sky, turning the lake’s surface into a

mirror. The night is warm, with crickets chirping and a gentle breeze rustling the trees around the lake.



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I stand alone, feeling an anticipation, a giddy excitement—something I never felt with my ex.

After a few moments, I start wondering if Caspian will show, or if he's changed his mind after sensing Kaelen's claim on me. Then the water ripples, and he emerges—not just his head and shoulders this time, but his full form rising from the depths like some god.

His tentacles rise higher from the water, glowing brighter, creating patterns of light that dance hypnotically across the lake's surface.

“Come to me, Lily,” he beckons, extending a hand.

I drop the robe completely, standing naked. His sharp intake of breath is gratifying—even this ancient being is affected by a simple human girl. I step to the very edge of the dock, toes curling over the weathered wood.

“Will I be able to breathe again? Like before?”

“Yes,” he promises. “My kiss will change you temporarily. Allow you to experience my world without fear.”

I dive in rather than waiting for him to pull me—a small assertion of control that makes him laugh as I surface beside him. The water is once again surprisingly warm, caressing my skin.

“Brave little water Lily,” he murmurs, pulling me closer with gentle tentacles that

wrap around my waist. “Ready?”

I nod, and his mouth claims mine. The kiss tastes of salt and something sweeter, more intoxicating. That strange substance floods my mouth again, changing my body’s chemistry. When he pulls me under, there’s no panic, no desperate need for air—just the strange sensation of water filling my lungs and somehow providing oxygen.

The underwater world opens up beneath us, more magical than I remembered. Bioluminescent creatures dart away from our descent, plants that wave in currents that seem to follow Caspian’s commands. His tentacles pulse with light, illuminating our path as he guides me deeper.

This time, we pass his cave sanctuary, continuing downward to a place where the lake bottom drops away into a vast, dark chasm. I hesitate, the fear of the deep overriding even the magic that allows me to breathe underwater.

“Trust me,” his voice somehow reaches me, though his lips don’t move. Telepathy, or some water-based communication I can’t comprehend.

I squeeze his hand in answer, and he pulls me into the abyss.

As we descend, the darkness gives way to light—not sunlight or moonlight, but an eerie, beautiful glow emanating from what appears to be ancient ruins, partly reclaimed by aquatic plants. Columns rise from the lake bed, covered in luminous algae that pulse in rhythmic patterns. Archways and fallen statues create a labyrinth of stone, while schools of glowing fish dart between them like living constellations.

“What is this place?” I ask, surprised that I can speak underwater, my voice sounding strange and distorted to my own ears.

“The remains of another time,” Caspian replies, his tentacles guiding me gently

through the ruins. “One that existed long before humans claimed dominance.”

“You knew them?” I ask, trailing my fingers over a carved stone face half-buried in silt, its features not quite human.

“I did,” he says simply.

The revelation stops me short. I turn to face him fully, seeing him with new eyes—not just a magical creature, but one that has lived for millennia.

“What happened to them?”

A shadow passes over his perfect features. “Time. Change. The waters receded for centuries. Many died. Others changed form to survive on land, forgetting their origins.”

The loneliness implicit in his words makes my heart ache. I reach for him, my hand small against his chest. “You’ve been alone all this time?”

His smile is gentle but tinged with sadness. “Not entirely. Oren was already here, then Kaelen arrived. We established boundaries, territories.”

He looks at me, slightly apprehensive. “The wolf and I have a past.”

“Kaelen alluded to something,” I say, “But he didn’t elaborate.”

“It’s complicated,” he admits, his voice low. “We were both broken and lonely. We were too much alike—both strong willed and stubborn. We fought. There was no balance between us. In the end, I rejected him. My pride got in the way, and now. Well now, it’s too late.”

I feel a tug in my chest. “It’s never too late. You can still be together if you want to.”

Caspian’s gaze softens, “I have you now, Lily. And that's all I want. Besides, that was a long time ago and we’ve established a kind of peace.”

“Until I showed up and complicated everything,” I murmur.

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“Until you showed up and awakened something we’d all forgotten,” he corrects, a tentacle curling affectionately around my me. “The joy of wanting. Of being wanted.”

He guides me deeper into the ruins, and at its center stands a pool of water that glows somehow distinct from the lake water surrounding us.

“What does it do?” I ask, mesmerized.

“Many things,” he says cryptically. “But tonight, it will make you mine, for as long as you wish to be.”

The promise in his words sends a shiver through me. “And if I wish to be yours forever?”

His eyes darken, “then it could make that possible, too.”

Before I can process the implications, he’s guiding me into the glowing pool. The moment I enter, the water feels different—thicker, almost gelatinous, yet pleasantly so, like being immersed in warm honey. It clings to my skin, seeping into every pore, and I gasp as sensation floods my body.

“What is this?” I whisper, watching as the glowing liquid seems to absorb into my flesh, leaving trails of blue-white light that trace through my veins before fading.

“Essence of the deep,” Caspian murmurs, his tentacles curling around me, supporting me as my limbs grow heavy with pleasure. “It cleanses, renews, and transforms.”

The liquid-light pulses through me, erasing Kaelen's marks from my skin, yet somehow deepening the pleasure centers those marks had awakened. I feel myself opening, becoming more sensitive, more receptive.

"It's incredible," I breathe, watching as my skin begins to glow softly from within, matching the bioluminescence of Caspian's tentacles.

"You're incredible," he corrects, drawing me against his chest. "A human who can withstand our magic, who can take the essence of forest, wolf, and now water into herself."

His tentacles wrap around me more fully now, no longer just supporting but exploring. They slide across my skin deliberately, leaving trails of tingling sensation in their wake. Unlike Kaelen's primal claiming or Oren's gentle magic, Caspian's touch is precise, methodical, finding every sensitive spot with unerring accuracy.

I moan as one tentacle traces the curve of my breast while another slides between my thighs with perfect pressure.

His smile is knowing, almost smug.

A smaller tentacle circles my nipple, the tip flattening and then curling around the sensitive bud in a way no human finger could mimic. Then he moves his tentacle slightly, so the suction cup covers my nipple. Another does the same to its twin, creating a perfect symmetrical suction that makes me arch into his touch.

"Oh god," I moan as the tentacle between my thighs slips along my heat, each little suction cup strategically plucking at my clit, sending waves of pleasure up my body.

"Not god," Caspian corrects, his voice deepening as his own arousal builds. "Just very old."

He lifts me in the glowing pool, tentacles supporting me, so I float on my back, spread open to his gaze and touch. The sensation of being completely surrounded, supported, and stimulated is unlike anything I've experienced before.

Where Kaelen was dominant and Oren was tender, Caspian is... comprehensive.

No part of me is neglected, no sensitive spot undiscovered.

Tentacles stroke my calves, the backs of my knees, the sensitive crease where thigh meets hip. They slide beneath me, supporting my back while smaller ones trace my spine, finding all the right nerve clusters. One wraps delicately around my throat—not threatening but enhancing, applying gentle pressure that makes every sensation more intense.

“Caspian,” I pant, my voice distorted by the water and my mounting pleasure. “This feels...”

“I know little treasure,” he says, his black eyes glowing with the same light that pulses through my veins. “Let the water take you.”

I relax even more into his touch, letting him have complete control over my body.

The tentacle between my thighs changes its movement, the tip flattening and then curling around my clit. It pulses with light in time with my heartbeat, each pulse sending waves of pleasure radiating outward.

