



Kept by the Kraken (The Last Shifters #3)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: He's the last kraken—and he's living in exile.

For centuries, Bjorn has punished himself for the loss of his people in the Great Shifter Wars. He barely lives, hiding away in his nature preserve and overseeing his watery territory.

But an underwater encounter with a human scientist in his bay reawakens his magic. Bjorn is determined to ignore fate, except the quirky and curious scientist won't leave him alone. When Penelope shows up at his lighthouse, his Kraken takes matters into his own hands

Can the bubbly scientist convince the brooding kraken to start over?

Kept by the Kraken is the third book in a paranormal shifter monster romance series, featuring fated mates. This can be read as a standalone. This FM monster romance includes hurtful/comfort, a curvy FMC, and all the tentacles.

Check the author's note for information about content.

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Chapter 1

Penelope

I finish collecting the soil with the auger and stuff the sampling tube into my underwater collection locker. Checking my air tank gauge, I realize I've got barely enough time to take one final sample before I need to go back up to the surface.

If I could only grow gills so I could breathe underwater and stay here. In the comforting cold weight of these watery depths, life always seems lighter. It's a testimony to how shitty my life has become on the surface that the rocky sea floor of the Atlantic Ocean outside of Claw Bay Harbor sounds more appealing than dealing with the fallout of my failed marriage.

At least here, unlike my hometown, there is no one to criticize my every move or remind me of all the ways I'm failing to please someone. It's only me, the marine life, and the beauty of the quiet, cold sea.

That's the point of the sabbatical. I've retreated to this quiet fishing village for the fall semester to lick my wounds, study the reproductive success of lobsters for the postdoc research grant I'm working on, and figure out how to adult. Getting married at age nineteen, ten months into an affair with my undergraduate professor, seemed romantic and whimsical at the time. A decade later, after catching Daniel fucking yet another bright-eyed freshman, I was finished playing house and more than ready to move on.

But it's hard to know which pieces to pick up after everything falls apart. Which of

those fragments need to be let go and which should I collect? How do I learn to trust that small voice inside after ignoring it for so long?

Not the time for an existential crisis.

I glide along the rocky bottom until I spot another lobster through the murky water. Snatching it, I quickly measure and record specimen details on my tablet before snapping a picture with my underwater camera.

In my peripheral vision, there is a flash of crimson. I whip my head in the direction of the unexpected color and see nothing but an outcropping of rocks. Without really seeing, I click the camera again. My body tenses, fear spiking in my veins. I survey the area frantically, shaken by the feeling that I am no longer alone. A ripple behind me causes me to twist.

Something is out there.

Another flash of an unusual color. I snap wildly with my camera, hoping to capture whatever it is. A shiver runs down my spine and my stomach drops with the overwhelming feeling that I've become prey. I narrow my eyes and still my movements, trying to see through the upturned silt.

There. I squint. Speckled crimson.

It's too bright to be a shark. An octopus possibly?

Not likely off the shores of Maine in the Atlantic, Penelope. Don't you know geography?

My snarky inner voice sounds a lot like my ex, and I block it out.

The presence darts. Another flash. This time it's an unearthly glowing gold that sparks for a moment then fades. A dark figure swirls around me in the water, creating a current until I'm tossed and tangled up at the center of a cyclone of bubbles. My tool bag gets twisted around my thigh, a hard piece of metal digging into flesh. My camera falls—forgotten—as I try to right myself, to stop the dizzying turning.

Breathe slower. Don't panic.

But it's no use. Tentacles, slick and strong, wrap around my legs, squeezing them together. Another slithers and circles my waist, pulling me against something hard. A squid? An octopus? But it feels as if I'm being cradled against a chest. A human chest.

This doesn't make sense.

The tentacles tighten, the pressure so intense I lose focus. It's so snug, almost possessive, that for a moment, the fear dissipates, and my muscles loosen. My touch-starved body misunderstands, confusing being strangled with the hug of a lover. Give me a sexless marriage and nothing but a fantasy dildo for years and my mind decides to take the slightest touch as pleasure.

A tentacle wraps around my chest, the long pointy tip flicking up to swipe my lip where it meets my mouthpiece and along my mask, clouding my vision.

I'm going to die. It's going to strangle me. Or dislodge the precious tubes that give me air and allow me to venture to underwater world humans were never meant to invade.

The tentacles writhe and circle, a vibrating wave of pressure all along my captured body. It doesn't hurt. It feels too good actually. My nipples pebble.

Shame, hot and sharp, burns my gut. Daniel was right, I'm a freak. What kind of person gets turned on when being drowned to death by a sea monster?

Jerking, I try foolishly to free myself, or to at least turn and see my captor. Claws wrap around my throat and squeeze. Black spots cloud my vision, and a blanket of nothingness descends.

My last thought isn't about the pleasantness of death, though I feel a great sense of peace wash over me. No, my last thought is to wonder if my fantasies weren't so farfetched. Maybe sea monsters do exist.

"That's it. Breathe." A hand claps roughly along my back.

I jolt, coughing and sucking in crisp burning air. The harsh sunlight forces me to close my eyes again. My throat is on fire, stinging sparks that light up as each breath passes my lips. The cold pricks and gnaws at my limbs. My body is paying for the dive. However I managed to become free of the creature, it was a fast ascent.

Almost dying isn't feeling so great right now.

I try to sit up, but Odis, the boat captain, holds me down. "Not yet, Dr. Hart."

I open my mouth to ask what happened, how he saved me, but the words come out as a jumbled croak from my abused throat. Through squinted eyes, I try to inspect my surroundings. I'm laid out in the back of the commercial fishing boat I've chartered for my data collection. There is no creature, and my equipment appears to be missing.

The older white man, with his bushy silver mustache and bald head, reminds me of a grandpa. His rich chestnut eyes are kind as he hands me a bottle of water. My attempt at twisting the cap proves feeble and he opens it for me, cradling my head and helping me to take a few sips.

“What happened?” I manage to rasp.

“I was hoping you could tell me.” He leans forward and studies me, knowing eyes sharp and measuring. What did you see, they seem to ask.

I look away, embarrassed by my wild imagination and my near brush with death. Turning away from his stare, I attempt to sit up. I’m woozy, the boat swaying beneath me, but I make it. “I don’t remember much. Some kind of animal attacked.”

He hums, a thoughtful sound. There’s no way he could guess what I’m hiding, but the sound is chiding all the same. It’s not like he can discover how my depraved mind works or that I conjured myself a sea monster when the reality is far more likely that I was attacked by some kind of cephalopod.

He doesn’t know you fantasize about monsters. Chill the fuck out.

Odis grabs a blanket and tosses it around my shoulders. “I was watching the water. You were due up the line, but you burst from the surface. Shot out like a cannon and landed face-down in the water. I had to fish you out.”

My eyes widen in surprise. Does that mean that whatever had me underwater let me go, brought me to the surface? How? Or more importantly, why?

“Did you see the animal? A dorsal fin? Tentacles?” Who knows what parts of what I thought and felt were real. At this point, it could have been a merman, a regular squid, or Poseidon himself.

Odis looks out at the choppy water. “No. I didn’t see nothing out there in those waves. But I’ve also never seen anything like that neither.” He turns back and looks at me for a long moment before mumbling a prayer under his breath. “It was like the sea spared your life.” The old man stands and offers me his open palm, pulling me up

on shaky legs. “Better come on, Dr. Hart, before the sea changes its mind.”

He moves to the helm, and I brace against the side railing, wrapping myself up in the blanket to block the icy wind. I look out at the vast expanse of water only a mile outside of Claw Bay Harbor. It's desolate and lonely. Maybe the sea sensed a kindred spirit and Odis was right, maybe it spared me. My eyes scan the surface, searching the waves for a glimpse of crimson, but there's only the white of a misty sky and the dark churning of a restless sea.

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Chapter 2

Bjorn

The whirring of a motor rumbles in the water, and my claws and tentacles grip the bottom of the boat, plastering me against the hull. It reminds me of another boat in a faraway life, lost to me now in the currents of time. The boat races through the water, and the farther we head west, the more the tension in my muscles loosens. Familiar rocks and sunken markers of my territory ease the discomfort in my chest.

I ventured out of my bay today, pulled by some instinct that led me to the edges of my territory and into the open ocean.

The diver. A woman.

The ghost of her weight in my arms fills me with a yearning I don't understand. My appendages stretch, sneaking toward her, breaking the surface. They slither closer to her. Even among the whipping wind and the splattering wake, I can taste her on the air. I yank on my control, forcing my limbs back. The feelers near my neck seem to hiss in protest, the little barbs nipping at the skin of my throat.

It's much too dangerous for her to see me like this. I've already risked too much. My Beast protests when I push to take over. He does not wish to return my skin. For now, I let him remain in control, curious. He is content to follow her, to ensure her rise to the surface did not harm her. He is fascinated by the human.

I am at war with his reaction. A low warning gong travels through my limbs with

every urge he has to go to her. She is not ours to collect and hoard. Not after we have proven ourselves incapable of protecting those who needed it most.

My kraken is oblivious to the danger. He knows only that she calls to him and so he prepares to stalk and chase.

The motor eases as we come into the harbor lanes, and my Beast waits impatiently until we arrive at the marina. My kraken detaches from the boat and glides under the dock, barely breaching the surface. He watches through sensitive eyes, the world too bright between the wooden slats.

She disembarks with the help of an older man. My limbs circle the pillars and squeeze, a flash of possessiveness that betrays my desire to rip him from her grasp. She rights herself, her soft melodic voice carrying on the breeze.

“But tomorrow then? First thing? I have to try to recover what I can.”

“Dr. Hart?—”

She is nothing but shadow and footsteps. My Beast longs to catch a glimpse of her face, pushing closer to the slats, searching. Their footsteps shuffle down the dock as they move away. Angling for a better view, he eases under boats and watches until she is lost on the shore.

When she is out of sight, my kraken takes off back toward the open ocean. His only thought is to recover her lost treasure and return it to her.

I hoist myself onto the rocky edge, my body shifting as I emerge from the water. The runes along my skin glow with the receding magic as my kraken form is replaced by my human one. My tentacles become legs, my claws retract into human fingers. Pain sears through my body with each movement. With the change, hazy flashes of

memory return, but it's too fuzzy to make sense of.

When my kraken is in control, time is recorded differently. There is no memory as in my human form, only sensations and instincts that drive the Beast. I can partially shift if I need the use of my Beast on land, but for many years, I have kept him caged except for short bursts.

Long ago, when my people were plentiful and the Vikings ruled the northern seas, my Beast and I were one. Then, we did not need distinction and simply moved our form as desired. Now, we are something else. Something broken.

My kraken form is large. Though, of course, the legends of our raids on the seas exaggerate our size. The myths made our swarm of warriors into one monolithic Beast that brought sailors to their deaths.

The shift into my warrior form did not hurt as it does now. It was a breath from one to the next. Then, magic was plentiful, a sacred gift we took for granted. We feared nothing but the gods themselves and believed we were invincible. We were fools.

I force my body to move. Taking the slick staircase cut into the jagged rock, I make my way slowly toward the lonely white beacon at the top of the cliff. My stomach rumbles in protest and I blink against the harsh light after so long in the ocean. My kraken doesn't sense less than my human side, but the sensations are different, jarring in their emotional complexity. Already I long for the comfort of the mud and the lure of the water, for the oblivion the creature provides from my human memories.

Don't think of them.

Despite my command, their faces, aged only with the imperfection of memory, flit through my mind. Not their beauty or their fierce tongues or laughter. That, I might welcome. But of course, it is only their mouths gaping open in a never-ending scream

and the blood. So much blood.

I close my eyes and lean against the cold rock, willing the memories of my dead wife and child to fade until the bracing pain becomes manageable, then I climb again. You would think I would have grown accustomed to the pain after so many years. That it, too, would have lessened with the imperfection of memory.

I let myself in the back door and find a pair of sweats before heading into the kitchen. Taking long gulps from the faucet, I drink until water leaks down my chin. When my thirst is satisfied, I open the fridge only to find it empty of any real nourishment and smelling stale.

How long was my shift?

Too long.

What could have kept me?

I rack my brain, the certainty that I am missing something important festering like an old wound that won't heal.

All he shows me is a hunt for lost treasure. A camera? Some kind of underwater box? It doesn't register. Whatever he's gotten up to, we need to be more careful, or we risk exposure. Long ago our magic was discovered, and we were exposed. As a result, our people are no more.

Centuries ago, our people warred with the crusaders. When they came to our lands, the devout knight warriors had already discovered shifter magic and made an alliance with the serpent shifters who taught them how to strengthen their blades with dragon's blood. The dragons and kraken clans were lost and the wolves numbers decimated. The treacherous serpents remained, though for their work in helping the

humans they should have been wiped out.

Those of us who survived banded together and hunted the last of the crusaders until we had destroyed them and their records of our existence. Once we were successful, the remaining shifters created a permeant shifter settlement hidden from humans by magic wards. But I refused.

I'm disgraced. I have no family. No one to protect. Only those whom I have failed.

The world has long moved beyond my gods, our people a distant blip in history. But I did not die with honor on the battlefield. I lived while our warriors fell, and the knights took our land. Took my family. I can't stand the idea of being discovered and meeting a dishonorable end, of failing them in death too.

The gnawing pit in my stomach forces me to focus on the present. I raid the pantry, tearing into cans. Peaches and tuna. Beans and cold tomatoes. At the back of my mind, my kraken tugs, a warning or a cry that I still don't understand. I ignore it. With each passing moment, the sensation of looming dread grows.

When I have run through the measly stockpile, I ransack the kitchen for moonshine. Every jug I find is empty. I need to run to town and gather supplies, but I'm too exhausted after my long shift.

I curse and stumble to the bathroom, hoping the warm water and food will be enough after the physical exertion of the shift to lull me to a dreamless sleep. As I turn on the shower, I notice a new rune etched on my wrist amid my old marks. I look closer, horrified by the twisting lines that turn into the shape of a familiar brand. Pain lances my heart.

It's impossible. I scrub at the new rune, trying to rub the lines off my skin. They shimmer with a happy golden light, mocking me.

No. This can't be. I scream into the empty room, the sound drowned out by the pounding water.

"I refuse! Do you hear me? I refuse," I yell like a madman, cursing the gods and the sea, though I am alone.

Despite my anger, the mark does not fade, etched there like a brand of ownership.

I curse the dragon and her visit last winter. After centuries in exile, she found me and asked me to help her restore shifter magic. One vial of my ink and she promised to leave me in peace. Randi did not let me forget how we fought together against the crusaders.

Fool.

I should have never helped the dragon. Now, magic has come for me.

But this will not belong to me.

Not again.

I wipe off the cracked mirror enough that I can see my reflection. Desperate, I lean in, hands splayed against my heart.

It's still there. I sigh in relief.

My eyes burn with salty water as I trace the outline of the old marking. It has faded, no longer burning with magic since Thora left this realm for another. But it remains. The tips of my fingers brush against the familiar triangle and up the two intersecting lines. It is the rune for love, for mate.

I close my eyes, not wanting to see the new mark on my wrist glowing brightly with life. I did not ask for this, Thora. Please know I would never ask for this.