I'm floating, suspended in glowing water and tentacles, every nerve ending alive with sensation. My climax, when it comes, isn't the explosive release of Kaelen's claiming or the transcendent merging of Oren's forest magic—it's a rippling wave that starts at my core and expands outward, gaining strength rather than dissipating, building and building until my entire body is pulsing with pleasure so intense it borders on

unbearable.

“That’s it,” Caspian murmurs, his tentacles tightening around me as my body convulses. “Take it all.”

The orgasm seems to last forever, waves of pleasure crashing through me in endless succession. Just when I think I can’t take any more, the sensation shifts, deepens, and I feel Caspian pressing inside me with not one but two of his dexterous tentacles.

Slowly they inch inside of me, swirling and writhing in an undulating rhythm. While one presses firmly into my g-spot the other slowly moves in and out of me in overwhelming pleasure. I can feel myself tightening around him. He raises my body so he can stare deeply into my eyes as I let go and a second orgasm wracks my body, causing me to convulse around him, pulling him flush against my body.



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Before I've had time to come down from my pleasure peak he slips both tentacles out of me, replacing them with his prehensile penis, its shaft lined with suckers. It is more humanoid than the tentacles, though definitely not human in its dimensions or capabilities.

“Mine,” he growls, the sound vibrating through the water around us as he fills me completely.

The dual sensation of being filled by him while his tentacles continue their relentless exploration pushes me into a third climax immediately following the second. This one tears a scream from my throat that emerges as a stream of bubbles, my body clenching around him with such force that his eyes widen in surprise and pleasure.

As stars fall around me, Caspian flips me over and cradles me in his tentacles. They grip my arms and legs firmly into place as he takes me from behind, never letting up his stimulating ministrations. With my body held in place, Caspian applies gentle pressure to my throat, causing my head to spin every time he releases. He has complete control over me and I don't know how many more orgasms I can take.

“Caspian, I can't,” I cry out. “It's too much!”

“One more, sweet water Lily?” He asks as he flips me back around and pulls me in to his chest.

How can I deny this sea god, so intent on overflowing me with pleasure? I nod vigorously, accepting his challenge.

Caspian becomes more gentle, holding me rather than continuing to stimulate me. I can still feel my whole body tingling with delight.

Caspian enters me once more, bottoming out inside of me, spiraling his appendage in perfect synchronicity with his thrusting. As the pleasure builds once more, I become absolutelyferal for him, rocking and swirling my hips in a furious motion, desperate for another climax. His eyes grow wide and this time he loses all control.

“Lily,” he groans, “You feel—”

His words dissolve into a sound that’s half-growl, half-song as he explodes his release, his tentacles pulse in with an intense light that momentarily turns the surrounding waters into a blinding nova. I feel something flowing into me—not just physically but energetically, as if part of his essence is merging with mine. This orgasm combines the intensity of the previous ones with the sensuality of our connection.

When the light fades and the water calms, we’re floating in each other’s arms, my body still glowing faintly from within, his tentacles curled protectively around me.

“That was...” I struggle to find words adequate to describe what just happened between us.

“The beginning,” he says simply, touching my face with gentle fingers. “If you choose it to be.”

We drift together in the glowing pool, his tentacles still wrapped loosely around me, until my breathing gradually returns to normal. My body still hums with the aftereffects of pleasure so intense it transcends physical sensation.

“So,” I finally manage, “that’s kraken sex, huh?”

His laugh ripples through the water, low and melodious. “A simplified version, adapted for human physiology. The full experience might overwhelm you.”

“More overwhelming than that?” I raise an eyebrow, genuinely curious what could possibly top what I just experienced.

His smile is enigmatic. “Perhaps one day you’ll find out.”

The implication—that there could be a future where I’m more than human, capable of withstanding his full power—hangs between us, neither acknowledged nor denied.

Caspian guides me out of the glowing pool, my body still tingling with residual energy. As we emerge, I notice my skin has taken on a faint iridescence, subtle but unmistakable in the bioluminescent light of the ruins.

“What’s happening to me?” I ask, examining my arm where the glow seems to pulse just beneath the surface.

“The essence lingers,” he explains, one tentacle tracing the pattern of light along my forearm. “It will fade by morning unless you choose to make it permanent.”

There it is again—the choice. All three of them keep offering it, even as they claim me in their various ways.

“I need time,” I tell him, meeting his eyes.

“Time is something I have in abundance,” he says, drawing me close again. His tentacles wrap around me gently, supportively. “But you should know my claim on you is as strong as theirs now. It changes things.”

“Changes what, exactly?”

His expression grows serious. “The balance. The three of us have maintained an uneasy truce for centuries, respecting each other’s territories, avoiding conflict. But you—” he touches my cheek with gentle fingers, “—you’ve awakened want in all of us. The possibility of happiness, of a future.”

“I don’t want to create tension or hurt anyone,” I tell him.

“I know,” he agrees. “But with you, there’s a chance of companionship that spans more than a human lifetime, something we all want, but cannot all have.”

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The weight of his words settles over me. “You’re saying I have to choose one of you?”

“Eventually, you will,” he confirms. “Or choose none and return to your human life, carrying the memory of what might have been.”

The thought of returning to my everyday existence—apartment hunting, bills, explaining to friends why my engagement ended—seems impossibly dull after what I’ve experienced here at the cabin in the middle of nowhere.

“What happens if I don’t choose?” I ask. “If I just... keep seeing all of you?”

Caspian’s tentacles tighten slightly around me, betraying a tension his face doesn’t show. “I don’t know. The balance might break,” he says quietly. “We’ve maintained peace because we each have our domain, our purpose. You blur those boundaries.”

“So I’m basically Helen of Troy, except with monsters instead of Greeks,” I mutter.

His laugh is unexpected, a rich sound that vibrates through the water around us. “You know your history. Yes, in some ways. Though I’d like to think we’re more civilized than those warriors.”

“Are you?” I challenge. “Because from where I’m standing—or floating, whatever—you three are acting pretty territorial over a woman you just met a couple of weeks ago.”

“We are what we are,” he says simply. “Beings with ancient instincts. But also capable of reason, of patience.” He smiles. “Maybe not Kaelen.” His hand cups my

cheek. “Of letting you decide your fate.”

We float in silence for a moment, the ruins glowing below us.

“I should go back,” I finally say.

“Of course.” He guides me upward, his tentacles propelling us smoothly through the water toward the surface.

As we rise, I watch the underwater ruins recede beneath us, its glowing beauty fading into darkness.

When we break the surface, the night air feels cool against my skin after the womb-like warmth of the depths. The moon has traveled across the sky during our underwater interlude, now hanging low over the western treeline.

“Dawn approaches,” Caspian observes, guiding me toward the shore with gentle tentacles. “The wolf will be prowling, scenting you on the wind.”

“Let him prowl,” I say, feeling suddenly defiant. “I’m going to bed. Alone.”

Caspian’s smile is knowing. “As you wish. But remember, Lily—what we’ve shared has changed you, just as what you experienced with the others did. You carry a piece of each of us now. Nothing will ever be the same.”

He brings me to the shallows, where I can stand on my own. As I emerge from the water, I notice my skin still has that faint, subtle, but unmistakable iridescence.

“When will this fade again?” I ask, examining my arm where the glow pulses just beneath the surface.

“By dawn,” he assures me. “Unless you wish otherwise.”

I shake my head. “One thing at a time. I’m still processing... everything.”

He nods, remaining in deeper water as I walk to where I left my robe. As I bend to retrieve it, I catch sight of movement at the forest’s edge—amber eyes watching, a low growl vibrating through the night air.

Kaelen.