When I open my eyes again, the newest rune remains. The stark contrast between the dead and the living is never more apparent than now. I hate it.

But the sea has spoken and my kraken agrees.

My body revolts at the offensive suggestion that Thora could ever be replaced, that another should become my destiny. The contents of my stomach hit the stone floor, bringing me to my knees.

I want to run. To return to the ocean and bury myself beneath the mud, surrendering at last to the long sleep and the cold darkness. It's almost funny how I wish I could stop time after so many centuries of wanting it to speed up.

Instead, I collapse on the floor in my own vomit and pray to Odin that I die before I ever have a chance to betray my memories.

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Chapter 3

Penelope

By the end of the third day, I can get out of bed. I've read all about "the bends," the sickness caused from rising too quickly to the surface on a dive, but the words didn't convey how awful it feels. It's as if my insides are heavy, determined to drag me back toward the depths of the ocean and the promise of weightlessness.

I force myself to get dressed and eat a protein bar that tastes like chalk. I wash it down with the instant coffee provided by the rental host. I've been in Claw Bay Harbor for almost a week, but I've been busy getting my project off the ground and haven't bothered with groceries. I've been living off gas station rations and the vending machines in my lab at the satellite research station where I've been permitted access for my postdoc research grant. After the last few days spent in bed recovering, I'm out of all emergency food stashes.

Daniel is right. I suck at adulting.

Closing my eyes and taking a deep breath, I try to center myself. I can get it together on my own.

Daniel is wrong. This was a weird freak accident and not a reflection of me. I can adult when I need to. And I don't need his toxic shit in my head.

I make a mental list, trying to pump myself up. Get on site. See if anything is salvageable. The camera is probably gone, but maybe I can recover the equipment

locker. I'll have to report this to the university and complete the documentation to replace what was lost. Check if there are any clues about what I met in the water. Feed myself something that doesn't come from a wrapper or can. It's not hard. Follow the steps.

I step out the front door of the bungalow I'm renting for my sabbatical. It's early September, but the air is already cold coming off the water and the trees burn in the morning sun, emitting a glow that halos the world in brilliant reds, oranges, and yellows. To my left, the coastal forest and cliffs reach out into a wide wilderness and a harsh, thrashing sea. I turn to the right to take the stone steps toward downtown Claw Bay and notice a pile beside the hanging porch swing.

It's my missing equipment. My camera, my collection locker, my auger. It's all here. The lens on my camera is busted and the display panel is cracked. There's a possibility the pressurized collection locker kept the samples safe, but most likely they're ruined.

They're here though, but how?

Odis must have gone back after them. But how did he get them? There's no way he dived for them. He isn't certified. No way they floated to the surface either. I try reaching him with my cell, but there is no answer, so I leave a message. Giving up, I haul my gear inside and indulge my curiosity.

When the images transfer to my laptop, I scroll all the way to the bottom. The last pictures are blurry, but I pull up the first one and enlarge it. At the grainy edge of the frame is a golden light amid a dark shadow. On the next image, the golden light returns. In the bottom corner, the glow illuminates what looks like hieroglyphics or a symbol of some kind. I study it, knowing that this was the presence with me in the water.

Something in my chest unfurls. I'm not crazy. I wasn't alone down there.

But what is it?

I enlarge the corner and turn up the sharpness. It's definitely a symbol, but on what? Skin? An object? I crop the image and save the file before opening a browser.

What the hell do I search for? Strange encounter with a sea monster? Underwater symbols and hieroglyphs? Am I losing my mind: a symptom checklist?

Three hours later, my stomach grumbles. I flop back on the bed and groan. After exhausting those search terms and heading to the academic journals, I've learned that yes, I'm probably imagining things. Or, and of course this is the most likely, I discovered an artifact during my encounter.

Shit. I'm gonna have to contact him. There are very few experts in his field and he's the only one I know personally.

I brace for the reality and write the email, attaching the cropped image and the original. I read the request twice before hitting Send. No matter how much I couch it in academic jargon, Daniel is going to know what I'm saying. I had an encounter. I believe in monsters. I'm delusional.

Slamming the laptop with an unnecessary but satisfying thud, I grab my bag and head for town with my head held high. No matter what my ex says, I know what I saw. Now, all I have to do is prove it.

"Can't say I've ever seen anything like that, but I keep mostly to the docks. Some of the offshore crews could help ya. The lighthouse keeper may know?" The craggy fisherman scratches his head. The cigarette dangling from his mouth sends little flakes of ash into the breeze that cling to my skin, and the stench of gutted fish and

salty air turns the chowder in my stomach.

I've already questioned the folks at the diner while I scarfed down lunch, confirmed with Odis that he wasn't the one to return my equipment, and interrogated everyone I can find at the docks. This man is the last out here and they've all had the same thing to say. They've never heard of anyone talking about bioluminescent animals in their bay or seen anything with symbols. This is the third time someone has mentioned the lighthouse keeper though.

"And where can I find him? Is he a fisherman too?"

"Not a fisherman." He flicks his cigarette into a bucket and goes back to repairing the trap sitting atop the rough and worn wooden workstation. "Smart fella, people say, but he's a hermit. One of those lives-off-the-grid kind. He knows everything about the area. Someone from his family's been caretaker out there since the town was established. But he's not the kind that's friendly."

Friendly or not, it seems that's where I'm headed. "Is it the lighthouse out on that nature preserve? Down at the point?"

He doesn't turn his head, completely engaged in his task. "That's the one. But you couldn't pay me enough to go out there. He may have the answers you're looking for, but from what folks say, you're as likely to be greeted by his shotgun."

"I'll take my chances." I thank him for his help, googling the lighthouse as I make my way back through the marina.

The first article includes pictures of the historic site with its rugged landscape and lonely white tower. There's nothing about the caretaker, only that the lighthouse was established on the southern end of the island in 1851. I read the next link and the next, but there are no clues about the caretaker or his family.

I hurry away from the marina and head back to my rental to grab my car. Groceries can wait, but my curiosity can't.

I'm on the long winding drive to the lighthouse through the forest, the windows rolled down and the music up, when my cell rings. A groan escapes when I see my ex's name on the screen, but I accept the call and turn down the song.

"A sea monster, Penelope? Is that what you think you saw?" The harsh sneer of my ex's voice strikes my ear and my muscles tense.

I try to blink away the memory of my husband buried to the hilt in his TA. This last time he had the girl bent over his desk, but it wasn't the first time. How could I have been so stupid? How did I let it go on for so long?

I gather the burning nausea in my gut and turn it into as much fire as I can put into my voice. "Hello, Daniel. I see you've read my email."

"Yes. The one you sent from your institutional work account. The one where you use the word encountered like you're a writer for a tabloid instead of an academic university. We're serious researchers and you're asking about monsters."

My mouth opens in rebuttal, but his tirade continues.

"I always knew you were odd, but you've lost your mind, Pen." He sounds exasperated, his voice bristling with anger. "Are you trying to ruin yourself and me by association? Is that it? I said I was sorry. I won't do it again. It was a relapse. I've learned my lesson. Quit punishing us and come home to North Carolina where you belong."

Pulling into a large clearing, I park in front of the historical lighthouse and turn off the engine. I ignore Daniel's baiting. There is no coming home. There are only the

divorce papers—newly signed, but legal all the same.

I may not be going back, but I do need to hang on the line until I have some answers. Unfortunately, he's the expert in ancient languages, not me. "You saw the image. There's something down there. You're the linguistic anthropologist. Tell me what I'm seeing."

He scoffs. "There is no creature. The symbol is one that dates back to the Elder Futhark. It looks like a combination of symbols used for sea. You saw it at the bottom of the ocean. Use your brain. You discovered a ship or a lost artifact. Exciting, but not monstrous."

"So you recognize it? It's definitely Elder Futhark?"

Daniel sighs. "Come home and we can discuss it."

"No." I grit the word through my teeth. I've had more than enough of his brand of home.

"Then I'll come to you. Help you sort it out. Make sure you're eating. You always did need tending." He says the words as a reprimand, as though I should be ashamed for needing or wanting care from my husband. It makes my chest feel too tight and my eyes burn.

I bite my tongue until I taste blood, using the pain to help shore up my walls and my heart. "I don't need your help anymore, Daniel. All I needed was a language."

"This isn't one of your fairytale books, Penelope. You're making wild claims and acting like a crazy bitch?—"

The phone is yanked from my ear through the rolled-down window and a low

warning rumble emits from beside me.

“Don’t talk to her like that. Have some fucking manners.” The words are low and sharp, full of violence and darkness. But somehow, it sounds sweet to me, like the sound of the ocean’s rumble.

I find myself staring up into the face of the most harsh and beautiful man I’ve ever seen. He’s huge, dressed like a mountain man in flannel and jeans, but he’s got the air of a warrior come to rescue me or ravage me. Maybe both.

My lips part and my nipples pebble as I take him in. He is tall and muscular to the point that he’s severe, with an unruly beard that hides his mouth. His long hair is pulled to his head in a messy bun with the underside shaved. Like his scalp, his face is marked with tiny faint scars, and he’s covered in black tattoos on his hands and throat.

But it’s something else, something about him calls to me deep inside. It’s like the wonder of looking at the ocean for the first time or the comfort of coming home. Yet, his body looks as if it was made for violence and his icy blue eyes send a sliver of fear racing up my spine. They’re haunting in their unending depths, soulless and heartbreakingly wrong.

My ex’s voice crackles from the line, full of outrage. “Who the fuck is that, Pen?”

“Pen?”

“What the hell?”

The stranger ignores my staring and ends the call before handing me back my phone. His fingers brush mine for a fleeting moment, but it’s as if I’ve been struck by lightning, every cell inside my being illuminating in a burning white blaze. My

breathing stutters.

His temple tics and he grinds his jaw. Confusion washes over his face as he looks down at his hand, pulling it away as if he too felt the burn. Or maybe he's wondering how the fuck he ended up taking a stranger's phone to yell at her dick of an ex.

He gives the slightest shake of his head.

I'm suspended in time, my shaking breath the only sound between us.

Without another word, he turns and walks away from me. I'm left mouth agape. My entire body feels as if I've been stunned, except this live wire of static jolts from my heart and trails behind him. It's as if he took some part of me with him, this stranger, and until he returns it, I'll never be whole.

What the hell is in the water of this town? I'm having encounters on land now? Just summoning all my fantasies to life. Maybe I've gone nuts. I should get myself laid and forget this whole thing. Go back to cataloging lobster.

But I can't let it go. My curiosity propels me forward, and I climb out the car to follow the mountain man.

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Chapter 4

Bjorn

I've gone absolutely fucking insane. Walking away from the human, I flee to the side of the house. I need to get out of sight before the woman sees a man spouting tentacles.

That wasn't just any woman. It was her. The reason for my new rune. My kraken rages at me, determined to go back to her. The rune on my wrist burns, the magic like acid in my veins.

The veil that separates my Beast and me feels too thin, his tentacles squeezing through the cracks in my mind. He yanks on my skin, trying to wrestle for control. Feelers spout along my arms and back like goose bumps beading in the breeze. They're after a taste of her.

This is all her fault.

My mate. A small human with hair as dark as ink, lush round curves, and eyes so light they're the misty violet of the crocus that grows in the woodlands near my oldest home. I curse her beauty, her very existence. The moment I saw her, I knew she was meant to be mine and I loathe her for it.

The distance stretches between us, but she remains a presence in my chest, pulling me back like an anchor chain. The strain of the taut line aches, but it's nothing compared to the agony of my betrayal. I want to rip the link between us out with my hands, dig

and claw until the parasite in my chest is dead and I can toss it back to the sea.

Don't think of them.

Sweat beads along my brow as I wrestle to keep control. My eyes shift, the haze of my kraken changing the world into a kaleidoscope of riotous color. I blink, forcing back the Beast, and my sight returns to normal. My lungs burn with the strain of holding my skin.

She is nothing to me. She never will be. I will not give in to the pull between us.

I repeat the lie to myself as I grab my ax and head to the chopping block, needing to busy my body as a distraction. My Beast laughs at me in the corner of my mind. He's biding his time, waiting for me to slip so we can claim her. He knows we cannot resist the call of our mate, that it is unnatural to try.

Fuck the gods.

The swing of my ax is too hard, and splinters of firewood spit in every direction. I line up another piece and do it again. And again.

A faint trace of flowers carries on the salty breeze and my muscles tense. She is still here. I curse. My Beast is on high alert, too close to the boundary once again. If I thought he would help, I would take to the sea, but there's no doubt that if I give him control, he will claim her. Refusing to give in to the tug in my chest, I return to chopping wood.

"Hello." Her voice is sweet like honey. Still it scratches and chafes at old wounds.

I swallow as a pair of colorful galoshes appear in the grass, leading up to black pants molded to curvy thighs and shapely hips. My eyes refuse to stay put, following up her

rounded waist to the ample cleavage that spills from the top of her white shirt.

Her scent is thicker now that she's near. She smells floral and earthy, like the start of spring when the world wakes up after a long winter sleep. I don't want to like it, don't want to thaw for her.

"You're the lightkeeper?"

Her question is laughable, the light having been gone from my life before she was a thought in the universe. If I was a lightkeeper, I was a shitty one.

She tucks a strand of her dark hair behind her ear and looks away from the intensity of my gaze. I'm making her nervous, and my Beast rumbles his displeasure. Red splotches appear on her neck and chest as she flushes with embarrassment. My cock twitches against my leg, plumping in anticipation.

"Okay. You're not a talker. That's fine. I talk enough for everyone."

I don't respond, situating another piece on the stump and swinging my axe. The crack of the firewood is a jarring, angry sound between us. Splinters of wood cover her boots and she steps back.

"I'm a researcher for Sable University. A marine biologist working out at the NOAA lab on the other side of the bay. The villagers said you may be able to help me identify a symbol I saw on a dive earlier this week. Maybe you can tell me what it's on?"

Her words are breathy this time, and when she speaks, I imagine her coming on my cock as I stuff her full of my tentacles. I can almost hear her moans, the way the honey in her voice would turn thick. I shake myself, horrified by the thought.

She thrusts her phone into my face, her arm shaking. “Do you know what this is? What animal or symbol it could be?”

I blink. Once. Twice. I set down my ax and take the phone. The image remains the same. In the grainy watery depths, there is a glowing white light. It’s a picture of me. Well, my Beast. The rune on my back is unmistakable.

My Beast throws up an image of a diver under the water, wrapped in our appendages.

Mate.

Protect.

Hazy memories float one after another. Yesterday when I returned to shore. The scavenging of a camera and a metal box outside my territory. Stalking the coast in the water, back and forth along a small strip of beach. I remember breaking the surface to bring treasures to her door.

My kraken recognized her as our mate and led her to me. The Beast doesn’t understand why I’m refusing the mate call. He has grieved for our lost and he avenged them, but he does not believe a new mate is a betrayal. I am not the Beast. I wrench control, sealing the cracks in the veil. Her phone crunches in my palm, the glass and metal breaking.

Not only did the gods send me a mate, but they’ve also sent me a scientist. Even if my Beast desires to claim her, a scientist can’t know of our existence. Already she is asking questions of the villagers. How long before this scientist has me in a lab? How long before shifters are exposed?

“What the hell? You have serious issues with phones. Is it a hermit thing?” She huffs at me, trying to rescue the broken object from my grasp. Her scent doesn’t reek of

fear, only annoyance.

Trusting, reckless human.

The rumble from my chest does nothing to deter her. I hold the phone over my head, pulling it from her reach, but she jumps and grabs for it, moving her soft curves against me.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” Her small hands push against my chest. “First you barge in on a call and now you break the damn thing. Is this, like, an anti-technology conspiracy theory?”

“Who else have you told?” I clutch her with one hand, my fingers digging into her bicep and caging her to me. My teeth ache from how hard I’m clenching my jaw. I want to make her disappear forever. And I want to pull her closer, kiss her lips, and never let her go.

Her pupils dilate, her scent growing thicker between us. She takes a harsh breath and another. “Do you know what it is? Or what’s happening between us?”

“Answer me. Who have you told?”

“No one.”

My eyes narrow and a warning sounds from my throat. She will not lie to me. Already her actions may have put us both in danger. “The villagers?”

She looks away, a guilty expression on her face. “Why? What do you know? Why is it secret? Why am I drawn to you?”

I tug her chin, forcing those violet eyes to me. “Answer me.”

Her pink lips part and I'm overcome with the urge to taste her.

"The villagers, some folks at the diner, the captain of the boat I'm using for my work, and my ex-husband. He studies old languages. He's the one you hung up on."

I curse my luck. An academic like her. If he's curious, he's going to be trouble. The last thing I need is attention on the area.

Actually, no. The last thing I need is a mate. And she may have blown my hiding spot. I've got safe houses along the eastern coast that I move between when I outlive my human age and it's time for a new identity. But this one is my home base, and I don't want to lose it.

I want her gone. No matter how beautiful she is, how good she smells, or how much I want to protect her from her dickhead ex, I refuse to claim her. But I can't let her go back out into the world and risk her exposing me. And no matter the anguish in my heart, I can't hurt her. Even if a part of me wishes she didn't exist.

"Tell him you made a mistake. We don't want scientists up here making our town into a spectacle." I shove the broken cell into her palm and push away from our embrace, too harshly for a delicate mate. She needs to run as far and as fast from me as possible.

I should feel shame for treating her this way. My Beast does—he curses me from the veil. Mates are gifts from the gods, meant to be treasured and protected. But this woman is proof that I failed in my promise to protect. Nothing but my own fear courses through me when she looks at me with wide eyes. She has come to wreck me, and I want no part in it.

"Leave my property and keep out of our bay. There is nothing here for you to discover." I turn away from the beauty the sea has sent me.

Her shaky voice calls to me. “I’ll tell him whatever you need me to say, but I know you’re hiding something. It involves me and I’m not afraid.”

I stop and turn back to stalk toward her. She glares at me, but it’s filled with a smug kind of victory. Her hands are at her hips, and she stands her ground in challenge.

“You should be afraid because I’m a monster.” I scoop her up and toss her over my shoulder.

She kicks and screams, wildly scratching at my back. “What are you doing? Where are you taking me?”

Her tiny claws do nothing to slow me down. This woman has zero survival instincts. Attacking a predator. Putting her curious nose in other people’s business. Taunting me with her fearlessness.

Her scent billows, but it’s not fear. She’s wet at the thought that I’ve taken her captive. My cock responds, straining against my jeans. I swallow my words, refuse to get lured in by the bait.

The crashing waves along the rocky coast seem to magnify in a crescendo. The sea laughs at my resistance as I carry my captured mate inside.

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Chapter 5

Penelope

N o, but actually where is he taking me?

It's hot as fuck to imagine a delicious monster of a man picking me up, tossing me over his shoulder, and taking me off to have his wicked way with me. The reality is actually as hot. I've been wet since I met the man. What would not be awesome, however, is ending up on one of those TV documentaries about missing women. The sexual tension between us could fuel a spaceship, but he was deadly serious about wanting to keep whatever I discovered hidden. Right now, I can't be sure which way this is going to go. I'm both horny and freaking the fuck out.

I smack and scrape his back. It's like trying to harm a brick wall. I yank on his hair, and he swats my ass. His hand is so big his fingers strike my pussy too and a small moan escapes.

“Simmer down, Wildcat, or I'm going to restrain you.”

See? Still not a clear indication of how this could go. Restraints in bed? Yes, please. Holding me captive? Pass.

“Put me down. I'll tell my ex and the villagers whatever you want me to say. I won't tell anyone. I'll forget I saw anything.”

The wall of man beneath me grumbles. His huge feet stomp through a house and a

door creaks open. I bounce on a mattress and land on my back, looking up, then up some more, into blazing blue eyes. The mountain man studies me, deciding my fate. This is the part where I should run, fight. I am afraid. But the thrill of riding the edge awakens something dark inside me.

Heat swirls in my core as the tension between us pulses in the room. I want him to fold his big body over mine and take me apart. He opens and closes his fists, every muscle tensed and defined against the flannel of his shirt. He looks as though he's on the edge of breaking. The indecision warring within him is evident, but I know which way this should go.

I drop my legs open in invitation and sit up on my elbows.

“What are you doing to me?” he asks, sounding bewildered.

“Hopefully something that doesn't involve clothes.”

I don't have any idea what's come over me. I don't know this man's name or what he's hiding. Nothing about this interaction between us is usual. But somehow it feels right to tease him.

He looks torn wide open. His nostrils flare and his heated eyes pin me with an accusing stare. Then he's on me. When his lips meet mine, they're insistent and overpowering, almost angry. He kisses me until he is the only air I breathe.

The power of his big body caging me in sends my heart racing. His teeth nip at my bottom lip, sending a sharp burst of pleasure-pain straight to my clit. My legs wrap around his waist, and I rip at his flannel, reaching for the buttons, desperate to get my hands on his skin.

Strong hands yank my arms above my head. He deepens the kiss, his tongue slipping

into my mouth. That spark between us is back, the live wire that makes it feel as if he's burned his way into my marrow. The kiss is an extension of that, so hot that I'm panting into his mouth, rocking my wet center against him. He rolls his hips, the weight of his hard cock putting pressure on my clit.

He grips my throat and rips away from me. His eyes flash, a slit of black framed with gold. For a moment, it feels as if I'm meeting someone new, then he blinks. When he looks at me again, his eyes have returned to their icy blue.

I suck in a breath.

The man above me clearly curses, but it's not a word I'm familiar with. Two of his rough fingers trace the side of my cheek. He kisses my forehead and my eyes flutter closed.

"Gods, you're beautiful." He releases my hands only to wrap them in a sheet. The movements he makes are so fast that before I can open my eyes, he's yanked the fabric holding me into an intricate knot.

"Fuck, yes," I moan. My breath hitches and my belly swoops at the promise of his control. I've fantasized about nights like this but never lived it.

His strong hands add smooth touches along my arms and my side before he secures me to the bedframe. The moment I test my restraints and realize I'm caught, my muscles unlock. It feels like diving off a dock into the weightlessness of the ocean.

The mountain man makes a deep rumble in his chest. The sound sends a shiver up my spine and my toes flex. I watch with lust as he straddles my hips. The sexual tension pulses between us, our eyes locked together. I squirm beneath him, the feel of his weight pressing me down and the ties holding me bound for him making heat pool in my belly.

He tenses and the air around him shifts, the mood turning sour. “I’m sorry.”

My stomach drops, but this time it isn’t from arousal. Something just went very wrong.

He looks away from me, the temperature in the room dropping.

The hair on my neck stands on end and goose bumps break out on my skin. I aim for calm, but my words come out shaky. “Hey, hey. It’s okay. I don’t mind getting kinky, but we should talk limits first.”

I yank on my restraints, but it’s no use. I wasn’t sure how this die would roll, but it’s landed on crawl out the window and run.

He beats me to it, rolling off the bed in one smooth motion and righting himself without turning to look at me. I yell for him to let me go, but he ignores it, closing the door so hard it rattles on the frame.

Dammit, Pen. Your curiosity is going to get you killed.

This time, I can’t tell if it’s my ex’s voice in my head or my own. I flip back against the bed, kicking and wrestling against my restraints. Either he needs a refresher in basic rules of bondage etiquette, or this handsome, sad stranger is holding me prisoner. Just what exactly did I capture in that picture that he wants so badly to hide?

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Chapter 6

Bjorn

“O din’s hairy balls,” I curse.

I’ve kidnapped a scientist. One that people will look for. She could expose all shifters to the human world. That is nothing compared to the reality that my mate is on the other side of that door, tied to a bed and left alone. My fist pummels through the plaster of the hallway wall.

“Fuck.”

How low I have fallen. I’ve captured my mate as though she’s raider’s spoils off to the flesh markets. Yet I cannot force myself to return to that room and untie her as I should.

My kraken’s smug satisfaction seeps through my veins. We have chased and captured our mate. He is ready to claim her, brand her with our marks, and fuck her until she grows large with our hatchling.

How the fuck am I going to get out of this? Capturing her was impulsive. Stupid. A temptation spurred on by the mate call. But beneath that raging desire to keep her close is the reality of our circumstances. She has proof that my kind exists, even if she doesn’t understand what she possesses.

She is dangerous. There is no way she didn’t feel the menace of my words. Did she

run like a sane person faced with a monster? No, this woman opened her legs and invited me onto the bed. And I followed her, allowing myself to get lost in her mouth and the cradle of her hips as she rocked against me. Her arousal was thick in the air, her lips soft and sweet. The world faded; everything was lost to me but her. My cock ached with the need to fill her, to see the shape of her curves and to trace them with my lips. My Beast nearly took over, desperate to claim her as ours.

One afternoon in her presence, and I'm ready to forsake all my promises. The reminder rolls through my body like a brush fire, swallowing up dry land and propelling my body with rage. She is a temptress who has come to see me break my vows. Not to mention, she is a scientist. I can't trust that she'll keep her questions to herself. She's too curious.

I don't want her here, luring me in with her beautiful body and her reckless bravery. Any longer in her presence and I risk succumbing to my instincts. But I can't simply let her go back to town. Until I figure out what to do, the human stays. And my Beast will heed my command.

His agitated rumble of discontent rolls up the back of my neck and settles as a tension-laced headache. I ignore it and go in search of my laptop.

The woman is right. I do hate technology, how it tracks and invades, sucking people in. But even for me, learning to navigate the modern human world has been necessary. It's a trade-off that eases the burdens of staying hidden, but at the same time, it ups the risk of exposure.

Outside her door, I hesitate, attempting to shore up my resolve. It's no use—she calls to me whether a door separates us or not. I open the door where she remains as I left her on the bed, her arms bound above her, laid out for me like a booby-trapped treasure. Her violet eyes bore into me, full of hot anger, but her scent has wilted with fear. It makes my stomach clench and my body rigid. I hate the smell and loathe the

idea of her fearing me. Yet it is a gift.

“Untie me. Let me go,” she demands, tugging against her restraints. Black tear marks run down her pale skin. Even with them, she is beautiful.

I harden my voice. “What university do you work for again?”

She shakes her head and jerks forward, yanking on the fabric. It doesn’t loosen, and she tries again. Her chest heaves, causing her breasts to push against her shirt. I look away, ashamed that my cock thickens at the sight amid the stink of her fear.

“Untie me, and I’ll tell you.”

My Beast tries to take me closer to my mate so I can cover her in my scent and wash away the rancid stench of her fear. I force myself to stay near the door.

“You will tell me now. I need to fix this mess by explaining to everyone you made a mistake. Until then, you’re staying here.”

“You’re keeping me?”

Her question is said with a kind of breathless terror that strikes like the blunt edge of a rusty knife, hacking away at my insides. I cannot keep her. She cannot be mine, no matter how much I crave her. But of course, that isn’t what she meant. To her, I am only her captor. That fear will serve us both well.

I ignore her question and repeat mine. “What university?”

“You’re scaring the shit out of me. You can’t come in here and ask that without telling me what the fuck is going on. I know you think I’m going to blab. Let me go, and I won’t tell anyone. I’ll destroy the files. It will be like it never happened.”

The files from her camera that my Beast delivered to her. Without thought, I move to her and fist my hand in her silky hair. She sucks in a sharp breath at the sting.

“You will destroy the files. You will email what I tell you to. Until I believe the danger has passed, you will do as I say or risk all our lives.” I tug on her chin and force her to look at me.

Fresh tears pool in her eyes. “You didn’t have to do this. I would have helped you if you’d explained. You still don’t have to do it. Untie me, and I’ll do what you ask.”

My kraken fights me for control, causing my skin to vibrate with the need to shift. I grit my teeth. “If you run, I will hunt you down, catch you, and bring you here. If I untie you, this is not your freedom.”

Her lips tremble. “Untie me.”

“Say you understand.” I brush my lips near her ear, and she shivers, her scent a mixture of trepidation and lust.

“I understand,” she says on a shaky breath. “I won’t run. Untie me.”

I toss the laptop on the bed and kneel between her legs, reaching over her to work my knots until her arms are free. Her wrists are irritated from where the material has chaffed her skin in her attempts to escape. I want to kiss them, but instead, I rub the abused flesh, massaging her wrists briefly before letting them go. She pulls her arms to her chest, holding herself as if her hands might shield her from what comes next.

Reaching behind me blindly, I grab the laptop and thrust it in her face. “Email. Work. Your ex.”

I’m too on edge near her scent and body heat. The desire to claim her is nearly

overpowering.

She opens the laptop and sits up, scooting to the edge of the bed. I move with her, putting myself between her and the door. My eyes track the screen as she goes to the university website and clicks around. She starts with the email to her ex, and after a moment of furious typing, she holds the computer out for me to inspect.

In only a few sentences, she has explained away her findings as a discovery of a fake gold coin from a local party cruise.

“A party cruise?” I ask skeptically.

“I saw the ship in town at the docks today. It’s believable.”

“What the fuck is a party cruise?”

She turns to look at me, scrunching her button nose. “You go on a boat. Drink too many cocktails. Maybe fish a treasure from the sea or fight with inflatable swords. Like any party cruise but Viking-themed.”

My jaw tics at the absurdity, but it’s an intelligent lie. The self-deprecating tone of her email, however, grates on my nerves. The way her ex-husband talked to her on the phone leads me to believe she’s used to criticizing herself. I hate it, but I haven’t treated her any better. She wears my marks on her wrists.

“Send it.”

She does, then begins on a second email.

“Who is this?” I demand.

“My boss.”

This time, she writes that she will be out until she recovers from a bout of sickness after her dive. I nod my approval when she is finished and take the laptop from her.

“To delete the files, you need your computer? Your camera?”

She gives a sharp nod.

“We can worry about that later. I’ll leave you untied, but I’m warning you now that if you try to get away, I will chase you down.”

“Yeah, I got it. You’re a dangerous mountain man. I’m not an idiot.”

For a captive, she sure has a smart fucking mouth. My lips threaten a smile at her fierceness.

“What’s your name? Why are you in danger? What are you hiding?”