And just beyond him, nearly invisible against the trees but for the faint glow of flowers on his shoulders, Oren.

Both watching, both aware of exactly where I’ve been and what I’ve done.

“Great,” I mutter, pulling my robe on with as much dignity as possible while dripping wet and faintly glowing. “The welcoming committee.”

“They’re drawn to the change in you,” Caspian calls from the water, his voice carrying easily across the distance. “My essence mixed with theirs creates... interest.”

“I’m not doing this right now,” I call back, tightening the robe’s belt with a decisive tug. “Tell your monster buddies that I need sleep and space, and the next one who shows up uninvited gets a face full of whatever household cleaner I can find under the sink.”

Caspian’s laugh ripples across the water. “They hear you. Whether they’ll listen is another matter.”

I turn toward the cabin, head high, very aware of three pairs of eyes tracking my

every move. The sensation should be terrifying—three ancient monsters watching me like I'm the last cookie in the jar—but instead, it sends a forbidden thrill down my spine.



*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 3:37 pm*

“Goodnight, monsters,” I call over my shoulder, putting an extra sway in my step just to be petty.

I close the cabin door firmly behind me, leaning against it with a shaky exhale. My body still tingles from Caspian’s underwater attentions, my skin still faintly luminous in the darkness of the cabin.

“What the hell are you doing, Lily?” I whisper.

I should be calling the ranger station, or the police, or exorcists, or whoever deals with monsters pursuing humans. Instead, I’m cataloging the differences between forest pleasure, wolf claiming, and underwater ecstasy, wondering how I’ll ever return to normal human sex after this.

If I return to normal human life at all.

That thought stops me cold.

Am I actually considering this? Choosing one of them? Becoming something more—or other—than human? Just a month ago, my biggest concern was whether to keep the wedding venue deposit.

Now I’m contemplating immortality with a forest troll, a dire wolf, or a kraken.

I laugh, the sound edged with hysteria, as I stumble toward the bedroom.

I need sleep.

I collapse onto the bed, exhaustion finally catching up to me. My body still aches pleasantly from three nights of monstrous encounters, my mind racing with impossible choices.

As sleep claims me, I dream of forests that breathe, caves with hot springs, and underwater ruins glowing with forgotten magic.

And somewhere in those dreams, I think: What if I want them all?

13

Lily

I wake up with my fingers stained blue. On my easel sits a canvas I painted last night—an underwater scene of impossible beauty, ruins glowing with light.

It's the most beautiful thing I've ever created.

I touch the paint, and it's still wet.

My art has always been good, but this is transcendent. It's like I'm channeling something beyond my normal abilities.

Is this what happens when you let monsters into your heart? When you open yourself to unfathomable possibilities?

Before I even realize it, I'm sitting at my easel painting again, not even stopping for coffee, which by itself is downright sinful, but I have a renewed eagerness, one I haven't felt in years.

My paintings have slowly morphed over the years to accommodate the commissions

I'd secured, which consisted mostly of painting people with their pets. It's paid the bills, but let's just say my creative mind wasn't fulfilled in the least.

I'm mid-stroke on my painting when the memory hits.

Sarah, my sister, is sitting on my couch, eating ice cream, and listening to me worry about Brad and the upcoming wedding.

"You're overthinking it," she'd said. "He's a good guy."

All the while, she was fucking him behind my back.

The paintbrush snaps in my grip.

I loved and trusted them both, and they gutted me. Two weeks later, they had the audacity to ask me to "be happy for them" at a family dinner.

But sitting here, surrounded by this beautiful wilderness and three beings who really see me, I realize something profound.

Brad never looked at me the way Kaelen does, like I'm prey, prize, and partner all at once. He never touched me with Oren's reverent gentleness, like I'm something so precious. He never saw beneath my surface the way Caspian does, recognizing depths I didn't know I had.

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They look at me like I'm a goddess.

Cellulite, soft belly, and all.

I feel beautiful.

Not “beautiful if I just lost ten pounds” or “beautiful with the right lighting.”

Just... beautiful.

I pick up a new brush and continue painting.

I'm not the same woman who drove up here broken and lost.

I'm becoming something entirely new. Someone in charge of her own destiny.

When I'm done and the sun sets for the day, I've realized I've painted all day.

I painted the forest heart pulsing with golden light and a wolf racing through moonlit trees. Each one is so detailed, it feels almost alive.

"Holy shit," I whisper.

It turns out monsters are not only good for the body but also for the soul.

Lily

The cabin door creaks behind me before I take my first sip of coffee.

I don't turn around.

"You know, in human society, we knock before entering someone's home," I say, clutching my coffee mug like it might protect me from whatever shenanigans await.

"I guarded you all night," Kaelen's rough voice replies. "I kept you safe."

I turn to find him in his more humanoid form today—still massive, wolf-like, and covered in fur. His face is a fascinating blend of human and canine features, and his amber eyes track my every movement.

"That's... both creepy and oddly sweet," I manage, taking a deliberate sip of coffee. "But maybe next time, just text me that you're on guard duty? Oh wait, you can't, because you're a dire-wolf-man and we're in the middle of nowhere."

He moves closer, nostrils flaring as he scents the air. "It's been two days, and you still smell like water. Like him."

"Caspian? Yeah, I guess underwater make-out sessions will do that." I try to be casual, but my voice betrays me.

Kaelen is so large and yummy, his presence fills the small cabin with desire.

"You need to smell like me from now on," he growls, closing the distance between us with alarming speed. Suddenly, he's looming over me, radiating heat like a furnace. "Like my mate."

“Whoa there,” I say, backing up until I hit the counter. “Let’s dial back the possessive... It’s a little too early.”

His massive hand—more paw than human fingers—reaches up to touch my face. “I’ve watched you from the first day you arrived. You’re beautiful, brave, and smell like my mate. You’re mine, and I need to have you again.”

My heart hammers against my ribs. Yes. I definitely want that... But I also need time. “Kaelen, I—”

The cabin windows rattle as something heavy lands on the porch. The door swings open again, revealing Caspian, walking on strong human legs rather than his usual tentacles. A towel is wrapped around his waist.

“Step away from her, wolf,” he says, voice cold and dangerous. “You’re frightening her.”

“She is not frightened,” Kaelen snarls, not moving an inch. “She’s aroused. I can smell it.”

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My face burns. Damn these superior senses.

“I can also smell your overbearing dominance display,” Caspian counters, entering the cabin fully, two tentacles suddenly expanding from his back.

Caspian then turns to me, “I came to invite you for another swim, Lily. There’s more I’d like to show you.”

“Bet there is,” Kaelen growls, shifting to place himself between me and Caspian.

The tension in the small cabin thickens, two monsters squaring off, and I am caught in the middle. Then, because apparently the universe has decided I haven’t had enough drama this morning, the ground beneath the cabin trembles.

The door—which really needs a lock, I’m now realizing—swings open a third time. Oren ducks his massive frame through the entrance, small flowers blooming across his moss-covered shoulders in real time.

“Lily,” he rumbles, eyes glowing greener when they land on me. “Prepared special place. In forest. For you.”

“Seriously?” I look between the three of them, incredulous. “Did you all coordinate your ‘claim Lily’ schedules this morning?”

“She’s not going to your forest,” Caspian says coldly.

“Or your water,” Kaelen growls.

“My cabin,” I interject uselessly. “This is my rental cabin, and you’re all trespassing.”

None of them acknowledge this legal fact. Instead, Kaelen moves closer to me, his body heat enveloping me.