I ignore her questions and leave the room to snatch the skeleton key from the kitchen so I can secure the bedroom door now that I’ve gone and left her unbound. It was easy to hate my mate in the abstract because her very existence means I failed to protect my family. But the more time I spend with the adorable curvy scientist, the more I don’t know what to think or how to feel. I’m finding her hard to resist. It’s as though she brought color into the world, and I don’t know if I can go back to only muted grey.

I slip the skeleton key in the lock, securing her inside, and walk away.

“What are you going to do now?” she shouts from behind the door.

Now isn't that the fucking question?

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Chapter 7

Penelope

I shout uselessly at the door, banging against the wood with my hands. The stranger is out there. After the hefty click of the lock sliding into place, I hear his heavy footfalls thump down the hallway.

Stupidly, I try the handle, but it won't budge. This house is ancient, with one of those old-timey locks. Unless I can get the hinges off the door or he unlocks it, I'm fucked. The reality of my situation twists my stomach in knots.

Shit. I've got to think. I need to find a way out of this room. He knows something about whatever was with me in the water that day, and it has this mountain of a man afraid. Something about my asking questions has spooked him. But why?

Focus. That's the kind of thinking that got me here in the first place.

I don't need to care about this stranger or what I saw in the water. It doesn't matter that I feel a connection to him. I need to get my ass out of this house and haul my butt to the police. Despite knowing I should, the thought of involving the authorities adds to my unease.

Once I get myself out of here, I need to go back to studying lobster reproduction. Slightly boring. Stable. Very adult. No fantasies or red flags. Absolutely no broad shoulders or monsters.

Straining, I listen for the sounds of the stranger, but the house is silent. I pace the small, threadbare bedroom. White plaster walls, no decor. A wrought-iron bed that may have been new when the house was built. White sheets. It's so sterile it could be a hospital room.

The drawer in the small wooden nightstand is empty. No odds and ends under the bed that I could use to escape. I drag the wooden chair in the corner underneath the window. I'm average height for a woman, but this window is higher than modern ones.

I climb up so I can comfortably look out. A hysterical sound escapes me. This room is at the back of the house, practically hanging off the edge of a cliff. To escape through the window, I'm going to have to balance on a narrow ledge until I get to the drainpipe.

There is no doubt that if I breathe wrong, I will fall to my death into the crashing sea. I love the outdoors, but I'm not particularly graceful, and my odds don't look great.

The horizon flashes with lightning, a storm right off the coast looming closer.

It's now or never.

Opening the old window proves more difficult than I anticipated. It makes a racket, squeaking and groaning as I push it up. I wince, freezing on the chair as I pause to listen for the stranger. The house is still quiet. I wait a solid minute before I try again, pushing the window farther up until I can fit.

The window is narrow, but I hoist myself onto the sill and straddle it. I'm in rubber boots with no grip, so I go slowly and find my footing. It takes a lifetime to get out the window and onto the ledge. I keep stopping to listen for the stranger and to ensure my footing is secure before I move.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath of the briny sea air. My limbs loosen. I let myself focus on the sensation of the wind rushing through my hair. I can do this.

One shuffling step. Another. I reach the end of the ledge and go for it, grabbing hold of the drainpipe. The metal groans and shakes, but I leap anyway. I spider-monkey the pole for a moment before I can psych myself up enough to shimmy down a few inches.

Don't die. Don't die.

My arms burn from the strain, but I keep moving until I'm inching down past another window. I can't hear anything but the wind and the sea, so I move more quickly, hoping he isn't watching from inside as I scale down the wall.

When my feet hit the narrow rocky ledge at the back of the house, I almost weep in relief. I shuffle to the edge and duck down, creeping along the side of the house.

That's when I hear the ax fall on the wood, and I curse under my breath. Peering around the side, I confirm that the stranger is back out front. Hunkering down, I wait for my chance to run.

We've been out here for what feels like an eternity while I wait for an opening to escape, and the stranger throws his ax. The adrenaline from my earlier climb down has dissipated and now I'm tense with fear and sore from holding still for so long.

He stopped cutting wood when he ran out of lumber and has instead shifted to throwing his ax at a target mounted to a tree. He's right in front of my car and has a clear view of the road, his back facing me. The muscles of his wide shoulders flex and bunch as he lifts the handle and throws the blade. It would be hot if I didn't think there was a possibility he might throw the ax at me if I ran.

I've debated trying to sneak into the house to see if I can find anything to help me escape, but I'm too afraid he'll see me. There isn't any cover near the house except the wood pile, and that's not close to the door. Besides, darkness has set, and the storm is almost on top of us. The temperature has dropped, the wind whipping the waves into a frenzy.

The stranger has been focused. Silent. Watching his methodical movements is unnerving. It's as if he's stuck in place, doing the motions on a time loop.

Turning away from him, I calculate my odds. Not far in the other direction, it looks like some kind of trail leads down the cliff. Maybe to a beach or a cave? In the darkness, it's hard to tell.

I look back at the mountain of a man. Even though I'm afraid, he is also the saddest creature I've ever seen. I can't reconcile the man who kissed me on the bed or even the riled-up one who threw me over his shoulder with the husk of a man on the lawn. Something about him tugs at my heart and calls me to him.

No. He's not for you!

Rain splatters in fat drops that turn to slick sheets. Forcing myself to move, I dart toward the trail. My hands grip the damp sea wall, and I almost trip on the slick rock at the opening of the trail. Thunder rumbles as the heart of the storm moves closer.

His voice carries on the wind, a broken cry. "You want to know what I know, my violet eyed human?"

I freeze and turn back to him, caught out in the open with nowhere to hide.

Human? He said human right?

Amid the white rain, he stands, arms out and head thrown back. The sound of his roar into the darkness bounces around until it feels as though it's everywhere and nowhere. It's filled with so much pain, it nearly takes my breath.

But the most haunting thing is the bright symbols that mark his skin as though he's lit from within. All of his tattoos glow. They're so bright that I can see them clearly through his clothes. It's unlike anything I've ever seen.

No. That's not right. It's like the creature that was with me in the water. A mark exactly like the one in the photograph glows on this man's back.

What does this mean? Was he with me in the water? But how?

He doesn't turn to face me, though he knows I'm here. His skin is a brilliant beacon in the night, and I step closer.

"I'm a man who lost everything and everyone I've ever loved."

My insides ache at the despair in his voice. It's a sound devoid of all hope.

"I'm a monster. Leave before I'm your death too."

He stomps across the yard, his footsteps sloshing in the rain. The door slams, the glass in the front rattling with the force.

I look at my car and the dark path cut into the forest then back at the house. This is my chance. I need to run. Run and never look back.

But I can't let it go. The need to understand is a hunger in my gut, gnawing at my insides. Was he with me in the water? Did he save me, bring me to the surface? Is he not human? What are those marks on his skin? I would say it was magic if I didn't

know any better.

It isn't only my curiosity about the water. It's this man, this haunted stranger. His words cause an ache that lodges in my throat, choking me. Who did he lose? Why does he think he's a monster? He's lonely and hurting, carrying a secret so big that he's falling apart under the weight of it.

I recognize his loneliness. Sometimes I'm so fucking lonely I think I might disappear. All my life, I've tried to fit in, do what everyone expects, and stay in the lines. But it's never enough.

I'm always too much. Too loud and opinionated for my family. Too socially awkward to make many friends. Too weird and messy for Daniel. I was an obligation to my parents and my husband.

But this mysterious stranger with glowing skin and haunted eyes saw me. In the darkness and this raging storm, he called out to me, and I felt the ache of his longing in my soul.

Even though logically I have no reason not to run, walking away from him feels impossible. My feet carry me across the yard, but instead of the darkness of the forest, I turn toward the lighthouse. He's told me to leave, but I can't go until I know who he is. Or why it feels as though I'm meant to know him.

Chapter 8

Bjorn

The violet-eyed human walks through the front door as if she owns the place. When she should have fled, she stayed. She's wildly, foolishly, brave.

She escaped the room I locked her in by climbing out a window, though how the human did it without splattering herself on the rocks below, I don't know. I missed the sounds of her escape but couldn't avoid her presence in the yard. She watched me, waiting, with the thick stench of her fear heavy between us. It made my lungs tight and my gut sour with the wrongness of it.

I came outside to figure out some kind of solution to her presence. But I couldn't get past the idea that I'd hurt her. As her scent settled and her fear lessened, my resolve heightened. This woman has only known me for an evening, and already she suffers. This time at my hand. She will not be like Thora. I can't be responsible for her death too.

"No more questions. Leave."

"Who are you?" Her sweet voice sounds behind me. The storm has washed away the scent of her fear, and all that remains is her hopeful florals, full of anticipation.

"I told you to leave." I grit the words out, refusing to turn and look at her.

She laughs, but the sound is humorless. "I never was good at reading warning signs."

That's when I realize I'm the one who has to disappear. If I had known the cause of my new rune would find me so quickly, I would have fled after my trip to town for supplies this morning. But now it's necessary. I need to move on to the next house and the newest identity. Whatever this is between us can't be, and the longer I stay in her presence, the more I risk giving in to the pull between us.

She steps closer. "Were you with me in the water?"

This woman is infuriatingly curious. My Beast preens at the mention of their meeting and pushes against the veil, vying for control. I ignore her question.

The air shifts as she walks through the living room and into the kitchen. The creak of drawers and cupboards opening draws my eye.

"What are you doing?"

"I could use a drink." She peers into the pantry and digs around.

I should flee, but instead, I grumble, "Top shelf on the left."

She arches onto her toes, reaching for the bottle. Water drips on the floor, and her skin is so pale she looks blue.

Shifters run hot. I barely feel the cold right now, but she is human still, without my claim and protection. Her body is fragile even if her spirit is fierce.

I cross the room and crowd behind her, grabbing the moonshine. Leaning in, I murmur in her ear, "One drink, then you go."

She trembles, turning to look at me over her shoulder. Even in the dim light, her eyes are bright and bottomless. Her pink lips part, her words tumbling out softly between

us. “Who are you? Why do I feel like I know you?”

I turn away from her scrutiny and busy myself by pouring a drink. Once I hand her the mug, I take a swig from the bottle. The weight of her stare makes my skin crawl.

“My name is Bjorn. I’ll give you a change of clothes. One drink. Then you’re leaving.”

“Bjorn, I’m Penelope. It’s nice to put a name to this kinky adventure gone wrong.”

An unexpected chuckle leaves me, and the edges of her mouth lift into a pleased smile before she glares at me.

“I meant what I said before. I would have helped you. There was no need to hold me prisoner. Don’t ever fucking leave me tied up like that again.” She glares at me as she takes a sip from the mug. Her eyes widen as she coughs, patting her chest. “That’s rough... whew.”

My lips twitch. “Take it or leave it.”

Of course, she drains the glass. Penelope wipes her hand across her mouth and sets the mug on the kitchen counter with a flourish. One smug eyebrow lifts in a challenge.

“I’m sorry. I’ll use a more diplomatic approach in the future.”

“Something tells me that’s a lie.” She steps closer, her delicate hand reaching for me. “What are those symbols on your body?”

“Tattoos.” I sidestep her, fleeing the kitchen before I do something I’ll regret, like giving in to the urge to fuck her against the wall and claim her throat.

My Beast pushes against my skin. Feelers sprout and my fingers lengthen to claws. I fight him for control, barely managing to tuck him back in the recesses of my mind.

“Not when they glow like that,” she calls after me.

“It’s glow in the dark ink.”

She lets out an amused laugh. “Sure.”

I busy my hands by setting a fire. I can at least make sure she doesn’t catch her death of cold before I figure out a way to get us out of this mess.

She moves closer, standing above me as the pine knot catches. “I know you were with me that day in the water.”

The flames dance, and I watch the oranges and reds flicker, so I don’t have to meet her gaze.

She continues her unending questions. “How did you get down there?”

Heat blazes between us, a combination of the fire and her presence.

“I’m a good listener. Whatever it is, you can tell me.”

Nothing good will come from indulging her. We are only dangerous to one another. But the urge to take her in my arms, to give in and spill everything to her is overwhelming.

I back away from the fire and stand, my body crowding hers.

She holds her ground, her beautiful face set in stubborn lines. “You can trust me.”

“But you shouldn’t trust me,” I growl. I’m torn in two, the pull between us a physical ache that I’m not sure I can refuse much longer.

Her finger outlines the black raised lines of a rune on my forearm. I freeze at the contact, closing my eyes momentarily as I soak in her touch. It’s been so long since I have touched anyone outside of battle. The moment between us earlier when my Beast took control was the first in lifetimes that I’ve felt alive.

The soft caress almost tickles as she moves to my wrist. My pulse thumps wildly as she traces my newest rune. It’s her mark, the one she awakened. Her touch stirs the magic between us, a magnetic charge that pulls us together without my permission.

“You’re glowing,” she says in wonder. “And I can feel you somehow. What is happening to me?”

It’s the mate call. With our chance encounter in the water, she awakened the bond. The nearer we are to one another, the stronger it will become until I won’t be able to resist my Beast’s need to claim her. I’ve never known anyone to resist the lure of a mate, but I’ve got to try. I turn away from her touch even though every cell in my body urges me to wrap her in my arms.

The past assaults me, flashing a reel of bloody nightmares. My stomach turns at the reminder. I refuse to go down that path again. I harden my heart. I don’t want to betray my vows or bring death to Penelope.

My Beast roars in protest, his tentacles trying to seep through the small cracks in the veil.

In the bathroom, I hastily grab towels. I need distance from her. Miles and states won’t matter if I can’t leave this house.

She peeks her head into the bathroom, then steps into the doorway, crossing her arms. Her T-shirt is soaked through, and the pose draws attention to the hard peaks of her nipples. The urge to trace them with my tongue, to pull her closer and devour her until she's panting with heat, overwhelms me. I grind my jaw and flex my fingers.

"You can't ignore me forever." She scowls at me, but the effect is lost on her sweet face. She doesn't have a menacing bone in her body.

I toss her a towel, push past her, and go to my closet. Riffing through my drawers, I find an old pair of warm sweatpants, a flannel, and a pair of thick socks. "Change and leave."

Her arms pull at her wet clothing, revealing pale skin.

I force myself to look away.

The sound of her sopping shirt hitting the floor echoes between us. Another slap as more of her wet clothing hits the floor.

"I'm not going anywhere until I get some answers, Bjorn."

My name on her lips will be my undoing. I want to know how it sounds when she says it in the throes of passion, what it feels like when she comes apart screaming my name.

"I won't tell anyone. I'm not looking to get you in trouble. I just want to understand what happened that day in the water. Why do I feel this connection between us?"

The fabric rustles. I remember the feel of her curves beneath me, tasting her on my tongue.

Despite my desire, I walk away. It's harder this time than the last.

In the kitchen, I take another swig from the moonshine bottle, hoping it will make me brave enough to do what I must. Outside, the storm beats against the old house, but it feels as though it lives inside me, battering my insides.

My Beast lurks at the boundary between us, urging me to give in to his control. I shouldn't. I should walk out of this house, get in my Jeep, and drive until the distance between us is enough to clear my head.

"Bjorn?"

Why did I give her the power of my name? My Beast comes for me. I grit against the onslaught, barely able to contain him, but it won't hold. "Leave and don't come back."

My eyes meet hers across the room. She's drowning in my clothes, and it fills me with a sick sort of satisfaction to see that small claim.

"No. Not until you tell me the truth."

"Forget me, this place, and whatever you think you saw in the water. I'm nothing to you."

"Liar," she says softly.

My Beast laughs. Like her, he knows the truth.

"Leave," I roar. It's a last effort. My resolve is crumbling.

She shakes her head and moves toward me. "I can't do that."

The words that come next are a desperate snarl. “I need you to go.”

“No, Bjorn. You need me to stay.” She wraps her soft curves around my middle, her arms locking behind my back.

My muscles sag in relief at the feel of her against me. I’m weak. So weak. I can’t leave her. She is a part of me now, like the sea, like my broken Beast, like my bloody memories.

She plants a kiss on my chest, her small hand caressing the skin of my back. Violet eyes, full of compassion, look up at me.

“It’s okay. Whatever you’re hiding, you don’t have to be afraid.”

My Beast snaps and I lose my skin.

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Chapter 9

Penelope

Bjorn's eyes do that thing again, turning to a slit ringed with flaming gold. I don't know how it's possible, but I know I'm looking into the eyes of the creature who was with me in the water.

"Hello," I say awkwardly.

The not-quite-Bjorn doesn't reply with words. He claims me with a kiss until I surrender to him, opening my mouth. Strong arms lift me, and my feet lock around his back. We bump into a cabinet as he lifts my borrowed shirt.

My hands find the scruff of his beard and I yank hard until our lips rip apart. "You won't tie me up and leave me this time. And after, we're talking."

A rumble sounds from his chest. Before I can respond, his mouth is back on mine. The kiss is explosive, so full of fire and passion that it devours everything in its path.

He pushes me back against a wall, moving to suck along my neck. He touches me as though I'm the oxygen he needs to breathe. It makes me feel alive and beautiful, like for once I'm not too much.

My fingers dig into the muscles of his shoulders, bringing him closer. Like before, there is a pull between us, tethering me to him.

He sucks blooming marks on my throat until I'm panting and wet for him. My hips rock along the hard ridge of his abs as his lips trail across my collarbone. He licks a circle around my nipple, then flicks it with his tongue before sucking it into his mouth.

It feels so fucking good, that zing of pleasure heating up my core. He buries his head between my tits, sucking and biting until I'm squirming against him.

The low growly sound he makes sends a blast of heat to my clit. He releases my nipple, biting at the tip, then he's moving. It's a messy trip. He doesn't take his mouth from my body, kissing everywhere he can touch. We bounce against furniture and bump into walls, until finally, he lays me at the center of his bed.

He strips and follows, yanking down my sweats. As he comes to rest between my legs, I lift onto my elbows and study his eyes. The blue has vanished, and I wonder how this all works, my mind taking me out of the moment and asking a thousand questions.

It's happened before. My brain takes over and my body dries up, disconnects from pleasure. It's my fault... if I only?—

My lover makes that deep rumbling sound again and shakes his head. He grits out the words, "No more thinking. You're mine."

He grabs my thighs and pulls them open so he can bury himself between my legs. The first swipe of his tongue through my wet center shocks my system.

"Fuck," I moan.

His eyes flash and he's backlit with a brilliant golden glow. I'm so mesmerized by the light that when something slick squeezes me, it takes me by surprise.

My eyes widen as I get a look at the tentacles that have replaced Bjorn's beard. They're crimson and speckled white, luminous, and more beautiful than I remember. I trace one of the appendages and it curls and twists around my hand. It's soft but strong. Little feelers tickle my palm, almost a hello, before the tentacle retreats. Two of the others have wrapped themselves around my thighs. They're slick, so there is little resistance as they twist along the sensitive skin. Then they squeeze and little hooks dig pricks of pleasure-pain into my flesh.

I don't know what to think about the transformation, my mind unable to process the pleasure and confusion all at once. But that problem is solved for me when another tentacle teases my pussy, rubbing the textured ridges through my wetness and nudging at my entrance. It feels so good, thought is impossible.

It pushes inside, twisting and vibrating, just as Bjorn sucks my clit into his mouth. My back bows off the bed and more tentacles wrap around me. One circles my waist, another slides over my eyes, and still more bind my arms above my head. It's a full-on takeover, every part of my body claimed by him until I surrender and give in to the rising tide of my climax.

My orgasm washes me away. I'm drifting on the feel of his appendages binding me. The deep pull of the suckers. The heat of his mouth. The way his tentacle slowly glides into my pussy, letting me ride out the wave. All of it together is pure bliss.

The wave keeps cresting as his tongue joins his tentacles, lapping at my entrance. The tip of his tentacle vibrates and expands, creating a buzzing pressure as he hits that spot deep inside that causes sparks to dance behind my eyelids. I'm stretched fuller than I've ever been, and it aches so good.

Suckers latch onto my nipples and the tentacle covering my eyes moves down to trace my lips. I open, curious about the feel and taste. It's an explosion on my tongue of citrus and salt as my mouth dances with his tentacle in a semblance of a kiss.

All parts of him are focused on my pleasure as Bjorn takes me apart in a hundred little ways. It's as though he's paying attention to each shiver and breath so he can memorize every reaction. I've never had a lover worship me in bed, but that's what it feels like he's doing.

My heart and body respond, surrendering to the onslaught of pleasure. He pushes me to the peak again and again, until I've lost count of how many times I've come. I'm sopping for him, slippery and aching.

"Bjorn, please. I want to see your eyes." I squeeze my thighs, trying to signal my demand.

He gives one final flick against my clit and lifts up onto his knees. He's part human and part creature from the deep. The combination of the man and monster should probably be frightening. But I don't find anything inside but lust and a strong desire to get to know both sides of him.

"Take me."

His eyes flash gold and he flips me over. His tentacles writhe and massage along my neck, plucking and teasing my skin into a frenzy as he slides his thick cock through my slick pussy. The head nudges inside, brushing along my entrance. He teases me, giving me only a little of the fullness I crave. But even the head of his cock stretches me, he's so thick.

I push back against him, desperate and demanding, but his tentacles squeeze, holding me in place. On the next pass, he flexes his hips, and his cock fills me. I'm soaked, but that first thrust aches. He stills while I adjust. His big cock fills me to the brim, massaging my walls and hitting deep inside. He makes a husky, guttural grunt then slowly pulls out. Ridges or suckers, I'm not sure which, pulse along my channel, sending out waves of pleasure.

Human cocks don't do that, but they should. It's amazing, the sensations overwhelming. My pussy spasms and he picks up the pace, slamming his hips. Every thrust hits that deep spot of pleasure until my core is pulled tight. When I'm about to come, he pulls me up onto his lap and brings my back to his chest.

The tentacles of his beard wrap along my neck, squeezing, as he fucks me in deep strokes. His hand takes a possessive pass along my hip and between my legs to cup my pussy.

"Mine," he grits out.

His fingers rub my clit exactly where I need at the same time the base of his cock expands and wedges inside, stretching me wide. I gasp, moaning at the fullness and the impossible pressure as my orgasm takes me. It's so powerful, it wipes out my vision for a moment and my nails dig into his forearm for purchase from the onslaught of pleasure.

"Holy shit! You have a knot?" I moan, rocking and grinding down on him. I've read about them, even played with a fantasy toy that came equipped with the swollen bulge at the base of the dildo, but I never thought I would feel one.

He nods, groaning when I squeeze around him. His cock erupts, filling me with his cum, but it's like nothing I've ever felt before. There is so much that it comes in spurts and each one makes my body shiver.

The tentacles wrapped around my neck glow that same golden hue, then tiny sharp hooks sink into my neck. Pain, searing and hot, flames up my throat, burning me like a brand. Something cool flows into my veins, and just as quickly, the fire is replaced by pleasure. Liquid euphoria seeps through my blood.

My mouth opens as I scream, my climax so intense it feels as though I'm swallowed

by a crashing wave, swept under in a rip tide. My cells transform at the molecular level, reorganizing themselves around this man's claim. I am his, fundamentally.

His mate.

I've never heard the term except in stories, but the moment the term pops into my mind, I feel its truth. I was meant for the man and the creature.

The suckers along my neck detach and a cool gel coats my skin, the tentacle rubbing back and forth along my bites. It tingles and I giggle, pleasure drunk.

Bjorn pumps his hips again and I realize he's still coming. I'm already stuffed full of him, warm cum leaking down my thighs. Languidly, I rock against him, enjoying the fullness and the slide of our slick bodies. My lips twist up, seeking his, and his mouth claims mine.

Between us, something stirs. Since I first saw him, I've felt this pull between us, like an anchor that hooks into my heart. The feeling swells, welding us together. It's as if I can feel him inside me. He's a warm, dark glow. Almost like a smoldering ember in my chest.

We kiss for an eternity as our bodies slowly come back down. He lays me on my side and pulls me to him, shifting his knees between my legs.

The questions that normally spin and whirl are quiet. I have a million reasons to obsess and analyze over what happened, but my brain can't muster the energy. That can be a problem for tomorrow.

I'm blissed out, my mind floating on a gentle current. The quiet between us is peaceful. I reach an arm behind me and let my hand curl in his tentacles. His chest rumbles a soothing sound of satisfaction that makes my eyes heavy, and I drift off to

sleep.

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Chapter 10

Bjorn

The warmth in my chest when I wake feels so good it almost aches. When I open my eyes, late morning sun spills through the window and I blink in surprise. I slept late, better than I have in as long as I can remember.

A memory of Penelope coming apart in my arms last night forces me to acknowledge the source of the warmth and the peaceful sleep. My Beast took my skin and claimed our mate. He didn't only take her to bed, he sealed us together with his mate mark, branding her neck and infusing her with our venom. For our mates, it doesn't hurt; it's a shot of pleasure. The injection changes a human's body, making them compatible for the sea and for mating with a shifter. But it also means she is tied to my magic now. And my heart.

My kraken gives a smug grunt, his presence in my mind larger than the day before, stronger. I push against the veil, but the boundary marker is all but gone. The Beast doesn't budge, and I know he won't be locked in a cage again.

Part of me is glad that he took control. It's done. That should make it easy to give in fully to the urge to love and protect Penelope, to get to know this woman with the brave heart. I can't run from her now, and there's a comfort in surrendering to the inevitability of us.

But the bond doesn't change our circumstances. Penelope's questions have already risked my exposure. My mistreatment of her means she may hate me, and I would

deserve it. There is also the reality of her job and her human life.

My hand rubs along my old brand near my heart and my gut tightens. Thora. The one I made vows to. The one I have forsaken.

I turn in the sheets, and for a moment, I swear I see Thora out of the corner of my eye, her long straw-colored braid flashing in the sunlight from the window. My heart trips and I jerk up, searching for her.

The bed is empty. There is no one. Not a ghost and not my new mate. Jumping from bed, I go in search of Penelope.

Did she run after the reality of seeing me as part man and part beast? Frantically, I check the house, half stumbling as I pull on clothes and stuff my feet in boots. I check the bathroom, kitchen, and the lighthouse tower, but she's gone.

I stumble into the yard, eyes wild. Her car is parked in the same spot as yesterday. Did she leave it, fleeing on foot?

Darting to the cliff trail, I scan the rocky inlet. Nothing.

My Beast nudges me, and I give up some of my control, calling on him to track her. I partially shift, my eyesight changing and my feelers sprouting. They taste the air and scan our territory.

She is here.

I take off through the yard and into the forest after her. My legs carry me at inhuman speeds, darting through the pines. Animals skitter at my presence, but otherwise I'm alone in the forest.

When I find her, she's at the edge of an overlook on a cliff deep within the preserve. She's wearing my clothes again, her eyes closed and face thrust into the wind. Her inky hair whips and curls around her delicate neck, drawing my eyes to the red skin where my mate brand marks her throat.

She's otherworldly, so beautiful. I don't understand how, but she's meant to be mine.

"Are you all right? What happened?" I call, scanning her for any injury or signs that she's fearful of me. I'm not sure if she will welcome me if I go to her, but the need to have her in my arms pounds like a drum.

She turns to look at me over her shoulder and her eyes light up. "I hoped you'd let me see you again today."

"What?" Of all the things I thought she might say after my kraken claimed her without ceremony, that isn't it.

She bites her bottom lip, eyes nervously darting from my gaze. "Last night that wasn't you. You lost control?"

I nod but refuse to look away even though my cheeks burn at the shameful admission. My treatment of her so far has shown her the worst of me.

"I thought you might keep that side of yourself hidden today, that you'd be angry about what happened."

"When I first met you, I was furious?—"

Penelope's face falls and she takes a stuttering breath, looking back at the sea. I want more of her curious and insistent questions, not the unsure woman in front of me. But I've only got myself to blame.

“That’s not your fault or how I feel now.”

She faces the cliff, silent and waiting.

“I’ve been acting like a crazy asshole since you met me. I have reasons, but they don’t excuse how I’ve treated you. I’m sorry.”

I do what I should have when I arrived and go to her. Tugging on her elbow, I spin her to me, hands finding the curve of her hip. Her mouth opens in an O of surprise, and she steadies herself with a palm to my chest. The movement crushes a bundle of flowers to me, and I tense at the sight of the violet crocus amid the white daisies.

“Where did you get those?” My words come out as a strangled whisper as I stumble away from her.

It can’t be.

Not those specific flowers.

“What?” she splutters.

The sight of those flowers flays me wide open.

“Where? Those don’t grow here.” The crocus isn’t native to the area, and I’ve never seen it here in my preserve.

“I found them on the trail. I woke up early, buzzing with energy”—she fidgets nervously—“and I knew we needed to talk, but I wanted to think first. I didn’t want to disturb you.”

She looks gutted, but I don’t know how to hold her pain and mine, how to be Thora’s

mate and Penelope's. How do I give myself over to my new bond when the ghost of my first mate haunts me? How can I ever take care of Penelope, keep her safe, when I couldn't save my family before I was broken?

Penelope rocks forward, hesitant. "Bjorn? Are you all right?"

My chest shakes and my cheeks are wet. When did I start crying?

She caresses my cheek. "Bjorn?"

Without thought, my feelers curl up and wrap around her hand. "You found them?"

Her eyes, the same vibrant shade as the flowers she holds in her other hand, question me. "Yes. It was only these, growing in a patch near a clearing."

My chest heaves in pain and in hope. These flowers are a sign.

"Why are they important? I want to know you. Help me understand why it feels like my own heart is breaking." Tears fill her eyes and spill down her round cheeks.

"My wife and child." The words hurt to say out loud.

She backs away, stumbling over her words. "But last night? Please tell me... we didn't?—"

"They're... gone."

Penelope sucks in a sharp breath.

My hands fist at my sides. I look away from her horrified stare. "They're dead because I didn't protect my family, and now, I've claimed you as my mate when I

don't have a right to such a gift. I'm sorry?—"

"Woah. Slow down. One thing at a time. You had a family?" she asks softly.

It feels as if my innards are ripped out, my throat expelling the shameful truth. "Yes. I couldn't save them?—"

Gentle arms hold me, her anchor the only thing keeping me from breaking into a thousand tiny pieces and scattering on the breeze. "What happened?"