“It’s been two days since you’ve been with the water-dweller,” he says. “You need to choose. Choose to be with me.”

“You can’t force her to choose,” Caspian hisses, tentacles rising threateningly.

“All choose,” Oren suggests, his deep voice resonating through the small space. “Different days. Different times.”

“I’m not setting up a monster timeshare schedule!” My voice rises higher than intended. “This is insane. All of it. A month ago, I was nursing a broken heart over a cheating ex-fiancé, and now I’ve got three monsters fighting over who gets to—what, exactly? Court me? Claim me? Eat me?”

“Never harm.” Oren looks genuinely distressed at the suggestion.

“Protect,” Kaelen insists, moving even closer.

“Treasure,” Caspian adds, his tentacles reaching toward me.

They’re all advancing now, each radiating different energies—Kaelen’s primal heat, Caspian’s cool intensity, Oren’s ancient steadiness—but all focused on me with an intensity that makes the air feel thin.

Their scents mingle in the small space: earth and forest, water and salt, wild musk and pine.



It's intoxicating and overwhelming all at once.

"Stop!" I press myself against the counter, hands raised. "Just—everyone stop moving!"

To my surprise, they all freeze.

"I can't do this," I say, voice shaking. "I can't be what you all want me to be. I'm just... I'm just a human girl with terrible taste in men, apparently extending to non-men, and I came here to heal, not to get caught in some monster love—quadrangle!"

My chest feels tight, and my breaths are coming too fast. The room spins slightly.

"This is too much. You're all too much. Too intense, too possessive, too... everything." Tears spring to my eyes, frustrating me further. "I'm not some prize to be won or territory to be claimed. And I'm definitely not ready to be anyone's 'mate' or whatever you all have decided I am."

The silence that follows my outburst is deafening. Three pairs of eyes—black, amber, and glowing green—watch me with varying degrees of concern and confusion.

"Need space," Oren says finally, understanding. "Too much. Too fast."

"We've overwhelmed her," Caspian adds, his tentacles retreating slightly.

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Kaelen makes a sound between a whine and a growl, clearly struggling with the concept but backing up a step, nonetheless.

“Yes,” I say, swiping at my eyes angrily. “Space. Boundaries. Basic respect for the fact that I’m still processing a major heartbreak and didn’t sign up for Monster Dating Game: Summer Edition.”

The air in the cabin shifts as they all physically pull back. I can breathe again, though my heart still races.

“Just... give me some time. Alone. Please.” My voice cracks on the last word.

They exchange glances before Oren nods. “Okay,” he agrees. “Alone. Safe.”

“Thank you,” I whisper, feeling suddenly exhausted.

One by one, they file out—Oren first, then Caspian with a lingering look, and finally Kaelen, who pauses at the door.

“I will still protect you,” he says firmly. “But from a distance.”

When the door closes behind them, I slide down to sit on the kitchen floor, coffee forgotten, face in my hands.

What have I gotten myself into?

And why do I already miss their presence despite this moment of panic?

Kaelen

Her distress calls to me even through closed doors and wooden walls. I circle the cabin, keeping my distance as promised, but my every instinct screams to go to her, comfort, and protect.

The wolf in me understands only possession and territory, sees her rejection as a challenge rather than a boundary. But the man, the part of me that has learned patience over centuries, recognizes her fear for what it is—not fear of me, specifically, but fear of being overwhelmed, of losing herself in our intensity.

We three monsters have been fighting over who gets to claim her without considering whether she wishes to be claimed at all.

The realization sits like a stone in my gut.

I pause at the edge of the clearing, ears pricked toward the cabin. Inside, I can hear her movement—soft footsteps, occasional sniffles, the clink of her coffee mug against the counter. Her scent carries notes of salt and stress.

She's been crying.

The knowledge makes something in my chest twist painfully.

This isn't how it's supposed to be.

In my long life, I've encountered humans before—frightened and sometimes hunted them when they threatened my territory. But never have I wanted one like this. I never felt this overwhelming urge to protect and cherish, rather than intimidate.

There might have been something with the water-dweller, once. We were happy for a brief moment, but I wanted more.

I needed more.

I needed him to want me as much as I wanted him, but that moment never came. I stopped wanting, and my yearning for him turned sour.

There is no way I'll lose Lily to him.

My Lily.

My mate.

What is it about her that makes her different?

Her fearlessness, certainly—the way she faced three monsters without cowering.

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Her scent, so unique that it makes my head spin.

But it's more than that.

It's her strength, not her physical strength, but her emotional resilience—the strength to keep going even after being wounded by her chosen mate and her kin.

It's her sharp tongue and sharper mind, showing how she refuses to be cowed even when outnumbered and overpowered.

It's the knowledge that she is my equal.

My counterpart.

I drop to all fours, my preferred form for speed and stealth, and make a wide circuit of the cabin's perimeter. Checking for threats is a practical way to channel my need to do something, anything, for her. The forest is quiet today, respectful of my patrol. Even the birds seem to recognize my agitation, keeping their distance.

The others have retreated to their domains for now. I scent them in the distance—water-dweller to the lake, forest guardian to his grove. They, too, are struggling with this new directive to give her space.

A sound from the cabin draws my attention—a sob, quickly muffled. My ears flatten against my skull. Her pain is a physical thing to me, a scent and sound that drives my protective instincts into overdrive.

I want to howl my frustration.

I pace faster, wearing a trail into the forest floor. 'Honor her wishes. Give her space. Protect from a distance.' The mantras do little to soothe the restless energy coursing through me.

I've only known this specific torment once before with the water-dweller, wanting desperately to approach but forcing myself to maintain distance.

Something I had to learn the hard way.

I used to be accustomed to taking what I wanted, marking my territory, and defending it with fang and claw.

Restraint wasn't a skill I knew well, but one that I now appreciate, as painful as this moment is.

As the day wears on, I catch glimpses of her through the windows—moving from room to room, reading, writing in her journal, painting, staring pensively at the lake.

I promised her space, and I will honor it even as it chafes against every instinct. But protection doesn't require presence.

There are other ways to show care without intrusion.

I can give her something—not a claim, not a demand, but an offering that speaks of protection without possession.

I slip deeper into the forest, toward the northwestern ridge where the wild raspberries grow. It's early in the season, but I know a patch that gets the best morning sun, where the berries ripen weeks before the others. I collect them carefully in a large

leaf, mindful not to crush them with my claws.

Next, I visit the meadow where summer wildflowers bloom, carefully selecting the brightest blooms. This is not a romantic gesture—Oren has that territory well claimed with his living flowers—but something practical. Certain blooms keep insects at bay, and others can soothe sunburned skin when crushed and applied as a paste. These are useful gifts, not just pretty ones.

Finally, I shed a piece of my fur, soft and strong, something I've worn through the harshest seasons. I don't just give her fur—I give her a piece of myself, wrapped in the forest's protection, and enveloped in my scent. I leave it at her doorstep, hoping she understands the weight of what I've given—Freely, with no expectation of return.

I retreat to the treeline and wait, patient now that I have taken action. When the cabin door finally opens and she emerges, her eyes widening at the sight of my offerings, something shifts in me.

The possessive need to claim doesn't vanish, but it transforms into something more nuanced.

The desire to earn rather than take.

To be chosen rather than to claim.

She looks toward the forest, scanning the shadows where I hide. Our eyes meet across the distance momentarily—her green gaze finding my amber one unerringly.

“Thank you,” she calls softly, knowing I can hear her from this distance, and I can't help but wag my tail like a lovesick idiot.