Penelope deserves to know what kind of broken fate has saddled her with. I gather my courage and take a deep breath, opening the torrent of my memories. The gruesome images twist my insides, but I force myself to remember. "The Crusaders came for our village just as our ships were returning. We made it into our bay only to watch our home burn.

"They slaughtered our families, and the remaining warriors. We took to our Beasts and swam. But it was already too late. By the time we made it to shore, more knights spilled from the forest. I fell like my brothers, wounded by one of their blades, but I fled to the water.

"Instead of the honorable death I should have had on the battlefield, I woke again days later, washed up on a distant shore. I'm a coward, the gates of Valhalla closed to me. I shouldn't have survived."

"Oh, Bjorn. That loss. No one should have to face it, especially alone." Penelope hangs on tightly, her fingers digging into my back.

Even if I don't deserve it, I take her comfort and let it dull the pain. It's the first time I've spoken of my home and my family since the Shifter Wars. Admitting my deepest shame felt like expelling poison, but it's out now.

“And the flowers? They remind you of your family?” she whispers.

My heart aches as the words spill out of my mouth. “Thora used to say ‘hope returns’ each time I came home after a long voyage at sea. I always brought a bundle of crocus for her and daisies for my daughter to weave in her braids. It can’t be a coincidence that you found those today.”

She pulls back from our embrace, her face bunching in confusion and her brow furrowing. “What do you think it means?”

I stare into those beautiful eyes, the same color as the flowers. “Hope. Penelope, you’re my hope. I was fighting the connection between us because I didn’t want to betray my family, but I think maybe this was a sign that it’s okay to hope.”

Her lips part and I can’t resist her any longer. I don’t even want to. I pull her mouth to mine and surrender to my mate. The kiss is soft at first, bittersweet with sorrow and compassion, but before long, the heat between us ignites.

Penelope pushes against my chest, sucking in air and stumbling from my arms. I’ve been the one resisting the pull between us, but I think this time my mate has hit a wall with all this new information.

She holds out her hand to stop me, pacing and gesturing wildly. “So let me see if I have this straight. You’re a Viking. Like an actual Viking? And a shifter? Is that what you’re called?”

She pauses in her pacing to turn to me, an expectant look on her face. I nod.

“I’m your mate.” Her voice rises, a sort of hysterical sound full of disbelief.

She’s from the modern world, where magic isn’t real and the gods do not intervene so

freely in people's lives. I've told her too much too fast, but I don't know any other way.

"I know I sound insane. But I'm from a world that was ruled by magic. Dragons lorded over the skies, wolves reigned in the forest, and our krakens had dominion in the sea. You see my Beast. You know what I say is true, even if it doesn't sound possible," I plead with her, begging her to believe me. Part of me wishes she wouldn't, that she would do the smart thing and flee. But that possibility vanished when my kraken branded her. She is mine now, our souls forever tied.

"And you've claimed me? The pull between us is real. What does that mean?"

My head lowers in shame. She asked my kraken to take her, but she didn't understand the meaning of her request. "My Beast tethered your soul to mine, bound you to our magic."

Her palm traces the branded circles on her neck, her voice frantic. "What does that mean? To be bound to your magic?"

"When you met my Beast in the water, you awakened the bond, but he sealed the magic with his claim last night. That's more than a mark." I point at her neck. "It means my kraken has claimed you. You're not only human any longer, but something different. You'll stop aging so rapidly. You can breathe underwater. You can have my young and take my knot easier. You can?—"

"What?"

"You're my mate, made for me in every way. You are a gift sent by the gods and the sea. Though why they have chosen me after I've failed, I don't understand. I promise though, I will do everything in my power to prove worthy of you and atone for the way I have treated you since our meeting."

“Stop.” Penelope holds out her hand and shakes her head. “I’m pretty sure you just told me I’m gonna turn into a mermaid and have fish babies. I think I need a drink before you tell me any more.”

Chapter 11

Penelope

The hike back to the lighthouse ends too quickly. We spill out of the forest and into his yard, but I'm not ready for what comes next.

Yesterday morning, I was a scientist with a shitty ex-husband. Now magic exists and I have a mate. What the heck do I do with all that?

Bjorn walks beside me, his large presence bristling with pent-up tension. Sometime during our walk back, he's lost his tentacles, his shifter features melting back into his skin. My mind processes it as an observation, but the usual questions don't come.

My body is in a kind of stasis, stunned even though it continues to move. My mind was so full of questions that the weight of them caused a collapse, and now it's a blank void full of whooshing white noise. Despite my numbness, there is still this smoldering ball of heat in my chest, almost an ache, that I now recognize is my bond with Bjorn.

He pauses before the doorway of his house and leans down to look into my eyes. The rough pad of his thumb scrapes across my chin. It looks as though he's going to speak, but then he looks away. His beard twitches from the tic in his jaw.

Instead, he picks me up and carries me inside the house, then sets me down on the worn sofa. He busies himself by building a fire. The warmth of it tingles, bringing awareness back to my limbs. I think I'm in shock.

Bjorn leaves the room and I stare at the flames. My hand idly traces the imprinted circles on my throat. They're already healed, the raised skin smooth. A warm down blanket is pulled around my shoulders and I blink back to the moment. He hands me a steaming mug that smells spicy.

"Drink," he commands. His voice is the rumble of waves against the shore, deep and soothing. The sound makes my core ache and pleasure zip down my spine.

I blow on the drink and take a sip. It's citrusy, with dark cloves and a strong bite. The warmth settles in my belly, and I take a longer pull this time. Bjorn makes an approving grunt and returns to the kitchen.

The clank of pots and cabinets being opened is followed by chopping knives and the aromas of cooking. I finish the drink and look at the flowers I still grip in the other hand. The crocus is a brilliant violet. The color of my eyes and the name he calls me. I felt drawn to the forest this morning, pulled by a yearning I didn't understand. When I saw the flowers, I had this overwhelming urge to pick them. I wonder if he's right, if they're a sign.

Bjorn had a wife and child. He's a shifter.

As crazy as it sounds, I believe him. And I think I was meant to find those flowers this morning. He captured me, claimed me, but I don't think this broken half-man, half-sea creature means me harm. The thought of his loneliness and guilt makes my eyes burn and my heart ache. The thunderstorm of questions rumbles in the background of my mind. I'm going to need more answers, but first I need him to know he's not alone.

I set the flowers on the mantel and move to the kitchen, where I lean against the counter and watch as he adds ingredients into a bubbling pot.

“I know you feel guilty because you couldn’t save them. But it wasn’t your fault what happened.”

Bjorn hovers the ladle over the pot, frozen. The muscles of his arms pull into tight rocks threatening to burst through his flannel shirt. He speaks through a clenched jaw. “I should have been there to protect them.”

“It sounds like you tried, but one man can’t defeat an entire invading army. I know you’ve been punishing yourself. But it wasn’t your fault and you’re not alone anymore.”

He closes his eyes for a moment before searing me with his icy gaze. “I’ve gotten this all wrong with you. It’s my job as your mate to protect you, cherish you. I’m sorry. I don’t know how to do this, my Violet.”

“I don’t know how to do this either. But maybe that’s the wrong question. Maybe the question should be do we want to learn ?”

“How can you possibly... after what I’ve done?”

“Because I’ve been lonely and waiting for you a long time too. I’m not upset you claimed me. I didn’t know what I was asking for, but I did ask for it, Bjorn. You called to me, and I answered.”

He studies my face, and I don’t hide from it, letting him see all those hollowed out places. He makes a low rumble in his chest and sets me on the counter, crowding between my legs.

Bjorn’s big hands cup my face. “Penelope.”

The way he says his my name wrecks me. It’s like it means hope and everything

good.

His forehead touches mine. “You’re so beautiful. So curious and brave. A fierce warrior. Any man would be lucky to have you by his side. How is it that you’re here with me?”

Those words are unexpected and the opposite of most I’ve heard in my life. Nothing about this situation is normal, as if I’ve somehow landed in a different reality. Everything is moving fast and none of the rules apply. It’s jarring for sure, but not in a bad way. It’s like coming home after a long trip. You know everything is in the right place, but it takes a moment to settle in after being gone.

I wrap my arms around his neck and cling to him. “I’m asking the same question. You told me magic exists, I’m a mermaid, and the gods sent you as my chosen mate. If I think about it, my mind short-circuits. Maybe for now we should just roll with it.”

Bjorn lets out a husky laugh. It’s a rusty sound that squeezes my heart. “You’re not a mermaid. I’m a kraken shifter, not a fish, and you can’t shift.”

“Potato, po-tat-o.”

His next laugh puffs against my neck and sends a delicious shiver up my spine.

“But I can breathe underwater? How?”

“I thought we were rolling with it,” he teases before placing a kiss on my forehead and backing away from the hug.

“We are. But I’m still curious how it all works.”

His stoic lips tug up at the edges as he goes back to working on the stew. “It works

through magic. My venom is infused with it, and when my Beast claimed you, he injected you with venom. For our mates, it endows them with some of our powers.”

I watch as he works around me in the kitchen, gathering flour and starting on a dough.

“So, basically a mermaid. And my number one life goal has been accomplished,” I tease.

His bun bobs as he shakes his head and smirks at my response.

“When do I get to take these new upgrades for a spin?”

He smothers a smile. “After we eat, if you would like, but first let me feed you. Now, help me roll these out.”

I look at the large ball of dough he’s made on the floured surface of the counter next to me, and an old pressure pushes against my chest. “I’m hopeless in the kitchen. I don’t know how to make anything beyond grilled cheese.”

He turns a curious eye on me, then his face softens. “But do you want to learn?”

I take a deep breath and psych myself up. Bjorn isn’t my ex, and it’s okay to make mistakes when I’m learning something new.

“Yeah, Bjorn, I want to learn with you.” The ball of pressure in my chest untangles.

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Chapter 12

Bjorn

“L ittle Violet?” I peek my head around the doorframe to find my lost mate curled up in an old wooden chair, her face buried in a book. “Ready to eat?”

Penelope responds in a flurry of action, slamming the book closed and returning it to the nearest shelf. “Shit! I’m sorry. I found the books and I got sidetracked. Did you already bring up the food?”

I quirk my brow at her. “We’re good. It needs to cool.”

She looks at her feet nervously, the metallic green polish flashing as she rubs a spot on the wood with her toe. Penelope said before she was lonely, but it’s hard to imagine her any other way than bold and surrounded by life. I see her hesitance now and it riles up my Beast. He wants to rip apart anything that makes that expression on her face. We’re in agreement .

Instead of demanding control, I share space with him as I did earlier this afternoon. But to my surprise, he nudges me to lead.

“Do you want to see one of my favorites?” I ask, hoping the discovery of something new will clear the cloud that’s settled over her.

“Yes.” She nods at me from behind the curtain of her hair, her wide smile returning.

I tug her hand and bring her through the spiraling library toward my oldest collections in the back. I don't keep anything from my shifter life with my Clan except this. Penelope watches wide-eyed as I unlock the wooden puzzle box and remove the wooden tentacle.

"It's a children's book I found in a market long after The Shifter Wars. The seller thought it was a broken toy and traded it to me for fish. Each section of the appendage turns and is covered in carvings dipped with ink. It's spelled to tell the story of the first kraken shifters." I hold up the tentacle and twist the pieces to the right configuration to begin the story. "Are you familiar with Odin?"

She nods. "He's a Norse god."

"There are many gods and Odin is only a story now but to me and my people he was real. He created man, but after he left Earth, his son Thor, the great protector, was called to battle against a giant creature that threatened the people."

Penelope traces the lines of the monster's tentacles where they reach for Thor at the end of the first panel. She turns the wood, and I continue.

"Most of the humans had run in fear, but a few gathered to help Thor face the creature. They had few abilities, and many fell quickly. Seeing that even when he defeated the creature the humans would be unable to defend themselves, he decided to capture the creature. He combined his essence with that of the Beast and breathed it into the warriors, tasking them with the protection of the seas."

With a look of wonder, she studies the final piece at the tip that shows the first kraken clan, flipping back and forth between the man and the Beast. "Does that mean you're a demi-god? Is your Beast separate from you? Like a second soul in your body?"

"I don't think of myself that way. Only as a shifter." I shrug and place the wooden

come back when she hands it to me. “The kraken and the man are meant to be whole. My bond with him broke when I lost my family, though I didn’t understand that then.”

“There are lots of things that seem unbreakable until they do.” She looks away from me and steps back, surveying the bookshelves that line the narrow walls. “Have you read them all?”

“When you’re as old as I am, you find time for a lot of reading. If it’s made it in this house, it’s been read more than once.”

She grins, and I notice the small gap between her front teeth. “An endless Tbr, the key perk of immortality.”

I shake my head. “First, what’s a Tbr? Second, I’m not immortal. We just don’t die easily.”

My hand finds the small of her back and I guide us back through the bookcases until we hit the main staircase of the lighthouse tower.

She explains as she climbs, the bounce back in her step. “A Tbr is a To Be Read list. It’s a list readers keep of what they want to read.”

“Clever. I assume you’re a reader? What’s on your list?”

Penelope’s voice comes out pitchy. “Mostly romance and fantasy. My mind is always going. I read journals and analyze data all the time for work. The stories help me shut it off and escape into another world for a while.”

My chest rumbles in agreement. Nights are long when you’re alone. “You’ll have to let me read your favorites.”

She turns on me, her eyes full of mischief. “Yeah, I don’t know if we’re ready for that,” she says, a sweet laugh bubbling out.

“Why not? I’ve had you in my tentacles. Surely we’re past being embarrassed by books.”

Pink patches bloom down her throat, but she smirks at me, eyes narrowing in defiance. “I read naughty stories about monsters.”

My smart scientist has a dirty mind and I’m going to enjoy learning what makes her wet. She wants to be bedded by a beast? Good, because she’s been claimed by one.

I push her back against the stone wall, crowding into her space and binding her wrists above her head with one of my hands. She lets out a huff of surprise as I slot my knee between her legs and wrap my other hand around her waist. I want her to feel me everywhere, to start getting used to the idea she’s mine. I’ve been holding back since I met her, torn up about how I could honor my lost family and be hers. The guilt isn’t gone, but my desire to push her away has vanished.

I lean in and let my beard rub against her cheek as I murmur in her ear, “Does it make you wet to think about being filled with tentacles or trapped on a monster’s knot?” I suck down the column of her throat until I get to my marks, kissing each one reverently. “Does it cause you to touch your pussy and come on your fingers?”

Penelope grinds her center against my leg and her arousal blooms in the air between us, earthy florals dipped in honey. I sneak my hand lower on her waist and swat her ass.

“Penelope?” I ask in warning.

“Yes,” she moans. “They make me curious.”

“I like that you’re so curious. Even when I was frustrated with you digging into my secrets. I want to learn yours.” I dip my hand between her legs, rubbing her pussy through the cotton of her sweatpants.

She looks at me with those irresistible eyes, her voice soft. “I think I might let you.”

“Good. I want to start with your body.” I grab a handful of her ass and pull her closer, taking her lips in a demanding kiss that’s more tongue than finesse. I grind against her, letting her feel how hard she’s made me. “Make me a Tbr of books that made you wet.”

My hand slips under her shirt, down the soft roundness of her stomach, and beneath the waist of her sweats. She’s wet already and so responsive, her breath panting against me at the first touch. My fingers stroke over her pussy, back and forth until she moans for me.

I slide my other hand into her hair, fisting it until she’s held in place against the wall. Nibbling along her neck causes her to squirm against my hold. “Not yet.”

I fuck her on my middle finger, knuckle deep as she grinds her hips down onto me. It’s sexy as fuck watching her swivel her hips and her eyes glaze over with lust. My finger slows and I add another, circling her entrance then scissoring them to train her to take me.

“We’re gonna need to stretch you, Wildcat.” She’s so fucking tight. Last night when I claimed her, I was mindless, lost to my Beast’s need to rut and claim. I won’t be so reckless again.

“I like a little pain with my pleasure,” she gasps.

I fuck her faster, filling her with another finger until she is three deep and rocking on

my hand. She moans and her nipples poke against the fabric of the T-shirt. They're too tempting. My teeth claim one then the other, before I take turns sucking them into my mouth. When my thumb strums against her clit, she goes off for me, her pussy clenching my fingers as she comes all over my hand. I ease her down, kissing her lips and massaging her scalp.

She watches me with heat-filled eyes as I slide my fingers from her pussy, bring them to my mouth, and lick my fingers clean. "I'm going to eat your pussy later just to see how wet you can get."

I adjust my aching cock, tempted to take her right here. But the light has begun to turn with the incoming sunset, and I promised her we would watch it while we ate dinner in the tower.

Penelope pinches the skin on her forearm.

"What the hell was that?" I grumble.

"Checking to see if this is really happening?" She smiles at me again, and it's so full of giddiness that my heart tumbles, skipping a beat.

"Shifters are real. You're my mate. Claimed and bedded." I swing her over my shoulder, and she giggles.

"I probably shouldn't admit how hot that is," she says breathlessly.

"Too late." I swat her ass playfully and jog up the stairs.

I set her down on the spread blanket in the lantern room. She moves the tray I brought up earlier between us and gives me another of those guilty expressions.

“It will still be good,” I promise her. I rip off a chunk of the flatbread and dip it in the stew. The first bite is rich and salty. It’s lukewarm but good, reminding me we haven’t eaten in too long.

Penelope follows my lead, taking her own chunk of bread and dipping it in the bowl. She moans at the first bite. “I can’t believe I helped make this.”

“You picked it up quickly.”

Despite what she said about her knowledge of the kitchen, she caught on. She helped me finish rolling the dough and frying them in the pan.

“Thank you for answering my questions.”

I grunt in acknowledgment and take another bite. We fall into a comfortable silence as we eat and watch the sun set through the lighthouse windows.

“It’s beautiful up here,” Penelope says, edging closer to the wall of glass. “Tell me about it.”

I indulge her curiosity, telling her about when I first settled here and worked the land, building the house and the tower. It’s been a long time since I’ve dared get close to another and it’s easier than I expected, as if a dam has burst on my silence and a century’s worth of words tumbles out.

Each time I answer one of her questions, it sparks a new one. What was it like, she asks time and time again. She doesn’t share many of her own stories, only interesting facts about a place I mention or the time period. I wonder if she’s protecting her secrets or if she simply forgets to share in her thirst for new knowledge.

The sun fades and the stars travel the sky as we talk. It isn’t until the light of sunrise

returns that our words dry out, replaced by yawns.

I pick up my new mate and carry her to my room, then into the bathroom. Turning on the water in the shower, I wait for it to warm as I undress Penelope. She's a sleep-drunk little thing in my arms, snuggly and soft.

In the shower, I wash her slowly, massaging her skin and scalp. When I run my fingers through her legs, she lets out a small whine and I realize she's still a little swollen from my rough treatment yesterday. I wash myself quickly and towel us off before carrying her to the edge of the bed.

"You're sore?" I ask, though I already know the answer.

"Not bad," she mumbles and turns to crawl into bed.

I stop her with a hand on her thigh. "Let me care for you, Wildcat."

Pulling her knees open, I expose her to me. My Beast nudges and I give him room. Penelope pushes back onto her elbows and drops her knees wider, looking down at me with soft eyes. She's the picture of abundance and sensuality with every one of her round curves. Her dark hair pools around her shoulders and the violet of her eyes is so light, they almost glow. I'm awed by her.

My tentacles replace my beard, and her delicate hand comes out to stroke them. "What are you doing?"

"My kraken is made to take care of you." I press kisses to her thigh as a tentacle massages her pussy.

She moans and throws back her head. "What is that?"

My tentacle slides into her entrance, rubbing its cream into her walls. She squeezes against me, and I nip her thigh.

“It’s to help you recover.” I press more kisses into her thick thighs and over her plump mound until I suck her clit with my tongue.

She grinds her pussy against my mouth. I push more of the warm gel into her tight channel, massaging and suckling her clit until she’s shaking. Her orgasm rushes through her, clamping down on my tentacle, and my dick jumps against my thigh, desperate to fill her. But she needs time to recover before taking my cock again. Instead, I kiss her thigh and pick up my sleepy, well-satisfied mate. I tuck her in my arms and situate the blankets.

“I’m glad the gods sent me to you,” she whispers.

“Me too, my mate.”

Her hand reaches up behind her to find my bearded tentacles and she curls her fingers into them. I kiss her head and my Beast rumbles his satisfaction, creating a deep vibrating sound in my chest that makes her muscles go lax.

Her breathing evens out, her chest rising and falling in a slow pattern that works to soothe my soul. I can feel her light in my chest and her weight in my arms. For the first time in as long as I can remember, when I shut my eyes, there is not only darkness but peace.

Chapter 13

Penelope

The throbbing in my nipples forces awareness to return. With groggy eyes, I watch as one of Bjorn's suckers draws my nipples down hard. Shifting slightly in the bed makes my slick thighs rub together. I look back and smile when I realize Bjorn is asleep. His beard tentacles got curious. They slide along my torso and neck while one uses its suckers to tease my nipples.

I close my eyes again at the suckling sensation. My breasts are aching and my nipples puckered. The sensations travel through my core, and I squirm, arousal making me restless. My ass pushes against Bjorn as I squeeze my legs, trying to get pressure on my clit. He grumbles and his knee shifts between mine.

"Are you rubbing this sweet ass against me for a reason?" His voice is warm and deep with sleepiness, wrapping around me like a dream.

I grind down on the leg between mine. "It's your Beast's fault."

His chuckle sends little vibrations along my back, and I shiver.

"We are of one mind on this." He thrusts his hips, pushing his hard cock against my ass, and his suckers tug on my nipples. He turns me in his arms to face him enough that he can kiss me.

Bjorn's lips languidly cover mine. We make out as if exploring one another and

learning each other's taste is the only thing we have to do. I rub my body against him, swiveling my hips, and his tentacles squeeze, pulling me closer. The delicious pressure of being bound by him makes my muscles loosen and my pussy wet.

He nips my bottom lip and soothes away the sting, sucking it into his mouth. At the same time, the suckers on my nipples pulse with little vibrations.

I moan into the kiss, panting and desperate. "Please," I beg, completely uncaring how desperate I sound.

"What do you need, Little Violet?" His big palm travels over the swell of my ass and he takes a handful. The move opens my pussy. He dips his middle finger inside and applies pressure at my entrance.

I gasp. "I'm curious."

"Of course you are." Bjorn's dark chuckle rumbles between us as he fucks me on that one thick finger.

"Your cock, it has special features?" My hand travels between us, reaching for him.

Bjorn traps my wrist and brings it above my head, flipping us so that I'm on my back. "Are you asking to touch my cock?"

"Yes. I want a turn to explore."

He curses in his native tongue and the tentacles wrapped around my throat squeeze. The pressure doesn't hurt so much as ache. When the little feelers brush at the sensitive skin near my ear, they're rough and scratchy, making the area light up with tingling pleasure.

“Explore. But only if I can too. I want to taste you again.” He rolls us until I’m on top, then flips me around in a tangle of his limbs and tentacles until I’m straddling him and facing his cock.

I lean in and take him in one of my hands. It’s wide and covered in veins. The tip is an angry red and his slit dribbles pre-cum. The sight of it makes my pussy clench, desperate to feel him stretching me again. I use my fingers to swirl the pre-cum and massage the head, getting a feel for him.

Bjorn grunts and wraps his tentacles around my thighs and torso, bringing my pussy to his face. His fingers part me and I moan at the slight stretch. Wetness trickles down my thighs and Bjorn’s tongue flicks against it.

I squeeze his cock and pump his shaft, moaning at the feel of him. He’s so thick and hot in my hands. Imagining him filling me causes my pussy to constrict again. Bjorn swats my ass with one hand and slides his fingers through my center with the other.

“You healed nicely. But now I need to get you ready to take me.” He rubs along my slit, teasing me.

I bounce my hips, trying to get him where I want.

“Do that again,” he says, voice rough. “I want to see your pretty ass jiggle for me.”

His tentacles squeeze tighter, the little hooks pricking my skin. The slight scrape, mixed with the pressure and his gentle perusal, make me soaked.

“Mmm, that’s right. Every time you bounce your sweet ass for me, it gives me a little tease of your pink pussy.”

He kneads my cheeks, squeezing the flesh of my ass as I rock my hips for him, my

ass bouncing. A low rumble of pleasure sounds in his chest, and the sound makes my heart stutter. I feel his heated gaze on me. No one has ever looked at me and made me feel the weight of it before. He likes what he sees, and he's as desperate as I am. That knowledge lets loose some barrier inside me and I give over to my neediness, unashamed.

"Please," I beg again. I need him to help me ease the empty feeling in my core. My body is brimming with energy everywhere, my breasts and pussy aching.

He rumbles a soothing sound. "Shh. I'll not let you suffer, mate."

His tongue flicks against my clit. It's so good. I grind down on his mouth. He pops my ass and grabs hold, keeping me in position. The sharp sting makes me moan.

I return my attention to his cock, pumping him in my hands before leaning in to lick the tip. Even the head is a stretch. My lips part wide as I taste him. He's citrus and ocean air, and I lap at him greedily while I twist my hands around his shaft. Feelers sprout like little ridges and a heaviness forms at the base.

I pop off to ask about it and he growls, "Don't you dare stop."

"But I have questions," I tease.

His teeth sink into my ass as a tentacle circles my back hole, rubbing in something warm and wet. I open my mouth to ask another question and the tentacle wrapped around my torso squeezes, cutting me off.

I laugh at his frustration, but it quickly turns to a moan when that probing end presses into my ass and he fucks my pussy with his tongue. The questions die out as my body surrenders to the pleasure. I reach for his cock, taking more of him into my mouth. My tongue swirls around his shaft, catching on the ridges of his feelers.

It feels as if he's everywhere all at once. His tentacle pushes into my ass, expanding and contracting on each glide. He sucks my clit, and his thick shaft stretches my mouth wide. Pleasure rushes through me, little fireflies of light dancing in my vision as I'm hurdled toward climax. I scream around his cock and gush against his mouth as my orgasm takes me under. Bjorn goes wild, pulling me closer and soaking up my release, his tongue fucking my pussy through the climax.

"I'm never going to get enough of how responsive you are, my Violet. Or how much you like having all your holes stuffed." Bjorn flips me around in a blur of motion and settles me to straddle his lap.

"You make me feel beautiful," I admit, running my palm along his cheek and through the tangle of tentacles along his jaw.

His icy blue eyes are speckled with the gold of his kraken. "You are. Your body was made to be worshiped."

He kisses me slowly. The kiss is so full of tenderness it almost hurts. The bond between us grows larger in my chest, his warmth radiating out of me, a mixture of pleasure and something else. Something soft but small.

I tilt my hips to rock his shaft through my slick lips. His tentacles wrap around me, vibrating in waves up my belly and across my breasts. Another binds my hands behind my back, making my tits rub against his hard chest. His large hands grab my ass to help me glide back and forth against his length.

The sharp nip to my lip makes me pant into his mouth. He notches his cock at my entrance and steadies me as he sinks inside. That first stretch is impossible. I toss my head back and moan, swiveling my hips to help ease the sting. My pussy is wet, but he's big. Inching down, I take more of him, and those feelers vibrate, sending a deep burst of pleasure to my core.

“Oh, fuck, your cock. It’s?—”

“You like to feel me take you, claim your pussy all over again?” He thrusts, sinking deeper, and at the same time, his finger teases down my crack and pushes into my ass.

“Yes. It feels so good,” I moan.

“That’s it, sweet Violet. You’re so responsive and you take me so well. Such a good lover.”

His praise bathes me in light, soaking into my skin and sliding through my veins. I feel cherished and sexy, as though I’m responsible for taking this rugged a man apart. I squeeze around him, lifting off his cock, then taking him again in a slow slide.

Bjorn sucks along my neck and uses his strength to help me glide up and down. It’s sensation overload. I ride him while his finger fucks my ass, and his tentacles hold me. They vibrate, squeeze, and suck along my skin even as they keep me bound for him. I pant and moan, loving the feel of him all around me.

When I can finally take all of him, I ride him with abandon. He thrusts into me from below, his thick cock massaging my walls with feelers, adding another layer to the pleasure. Together, we give in to passion. It’s an all-consuming heat that makes our movements languid and unhurried. I feel as if all I am is wrapped up in this moment.

The anchor that ties us together pulls tight in a kind of squeeze that I can feel in my soul and see in his eyes as I pull his face back to me. Our eyes lock as I grind down on him, moaning at the way the bulge at the base tugs on my lips and teases me open.

Bjorn roars, “Yes, Wildcat, work your pussy on my knot.”

He grabs my hips and pulls me closer, fucking me in fast, deep pumps. His tentacles keep me bound tightly, and that reminder of his possession helps me let go. I throw my head back and come in a rush.

“That’s it. Now I’m going to fill you with my cum and mark you as mine.” His hips punctuate his words and the swelling base of his cock wedges inside on an aching stretch. He comes in pulsing jets, flooding my insides. He thrusts his hips, and more spurts flood my pussy.

I moan at the pressure. It almost feels as if there are little pleasure beads inside his cum, but the sensation is so different I can’t be sure. Whatever it is, it feels just as fucking amazing as last time, and I close my eyes as pleasure courses through me.

“Sweet mate,” he coos, wrapping me in his arms, the two of us breathing rapidly. “You’re mine now. I can’t bear to live without you.”

“Bjorn,” I plead. I want to belong to him, for him to be mine and to let the softness between us grow until all our hurt places are no longer tender. My chest thumps wildly and my lips find his, a reassurance or a promise.

We stay like that, wrapped up in each other, the rest of the morning, until we’re both exhausted. We fall back into the sheets, covered in cum, and nap the day away.

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Chapter 14

Bjorn

“Y ou’re sure I don’t need a drysuit?” Penelope asks, peering over my shoulder to look at the crashing waves beating against the rock.

After we slept all day, we got up and made a big breakfast together, which we ate lazily by the fire. But once she was full, her curiosity about her new abilities came back front and center.

“Are you cold now?” I ask. It’s dusk already, and the temperature has dropped.

She lets go of the hold her legs have on my waist and plops down onto the rock. “Nope. I know it’s cold out here, but I’m warm.”