She takes everything inside. Smart, observant human. My human—no, not mine. Not

yet. Maybe never. For the first time, I find that I could accept that possibility without rage.

I will protect her regardless of her choice.



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I will show her that even a dire wolf can adapt and think beyond instinct and territory.

And perhaps, in time, she might see that beneath the fur and fang lies a heart capable of more than possession—capable of devotion without demand.

16

Lily

I've spent the last two days alternating between sensible self-lectures, "Go home, Lily, this is insane", and increasingly unhelpful fantasizing about three very different monsters who've somehow all decided I'm worth fighting over.

The gifts from Kaelen sit on my kitchen counter—fresh berries I've half devoured, wildflowers arranged in a mason jar, and yes, his very own fur, which I may or may not have sniffed a hundred times already today.

The gesture's thoughtfulness, especially after my meltdown, has done things to my heart that no self-respecting modernwoman should admit to feeling about a possessive dire wolf leaving offerings on her porch.

"Get it together," I mutter, pacing the cabin's small living room. "You came here to heal from relationship trauma, not jump straight into monster polyamory."

But my vagina clearly didn't get the memo.

The truth is, I've felt more alive in these few weeks with my three monstrous suitors

than I did in the last year with my ex.

I'm more seen. More wanted.

This situation may be unconventional to the extreme, but our connections are undeniably genuine.

No pretense. No games. Just raw, honest desire and... care? Interest? Something deeper than just monstrous lust, though there's plenty of that too.

I pause at the window, looking at the lake shimmering in the evening light, the forest darkening at its edges. They're out there, respecting my request for space, probably circling the cabin like overprotective guard dogs.

The thought makes me smile despite myself.

What would my therapist say? Probably something about "unhealthy coping mechanisms" and "overcompensating in the worst way possible." But my therapist doesn't know what it feels like to be kissed underwater by a kraken, have a forest troll look at you like you're the sun after centuries of darkness, or be the focus of a dire wolf's unwavering protective instinct.

She always said I needed to put myself first. I don't think she meant "become the center of a monster harem," but technically, I'm following her advice.

A quiet shift happens inside me, subtle but undeniable; I don't want to fight this anymore. I don't want to pretend I'm not drawn to all three for different but equally powerful reasons.

I don't want to choose, and maybe... like Oren said, I don't have to.

“This is crazy,” I say to the empty cabin, but the words have lost their conviction. Instead, there’s a growing sense of... liberation?

The rules don’t apply here.

The normal societal expectations, the typical relationship structures—none of that matters in this strange little pocket of the world where monsters exist and apparently find slightly traumatized human women irresistible.

I grab my phone, checking the time. 7:30 PM. Still early enough.

“Okay,” I decide, suddenly energized. “If we’re doing this, we’re doing it on my terms.”

I gather supplies from the cabin—matches, a bundle of firewood, a bag of marshmallows I’d brought for solo s’mores therapy sessions, and a blanket big enough to accommodate four. With determined steps, I head outside to the clearing between the cabin and the lake shore.

It doesn’t take long to arrange a proper campfire circle, with rocks from the shore and the firewood stacked in a neat cone. I’m no wilderness expert, but I’ve been on enough camping trips to manage the basics. Once the fire is crackling cheerfully, I spread the blanket nearby and sit, waiting.

I don’t have to wait long.

Kaelen emerges first from the tree line, his massive form silhouetted against the darkening forest. He approaches cautiously, his head tilted in question.

“It’s okay,” I call to him. “You can come closer. All of you can,” I add, raising my voice slightly, knowing the others are watching too.

The lake's surface ripples as Caspian rises, water streaming from his shoulders, his tentacles just beneath the surface. He moves toward shore, and his tentacles shift into legs as he does. Gloriously naked, he wraps himself at the waist with one of the towels I left drying on the deck.

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Oren appears from the opposite edge of the clearing, his moss-covered form seeming to materialize from the trees themselves. Small flowers glow faintly in the gathering dusk.

They approach the fire in three directions, forming a triangle with me at the center. None speaks, all watching me with varying degrees of caution and intensity.

“Sit,” I say, gesturing to the ground around the fire. “Please.”

To my surprise, they obey without question. Kaelen settles to my right, cross-legged but still massive. Caspian chooses a spot to my left, and Oren sits directly across the fire, his bulk making the ground tremble slightly.

“I’ve been thinking,” I begin, suddenly nervous despite my determination. “About this... situation. About all of you. About what I want.”

Three pairs of eyes fix on me with unnerving focus.

“The past few weeks have been wonderful, but the other morning was... a lot. Too much, too fast. But the thing is...” I take a deep breath, gathering my courage. “The thing is, I don’t want you to go away. Any of you.”

A tension I hadn’t fully registered begins to dissolve from their postures.

“I came here to heal from a pretty significant betrayal. To be alone. To figure out who I am without... him.” I twist my hands in my lap. “But instead I found the three of you, and you’ve each shown me something different, something I didn’t know I

needed.”

I turn to Kaelen. “You show me protection, strength, the exhilaration one feels when you let go and let yourself be free.”

To Caspian, “You show me depths I never knew existed, beauty in the unknown, adventure beyond safe shores.”

To Oren, “You show me patience, wisdom, the value of roots and slow growth and steady presence.”

The fire crackles in the following silence, sparks rising toward the emerging stars.

“I don’t know what this is,” I continue, my voice steadier now. “I don’t know what we are or could be. But I do know I don’t want to fight. I don’t want to pretend anymore. I’m drawn to all of you. I’m tired of applying human relationship rules to something that’s clearly... not human.”

I reach for the bag of marshmallows, a deliberately light gesture to break the intensity of the moment. “So I’m proposing a truce. No more fighting over me. No more jealous standoffs. We figure this out, all of us, whatever ‘this’ is, at a pace I can handle.”

I look around at the three of them, these impossible beings who’ve crashed into my life and turned it upside down. “Can you do that? Can you share? Can you respect my boundaries while we... explore this?”

The silence stretches, filled only with the popping of the fire and the distant lapping of water against the shore. Then, Oren speaks first.

“Worth sharing,” he rumbles, his deep voice resonating around us.

Caspian's tentacles shift, curling and uncurling in what I recognize as thoughtful consideration. "It goes against our nature," he admits. "But you are worth the effort of... cooperation."

Kaelen's response is less forthcoming. "I'm yours," he says, amber eyes reflecting the firelight. "I cannot let you go. Even if it means sharing something I never thought I would."

Relief and something warmer flood through me. I hadn't realized how tense I'd been until that moment, afraid of rejection or refusal.

"Good," I say, trying to hide how my voice catches. "That's... good. Now, who wants marshmallows?"

And that's how I find myself teaching three monsters how to make s'mores and roast the perfect marshmallow over an open fire, laughing as Kaelen burns his to a crisp, as Caspian uses a tentacle with surgical precision to rotate his to golden perfection, and as Oren watches the process with fascinated attention to detail.

It's not normal. It's not sensible. But as the night deepens and the conversation flows more easily, their rigid boundaries begin to soften. Even Kaelen and Caspian seem less hostile towards each other. Maybe there's still potential for these two.

I realize I've made my choice.

I've chosen all of them.

I've chosen this strange, impossible situation. I've chosen to surrender not to one monster, but to the chaotic, beautiful possibility of what we might become together.

Caspian

Sharing is not in a kraken's nature. We're territorial to our core, possessive of our treasures, and I've decided Lily is the most precious gem in my collection.



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So when she announced she wanted all three of us—me, the wolf, and the walking tree—my first instinct was to wrap my tentacles around her and drag her to the depths of my lake forever.

But I'd rather have a third of Lily than none at all.

And watching her face light up when she swims in my waters... I'd agree to almost anything to keep seeing that.

I glide beneath the water, my tentacles trailing behind me as I contemplate this new arrangement. My head breaks the surface near the shore where Oren and Kaelen are arguing.

Again.

I drag myself partially onto the shore, water cascading off my skin. "If you two are done, maybe we should finish setting up before she wakes up."

They both turn to glare at me.

I'm not exactly the peacemaker of our unlikely trio; that's usually Oren, but Lily's due to step out onto the porch any minute now, with a mug of coffee in hand, and we're supposed to be showing her we can get along.

"The water-dweller speaks sense for once," Kaelen mutters, running a hand through his shaggy fur, which looks like it's been carefully combed.

Grooming Kaelen's fur was something I used to love doing.

So soft, warm, and perfect.

These past few weeks, as I have interacted with him more and more, I have realized what a fool I've been.

But now, it's too late.

Or is it?

I catch him watching me sometimes, and I wonder.

I quickly avert my gaze, focusing instead on the ridiculous sign we created. "Lily's Monsters" in mismatched letters—Oren's contribution made from actual living flowers, Kaelen's part from dyed animal hide, and my section crafted from polished shells and pearls.

“Look, we agreed to give this a try. Can we manage that, or do I need to drown you both?”

Oren rumbles deeply, “Small one makes threats.”

“I'm not small where it counts,” I reply to the walking compost, one tentacle curling suggestively in the air.

Kaelen makes a huffing sound, which I pointedly ignore.

We've spent the morning preparing, setting up a picnic area, gathering wood for tonight's fire, and generally trying not to murder each other.

“She’s coming,” Kaelen says suddenly, his nose twitching.

We all straighten up, attempting to look casual and failing miserably.

Lily emerges, sunglasses perched on her head, wearing a yellow bikini that makes my chromatophores shift with excitement. She stops dead when she sees all three of us together, her eyes widening.

“What’s... happening here?” she asks cautiously, looking between us like she’s witnessing a miracle—or preparing for disaster.

“Surprise!” I call out, forcing enthusiasm that isn’t entirely fake.

Just mostly.

“We thought you might enjoy a bit of fun. With all of us. Together.”

Her skeptical eyebrow rises. “And you haven’t killed each other yet?”

“The day is young,” Kaelen snickers.

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A smile quirks at her lips. “Well, this I have to see.”

She approaches us, and I feel the tension between Kaelen and Oren. We’re all restraining ourselves from grabbing her.

“So what’s the plan, monsters?” she asks, dropping her towel on the shore.

I slide back into the water, where I’m most comfortable. “First, I thought you might enjoy a ride.”

“A ride?” Her eyes light up with curiosity.

I extend two tentacles, curling them invitingly.

She doesn’t even hesitate for a moment before wading in. The water laps at her thighs, then her waist as she comes deeper. I gently wrap my tentacles around her, securing her firmly but carefully.

“Hold on,” I warn, launching us both upward.

Her squeal of surprise turns to laughter as we break the surface, shooting fifteen feet into the air. I hold her securely as we peak, then begin to descend. I adjust my grip before we hit the water, positioning her for a perfect dive.

She emerges sputtering and laughing. “Again! Again!”

Pride swells in my chest.

“My turn to entertain her,” Kaelen calls, diving into the lake.

I smile as Kaelen swims freely in my territory like he once did.

Lily’s delighted expression further heightened my joy. Even Oren eventually joins us, though he stays in the shallower water. His massive form creates waves that Lily playfully jumps over.

For hours, we play in the water. I send Lily flying again and again, each time pushing higher, spinning her, flipping her, and always catching her safely. Soon, it becomes a competition between Lily and Kaelen, showing off their diving skills, which look more like belly flops but entertaining nonetheless. Even Oren contributes, creating a massive splash that drenches all of us. Lily’s laughter rings across the water.

As the day wears on, we move to the shore. Lily stretches out on her towel, the sun glistening on her wet skin. All three of us stare, not bothering to hide our hunger.

“I’m going to burn if I don’t put on sunscreen,” she says, reaching for her bag.

Three creatures dive for the sunscreen bottle simultaneously. Kaelen gets there first, his reflexes just slightly faster.

“I’ll do your back,” he says, triumph written over his face.

“Can too,” Oren protests.

I wrap a tentacle around the bottle and yank it away from them. “Neither of you has the dexterity for it.”

“Stop it, all of you,” Lily laughs, snatching the bottle from my tentacle. “This is exactly the fighting I hoped to avoid today.”

“We’re not fighting,” Kaelen says innocently. “We’re discussing.”

Oren nods.

“And mild violence,” I finish.

Lily rolls her eyes, but she’s smiling. “How about this—Caspian, you can do my back. Kaelen, you get my legs. And Oren, you can do my arms.”

We all freeze, processing that she’s just invited all three of us to touch her at once. I see Kaelen’s nostrils flare, scenting her arousal. Oren’s mossy eyebrows rise. I feel a ripple of excitement travel through my tentacles.

“That’s fair,” I manage, trying to sound casual.

What follows is perhaps the most erotically charged application of sunscreen in history.

I position myself behind her, my tentacles gently steadying her as I work the lotion into her shoulders and down her spine. Kaelen kneels at her feet, his large hands encircling her ankles before sliding up her calves and thighs with deliberate slowness. Oren takes each of her arms in his massive hands, covering most of her arm.

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Lily's breath quickens as our hands work simultaneously. Her skin flushes pink, and not from the sun. I catch Kaelen's eye over her shoulder, and for once, we share a moment of perfect understanding.

We're driving her wild, and we're enjoying it.

"There," I say eventually, reluctantly pulling my hands away. "All protected."

"Thanks," she says, her voice slightly higher than usual. "That was... thorough."

We spend the rest of the afternoon lounging in the sun, talking, joking, and, miracle of miracles, not trying to killeach other. I tell stories of the lake's depths and treasures I've collected over centuries. Kaelen speaks of running through forests under the full moon. Oren describes watching saplings grow into ancient trees through the passage of time.

"You're all so ancient," Lily says, "and I'm just a blip in your existence."

"No," all three of us say simultaneously, then glare at each other.

"You're not a blip," I tell her, a tentacle gently brushing a strand of hair from her face. "You're a comet—brief but brilliant, changing everything in your path."

"Poetic for a water-dweller," Kaelen mutters.

"But can extend life. If Lily desires," Oren rumbles with a soft smile.

As the sun begins to set, we move to the fire pit. Kaelen lights the fire while Oren arranges logs for seating. I retrieve the food we've stashed nearby: hot dogs, buns, and marshmallows, the essential ingredients for any human camping experience.

Lily's eyes light up at the sight of the food. "Is this a monster cookout? Because I am so here for it."

We roast hot dogs over the fire, Lily laughing as Kaelen burns his to a crisp.

"I like it that way," he insists while Oren roasts his with precise patience.

Mine is perfect, naturally.

The sky darkens, stars appearing one by one. The fire casts a warm glow over us, softening edges, creating an intimacy that feels comfortable and charged with potential. Lily sits between Kaelen and me on one log, with Oren on a log opposite us, his large form silhouetted against the flames.

"Marshmallow time," Lily announces, reaching for the bag.

We each take turns roasting marshmallows. Kaelen, predictably, sets his on fire. Oren roasts his to precise golden perfection. I get impatient and eat mine raw, which makes Lily giggle.

"You're supposed to roast it first," she says, demonstrating by slowly turning her stick over the flames.

"Too slow," I reply, stealing another from the bag. "I prefer immediate gratification."

Her eyes meet mine across the fire, and something hot and promising passes between us. "Do you now?"



Kaelen's growl is soft but unmistakable as he picks up on the shift in mood. Oren straightens slightly, his mossy brow furrowing as he watches us.

Lily pulls her perfectly roasted marshmallow from the fire, blowing on it gently before sliding it slowly off the stick with her teeth. All three of us watch, transfixed, as her lips close around the sticky sweetness, a small moan of pleasure escaping her.

"It's better when you wait," she says, licking her fingers clean.

The tension around the fire thickens. I can feel Kaelen's heightened awareness beside me, can see the slow unfurling of new flowers blooming along Oren's arms.

"Lily," I say, my voice dropping lower, "you're playing with fire."

She looks around at all three of us, a mischievous smile curving her lips. "No, I'm playing with monsters. Much more dangerous."

She stands up, stretching deliberately, her body silhouetted against the flames. "It's getting hot," she says, and pulls her top off in one fluid motion.

The sight of her bare breasts in the firelight sends a surge of desire through me so strong that my tentacles writhe involuntarily. Kaelen makes a sound between a growl and a moan.

Oren breathes, "Beautiful Lily".

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“Much better,” she says, feigning innocence as she reaches for another marshmallow.

“Lily,” Kaelen’s voice is rough, strained with restraint. “What are you doing?”

“Enjoying my monsters,” she replies simply. “Isn’t that what today is about? Showing me how well you can all play together?”

She looks at each of us in turn, a challenge in her eyes. “Can you share? Really share? Because I want all of you. Right now.”

My tentacles curl with anticipation. “Yes,” I say immediately.

Kaelen hesitates, looking at me, then turns to Lily. Finally, he nods sharply. “Yes.”

“Yes,” Oren’s deep voice rumbles.

Lily smiles, triumphant. “Then come prove it.”

We don’t need to be told twice. Desire drives us into a fevered frenzy of hands and mouths, bodies and limbs. Somehow, we migrate from the fire to the blanket we’d laid out earlier. Lily lies back, looking like a goddess demanding worship, and oh, we’re more than happy to oblige. I wrap my tentacles around her with lovingly, one sliding around her waist, pulling her gently backward against my chest. She sighs as another tentacle comes up to cup her breasts, my suction cups moving over her nipples.

“What would you like, treasure?” I murmur against her ear.

“Everything,” she whispers back.

We’re one creature, elemental and untamed now, losing ourselves in pleasuring our chosen mate until she’s panting and pleading.

Kaelen kneels before her, his hands sliding up her thighs as he hooks his fingers into her bikini bottoms and pulls them down. His body transformed partially—more wolf than man now, covered in dark fur, his cock large and inviting. Oren moves beside me, his massive form casting us in shadow as he reaches for Lily.

His arousal is impossible to ignore—an enormous, towering thing, rising from a mossy softness. He’s the largest of all three of us, and for a moment, I worry for Lily’s human fragility. But then I remembered that she had handled each of us already. She’s compatible, adaptable, and I can see it only excites her more.

Still, he’s intimidating, especially when competing for the same female.

Or sharing one.

The thought sends an unexpected shiver of excitement through my tentacles.

“This is how I like them,” Kaelen says, taking the inside of his burnt marshmallows, sticky and sweet. He presses it firmly against her belly, letting it leave a trail of warm, melted sugar down the plane of her stomach. With a wicked grin, he slides it lower and lower, until she gasps as he shoves it deep inside her wet pussy.

“Mine,” he growls.

I should protest, should claim the right, but watching him drop to his knees before her, his tongue lapping eagerly at her clit, sends a thrill through me, remembering how good he used to suck my cock dry.

Sharing has never been in my nature, but watching another worship what I desire, especially Kaelen, it sparks something new and exciting inside me.

Oren moves to Lily's side, his large hand cupping her breast as Kaelen feasts between her thighs. I hold her securely with my tentacles, feeling her body twitch and tense as pleasure builds. Her head falls back against my shoulder, and I take the opportunity to kiss and nip at her neck.

"More," she gasps. "Another one."

I take a marshmallow and place it at her lips. She sucks it and my finger into her mouth, her tongue swirling around both before I withdraw. Then she takes it from me and passes it to Oren, who obediently pushes it inside her pussy with one massive finger, drawing a sharp gasp from Lily at the intrusion. Then Kaelen hunts the sweets with his impossibly long wolf's tongue.

The wolf growls in approval, his feast now doubled. Lily cries out, her body trembling in my hold.

"I've never tasted anything as delicious as your cunt," Kaelen growls as he briefly comes up for air.

I take a chance and glide one of my tentacles to the side of her body and make my way to her pussy. Kaelen stops momentarily, his eyes meeting mine as I move, my tentacle swirling around Lily's clit and Kaelen's tongue as he continues to stare at me. Then something miraculous happens; Kaelen resumes his feast, but his tongue lingers and swirls around my tentacle. It feels amazing to have his mouth on me once again. I slide another tentacle down and slowly enter Lily's pussy, fucking her while she moans loudly.

I slide a third tentacle down, but this one is not for Lily but for the wolf.

My wolf.

If he'll have me again.

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I move it slowly down his body. His eyes fixating on me once more, as I wrap my tentacle around his large, beautiful cock. He grunts loudly, and Lily looks down. I don't move, waiting for her reaction.

Her scent doubles, and we all groan.

I see from the corner of my eye, Oren has wrapped his large hand around his enormous cock, stroking himself. Lily notices too, and reaches for him to come closer, opening her mouth and lolling out her tongue. There is no way she can take him like that, so he simply slides his enormous cock across her tongue as she uses both hands to grip around his base. Oren tips his head back as he lazily strokes himself back and forth on Lily's pretty little mouth.

I hold Kaelen's cock in a punishing grip, the way I know he likes it. Kaelen's cock is rock hard in my tentacle and I furiously pump in time with fucking Lily. He lets out a wild animal groan, and Lily's scent grows headier, driving us all into a frenzy.

When she finally comes, it's with all three of us touching her—my tentacle wrapped around her clit, Kaelen's tongue inside her, and Oren's hands on her breasts. She shouts our names in succession, her body arching violently.

As she comes down, panting and flushed, I ease her onto the blanket. The three of us surround her, touching, caressing, murmuring praise.

"Perfect," I whisper.

"Beautiful," Oren growls.

"Ours," Kaelen rumbles.

Lily looks up at us, her eyes bright with satisfaction and mischief. "That was just round one," she informs us. "And I still have half a bag of marshmallows left."

I glance at Kaelen and Oren, and for the first time, I see something like respect in their eyes as they look back at me. We've managed to share, to give Lily what she wants, without killing each other.

It's a miracle of sorts.

"Round two it is," I agree. "And this time, I have some ideas of my own."

"It's your turn to get roasted, Lily." Lifting her into the air with my tentacles, I flip her body over so she is suspended between Oren and Kaelen.

Lily lets out a squeal of excitement and greedily reaches for Kaelen's cock as Oren enters her from behind.

"That's it, my perfect little marshmallow," Kaelen growls. How do you like being roasted?"

"Mmmm," Lily moans around Kaelen's cock.

Kaelen's eyes roll back as the vibration of Lily's moan travels up his length. When his eyes come into focus, he looks at me longingly.

Positioning myself behind him, I whisper into his ear, "Are you sure?"

He answers with an approving growl.

I gather the sweet juice from Lily's pussy and slide it up Kaelen's backside with a tentacle, testing his tight little hole with the tip.

He is more than ready for me. I slide my cock into him all at once and he surges forwards into Lily's mouth making her gag. Nervously, he pulls back from her, not wanting to harm her, but she pulls him back in, taking him into her throat. The sight alone has me about to blow.

Kaelen and Oren pound into Lily as she lets out sounds of intense pleasure. As I am taking Kaelen from behind, I feel him tighten around me, the dual sensation of having his cock sucked and of me stretching out his tight little hole, has him losing himself in the pleasure. He howls out as he comes and triggers a chain reaction from me, Lily, and Oren. We all dissolve into one another, drowning in pleasure and panting heavily, we collapse into a pile.

The combined scent of all four of us is the most magical combination. It's a wonder we didn't decide to share sooner.

18

## Epilogue

Waking up in a tangle of limbs is complicated enough when they're all human-shaped. Add tentacles, fur, and tree-bark skin to the mix, and morning stretches become an Olympic sport.

I'm sprawled across Kaelen's chest, his wolf-like form radiating enough heat to make blankets unnecessary even as summer edges toward fall. Oren's massive arm curves protectively around us, small flowers blooming wherever his skin touches mine. And Caspian, who should be in the lake by all rights, has somehow wedged himself along my other side, with tentacles draped possessively across all three of us like living



blankets.

My monsters.

All mine.

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And somehow, miraculously, I am theirs—equally, differently, completely.

“What are you thinking about, treasure?” Caspian murmurs, one tentacle brushing hair from my face with dexterity.

“Just marveling at how normal this feels,” I admit, gesturing to our cuddle pile. “Three months ago, I was crying into a pint of ice cream over my cheating ex, and now I’m the filling in a monster sandwich, and it’s somehow the healthiest relationship I’ve ever had.”

“Healthier with protein,” Kaelen rumbles beneath me, his chest vibrating with the words. “Not ice cream.”

“He’s not wrong,” I tell the others. “Yesterday, he brought me an entire deer. Very romantic, if slightly traumatic. We’re still working on appropriate gift-giving protocols.”

“Better than Caspian’s gift,” Oren rumbles, amusement in his deep voice. “Pearls pretty. Dead fish not pretty.”

“It was a very rare species!” Caspian protests, tentacles twitching with indignation. “And perfectly fresh.”

“It had three eyes,” I remind him. “And teeth where no fish should have teeth.”

“Exactly. Rare.”

I laugh, the sound echoing through the cabin that's become home to all of us.

The summer has transformed all of us.

The monsters share more easily now, their territorial instincts tempered by something more substantial, their devotion to me, and their gradual growing respect for each other.

Caspian and Kaelen have mostly mended their relationship. They are still working things out, but I'm happy they are no longer at odds.

I guess we've formed our own pack. Not one that is determined by social norms of cultural ways, but one that is formed by choice, by understanding, and by the kind of magic that happens when three monsters decide that loving one human is worth rewriting the rules they've lived by for centuries.

Kaelen hunts for all of us. Oren tends the gardens that have sprung up around the cabin. Caspian keeps the lake clean and brings treasures from its depths. And I paint, write, laugh, and feel the happiest ever.

"Rental agreement ends soon," Oren says, voicing the concern that's been growing as August wanes. "Three days left."

"I know." I sigh, snuggling deeper into our collective embrace. "Real life beckons. Jobs. Responsibilities."

"Stay here with us," Kaelen says, the word between request and demand.

"We've discussed this," Caspian reminds him gently. "She has a human life beyond these woods. Family, friends, obligations."

“Her family betrayed her,” Kaelen growls. “And friends are replaceable.”

The thought of returning to civilization and my small circle of friends, who are mostly busy with their own lives, seems colorless compared to this vibrant existence.

“There are options,” Caspian says carefully, a tentacle twining around my wrist like a bracelet. “If you wish to stay longer. Or permanently.”

I prop myself up on one elbow, looking between my three monsters. “You mean the whole ‘ways around the human mortality problem’ you’ve been hinting at for weeks?”

Oren nods, flowers blooming more intensely across his shoulders—a sign I’ve learned indicates excitement or anticipation. “Ancient magics. Forest heart. Lake depths. Wolf’s bond. Combined power.”

“Very cryptic, thank you,” I say dryly. “Translation, please?”

“He means we could bind you to us,” Caspian explains. “Share our essence with you. It would extend your life, grant you certain abilities. Make you less fragile.”

“Make you ours forever,” Kaelen adds, his amber eyes intense.

“Turn me into a monster, you mean,” I clarify, not as shocked or repulsed by the idea as I probably should be.

“Not exactly,” Caspian says. “More like enhanced. Still human, but more.”

It’s a lot to process.

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Immortality—or at least an extremely extended lifespan. Powers or abilities I can't even imagine. A permanent bond to three beings who've completely upended my understanding of love, sex, and relationships.

"You don't need to decide now," Caspian says, reading my expression. "The option remains open. For when-if-you're ready."

"For now," Oren adds, gentle despite his imposing size, "Just stay. Longer. Human still. Ours still."

"The job can wait," Kaelen insists. "The world outside will still be there later."

They're right, of course. The world beyond these woods isn't going anywhere. I don't have an apartment—my stuff was moved out of my ex's place, and I drove here shortly afterward. I could potentially line up commissions ahead of time. There's even a cute art store a few hours away where I could ask if they'd be interested in buying my work.

I've been painting non-stop; this new life has definitely rejuvenated my creative juices. And as for my family... well, that bridge was pretty thoroughly burned when I caught my fiancé and sister, and they all defended her.

"I could stay through fall," I say slowly. "See how this works in a different season. Give us more time to figure out... the rest."

The joy radiating from them is almost palpable—Oren's flowers blooming in a riot of color, Caspian's tentacles squeezing me tight, and Kaelen's rumbling purr vibrating

through the bed.

“Seasons beautiful here,” Oren promises. “Autumn colors. Winter snow. Spring rebirth.”

“Okay, let’s start with fall and take it from there. I need money to survive, remember?”

“Sell one of the necklaces,” Caspian suggests. “Or grab a few rubies. I have a trunk full.”

“I think just one of those necklaces would buy the entire land—including this cabin,” I say jokingly, but they’re all smiling.

“Then it’s settled,” Caspian grins. “You’ll buy the land, no more unwanted visitors, and we’ll live happily ever after.”

“I think you’ve read too many romance novels, Caspian,” I say.

“Well, in any case, we have forever to convince you,” Caspian adds confidently. “There’s no rush.”

Kaelen simply pulls me back against his chest, his message clear: mine, ours, stay.

As I settle back into our tangle of limbs, I can’t help but smile at the absurdity and perfection of where I’ve ended up. I came here to heal from betrayal, lick my wounds in solitude, and rebuild my sense of self after it had been shattered.

Instead, I found three monsters who see me more clearly than any human ever has. Who want me with a passion that should be frightening but somehow isn’t. Who offer me forever when I’d almost given up on making it through the summer.

Maybe I'll take them up on their offer someday. Perhaps I'll grow old naturally while they remain timeless.

Those are questions for another day.

For now, I have tentacles and fur and flowers blooming against my skin. I have three distinct heartbeats that are synchronized with my own.

And, as far as rebounding from a broken heart goes, I'd say I've absolutely nailed it.

This wasn't the summer healing I had planned.

It was infinitely, wonderfully better.

One hell of a hot monster summer!