“The change makes you sturdier against the elements. It will be the same in the water,” I explain as I lift her borrowed shirt. I know we need to discuss what lies ahead and get her things, but I can’t say I don’t like seeing her wearing my clothes.

She helps me, tugging off the sweats and folding them before placing them on the farthest rock from the water. I follow her, adding my own clothes to the pile. She shivers, her nipples pebbling into stiff beads, but I don’t think it’s from the cold. She eyes my cock.

“Eyes up here,” I smirk. My violet eyed little human is insatiable. The floral scent of her arousal melds with the ocean breeze and my cock takes interest, thickening

against my leg.

She swallows, looking up at me with wide eyes. "I'm kinda nervous."

I pull her to me and wrap her in my arms. "It will be as easy as breathing on land, but it may take you a while to get used to it. The water will flow through your mouth and pass through here." I touch her neck where our mating brand lives. "It will act like gills."

"Totally a mermaid," she teases, her lips widening into a lopsided smile and showing off that small gap between her teeth.

"But no tail." I swat her ass and she yelps, jumping in my arms, her plump breasts bouncing against my chest. I'm half tempted to pick her up and carry her back to bed.

Her eyes narrow. "No. I'm getting in the water. Ravish me there."

"All right, Wildcat. Hang on to me. I promise I'll keep you safe. No matter what we see, the other creatures won't bother us. Stick close to my side."

I let my Beast take our skin. The magic glows for a moment, then my body transforms with the full shift. It isn't as painful as usual, more of a deep aching stretch. When I'm finished, I open my eyes with the sight of my kraken and find Penelope staring at me in wonder.

"Hello, Beastie." My mate grins as I scoop her up. "You're beautiful." She runs her hands through the tentacles that replaced my beard.

I rumble my answer, and it's the two of us, my kraken and me, sharing our skin as one in a way I haven't in many lifetimes. My tentacles wrap around her, holding her tightly. I'm overcome with his pleasure as he properly holds her for the first time.

Taking the plunge, I jump into the water with Penelope flush against my chest. She squeals except no sound escapes, only a rush of bubbles from the ring around her throat. Her eyes widen comically, and her hand reaches up to check. The bubbles must tickle her because she laughs and does it again.

“Hold on,” I tell her, curious if our bond has grown enough to include the connection.

“Bjorn?” Her honeyed voice echoes in my mind, and I nod. “Holy shit. That’s wild.”

I turn her around in my appendages so that she rests with her back against my torso. Then I take off through the water. The bay is a highway of activity as the sun sets above the surface. Larger fish feed, crabs scurry about, and the rocks are teeming with life. Penelope is curious, thrumming with excitement, and I slow to let her take it all in.

We swim to the deep-sea coral gardens, and I watch with amusement as Penelope yanks on my arm and tries to pull me where she wants. I relax my hold and let her explore. As she gets a feel for it, swimming closer to watch a group of starfish and lobster skitter along the rocks, I take in my underwater home with new eyes.

Many of the creatures on the reef use bioluminescence that humans can’t detect, and the sea beneath the waves is lit up like a human carnival. Animals blink and undulate, sending signals that flash in colorful waves. Penelope gasps at the show, my magic allowing her to see the deep in a new way. Her bubbles float to me, tickling along my torso. I can’t stand to have her far for long, and my appendages wrap her up, pulling her to me.

Her inky hair swirls in the water and her eyes glow a luminous gold with my magic. “Thank you, Bjorn.”

I kiss her, wrapping her legs around my waist and holding her ass in my claws. My

tentacles can't stop touching her, slithering up her calves and arms, feasting on her taste as they wrap around her. Even in my first lifetime, my kraken did not take our mate this way. He is desperate to truly claim her.

As if she heard my thought, Penelope says, "Take me like this. I want my Beastie too."

Her delicate hands travel along my torso, rubbing the raised feelers. It lights up my skin and makes me ache with the need to rut. My mating tentacle grows heavy and seeks her center. The club with its sloped head is already sensitive and leaking slick, eager to pump her full of cum and get her heavy with my hatchling.

I push her against the rocks, my tentacles wrapping around her to ensure her skin doesn't chafe, and suck along her breasts and belly. My suckers go wild, every part of me desperate to taste her. My tentacle strokes her pussy until she's coated in my essence. Another of my appendages goes to work on her tight ass, rubbing and circling until the tip of the tentacle pushes inside.

She lets loose a torrent of bubbles, thrashing against my hold.

There's my Wildcat.

Another tentacle slithers to her clit, a sucker tugging it into its hold. My tentacle thrusts inside her tight pussy as another fucks her ass, and I groan at the pleasure. It expands, filling her until it can latch onto her walls.

Pulling back from her sweet tits, I glide up to her mouth. My tentacles shift through water until I've got her tucked up against me and wrapped in my claws. I thrust, and the move pushes me deeper.

We spin as I propel us through the water, pumping into her. She thrashes against my

hold, eager to test her restraints. I squeeze her tighter, and her body goes lax at my possession.

She moans, and I capture it with my mouth, her bubbles tickling along my feelers. Everything around us fades as she rocks into me. All my feelers are alive with the taste of her. I grind deeper.

“Come for me, sweet Violet,” I say through our link.

At my command, she lets go in a thundering climax that trips my own. I pump her full of my cum, shaking as the overwhelming orgasm rips through me. The power of it sets off my magic and my skin burns with her brand.

“Mine. Little mate. All mine,” my Beast demands, the thought loud and commanding in the bond between us.

“Yes,” Penelope assures me.

My kraken and I rumble our satisfaction. We float beneath the surface, lazily, my claim on her never loosening. I cocoon her in my appendages.

Her muscles loosen and she becomes jelly in my arms. I tuck her closer to my chest and cradle her against me as I swim toward home. She kisses my chest and closes her eyes as we speed through the water.

“Best swim ever,” she says in the bond.

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Chapter 15

Penelope

I dice up okra and place it in the growing pile we will add to the stew Bjorn started on the stove.

When we arrived back at the lighthouse after our underwater swim, Bjorn pulled up some of the traps he keeps near the house for dinner. We showered, where he did that thing with the gel and his tentacles that he swears is to help with soreness but really only makes me come. Then we gathered vegetables and herbs from his greenhouse.

This entire day has felt like a dream. Meeting his full kraken form and diving with him are experiences I can't put into words. And even the simple things are totally different with Bjorn. The world here at the preserve and lighthouse is slower. I feel every moment instead of working on an endless to-do list. It's living.

I left Daniel months ago, moving on and changing my life, but I don't know that I've been doing much living. Even now, cooking, which was a major stress point in my marriage, feels easy. Like yesterday, Bjorn is teaching me with an openness that means I'm not afraid to get it wrong or question why we're doing something.

"Is that enough?" I ask when I've made it through more than half our haul of veggies.

Bjorn grunts his approval and adds the vegetables to the fish stew, giving it a good stir. "Grab the flour and salt for me. In the pantry there."

I gather the ingredients for the bread as he wipes down the counter. I set down the pile and look at him expectantly. He walks me through making the dough. His chest is at my back, his ocean smell between us, and his big hands brush mine as we mix the spices into the flour and add water. It's sexy and comfortable at the same time, the smells of the kitchen mixing with his scent.

It feels like a home. Like it could be my home. He kisses along my neck, nursing his marks until I'm squirming against him and rubbing my ass against his cock.

"Behave," he growls in my ear before sucking on the lobe.

The sound of his deep rumble voice does nothing to deter me, and I grind against him again. He swats my ass with a flour-covered palm. I let out a shaky breath, squeezing my thighs together. I'm so fucking needy around this man. I can't seem to help it. And the amazing thing is that I don't have to.

Bjorn squeezes my hip and takes a step back.

"Like this," he says, voice still husky and thick. He rolls out the dough, but all I can see is the way the muscles of his forearms flex and the firm grip of his hands.

I scrunch my nose into a pout. "You make it impossible to concentrate."

His rich laugh rumbles between us.

I look up at him and lift my brows. "Just wait. I'll figure out what drives you mad and return the favor."

"No need for a science experiment. It's you. You make me hard and my blood run hot." He kisses me with a soft brush of lips.

When he pulls back, I swear my cheeks are on fire. I busy myself with rolling out the balls of dough we will fry in the pan.

He lets me recover from his general sexiness as he heats the iron skillet and adds a small amount of oil. “You’ve got this. I’m going to build the fire.”

I nod, trying to reassure us both.

Racking my brain for what he taught me yesterday, I take a deep breath and fry the first section of flat bread without fucking up. The next one I burn, but I simply toss it out and keep moving until I’ve amassed a plateful.

See, you got this.

I join him in the living room, brandishing the plate with a flourish.

“Perfect.” He takes the plate of flatbread and sets it on the blanket.

“Do you have any wine?”

“Only the moonshine. We can go to town tomorrow and gather some supplies and your things if you want.” He says the words quickly, his ears turning red.

He turns away and walks back toward the kitchen, but I catch up and tug on his arm. “Hey, big guy, slow down.”

He freezes but won’t turn to look at me.

I wrap myself around him from behind. “I don’t know what this all looks like, but we have time to figure it out. I’m not going anywhere.”

He takes hold of my hands where they rest on his hips, pulling me closer. “So, we’ll go to town tomorrow?”

I place a kiss on his back and then pop around him and dart into the kitchen, calling over my shoulder. “Yeah. And maybe tonight we can figure some stuff out. How does the mind link thing work? What would happen if I got pregnant? Would the baby be a kraken or human? Both? Does being your mate mean we’re, like, married?” The questions roll off my tongue, but I have a hundred more. Those seem most pressing.

When he doesn’t answer, I poke my head out of the kitchen to find him holding his stomach in silent laughter.

“What? Those are normal things to wonder about.”

“Wildcat, as long as you’re not planning to leave, you can ask anything you want.”

“Good. You can answer my questions over dinner.” I hand him a bowl of stew and carry my own to the little blanket setup he’s built in front of the fire.

We settle and dig in, both of us hungry after our time in the water. He eats his way through three helpings and most of the bread in the time it takes me to finish my bowl. I stare at him in wonder as he takes the remaining piece of bread and wolfs it down in three bites.

“It’s shifter metabolism. I eat. Often.” He sets down his empty bowl and spreads his legs, patting his thigh. I shift until I’m lying beside him with my head resting in his lap.

“I see that. Will that happen to me?” I look up at him.

“Your appetite shouldn’t change, nor your appearance, though you’ll no longer age as a human.” He runs his hands through my hair, massaging my scalp.

I make a contented humming sound and close my eyes. “What does that mean?”

“As my mate, you will age with me, and I put on time slowly. My kind don’t usually die of age but battle. But like me, you’ll heal faster. The great danger is an anointed blade. But those have been eradicated and lost to time.”

“So I’ll be twenty-nine forever?”

“No, but you’ll look it for many lifetimes.”

I open my eyes and he studies them, searching for something.

I let my mind play out the scenario and realize it’s kind of amazing. Like a pick-and-choose adventure story. “Think of how much we’ll see of the world. Do we always have to stay here, or can we travel?”

His lips tug up into a surprised grin. “We can go wherever you want. Explore anywhere there is a sea.”

“But what about babies? Do you want them again?” I’ve always wanted children in the abstract, but I was never in a hurry with Daniel. But Bjorn already had a family. He may not want to have children again.

“Yes, I think so, though I need time. My Beast would have you bred today, but for you to become pregnant, your body will have to accept my seed. It’s the way of kraken. Only the parent carrying the young makes the choice. But to answer your earlier question, my young will be a shifter if born male.”

I sit up and cross my arms. “Why only males?”

“That is how the gift is passed among my people,” he explains with a shrug. “The dragons are the female fighters. They carry their line, though their mating magic differs from kraken.”

His answer sets my head spinning with more questions. “Are there any dragons left? Could we meet one?”

He laughs as he pulls me into a quick kiss. His hands find their way to my ass, just holding me there. “Maybe one day. The last dragon joined with the wolves to create a shifter settlement long ago.”

I think aloud. “I have to finish my project. I’ve committed to it. But after, we could travel?”

“After, we can do whatever we want.” He kisses the crown of my head. “I’ve got money saved and we can get you identification papers.”

“That’s going to take some getting used to.”

“Doing what you want?” he asks, his face full of confusion.

I pull back from his arms. “Pretty much. Come on. Let’s clean up the dishes, then we can come back and snuggle on the couch. I have more questions.”

“Not this time. It’s my turn to ask you.”

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Chapter 16

Bjorn

“ W hy marine biology?” I ask.

We’ve settled on the old couch in front of the fire. Penelope lies on my chest, her legs tangled with mine as we snuggle under a blanket.

She turns her head, nuzzling into my chest. “My parents wouldn’t pay for art school and the thought to defy them never crossed my mind.”

My chuckle rumbles. “That’s hard to imagine. You’re persistent.”

“In some things maybe.” She’s somber now, and I want to understand what caused the change.

“If you could have chosen for yourself, what did you want to do?” I run my hands along her back, trying to soothe her.

“Ever since I was little, I’ve been drawn to the ocean. Like, obsessed with orcas and stingrays, reading all about the ocean, collecting shells,” she admits, a smile in her voice. “My best memories were made at my grandmother’s house on an inlet in Florida. We would spend weeks in the summer exploring. But I never wanted to study it the way I do now.”

I flip a strand of her hair back and forth between my fingers and trail it down her

nose, tickling her until she bats my hand away. “What did you want?”

“I wanted to live in the ocean, breathe it in. It always felt like my skin fit better in the water.”

“Because you belong to it, as do I. The sea calls us to our mates.”

She makes a thoughtful sound. “Is it weird I’m comforted by that? That means I was always meant to find you. And from the moment I met you, it was like I needed to know you, that you were somehow important to me even though we were strangers.”

“No. I don’t think it’s weird. I find comfort in it too, even though I was afraid of opening myself to you.”

She props her chin on my chest, looking up at me. “At least you did it. You asked what I wanted? What I dreamed of but was afraid to do was capture the beauty of the ocean as an children’s book illustrator. I wanted to explore the oceans of the world and tell stories about their creatures, make them accessible to kids.”

I wrap my arms around her, squeezing her tightly as she likes. “How did an illustrator end up a marine biologist?”

She sighs. “In my house, there was no college for art or the humanities. It was the sciences or math or business. I thought it was easier to avoid confrontation, to do what I was told.”

“Why?”

“I’ve always sought approval. I tried hard to be my family’s version of good, but it never came naturally. I didn’t know any other way to be. I was miserable and anxious all the time.

“When I was nineteen, I had a relationship with my undergrad professor. Daniel’s class was fascinating. It was one of the required humanities classes I had to take for my major. I went to his office hours once to ask questions and then kept going.”

“That was your ex-husband, the one I hung up on?”

“Yeah. He was older and persistent. I didn’t get a lot of attention from men or boys. It’s like they always looked past me.”

“Idiots. You don’t need their attention.”

Penelope laughs and I squeeze her ass, my Beast grumbling in my chest.

“Okay, you don’t like to share. I hate it, so we’re good.” She says the words teasingly, but I can hear the pain beneath them.

This prick Daniel helped feed into her parents’ bullshit. Penelope is bold color and bright laughter. I hate that they made her feel like less.

My record with her is far from spotless, but I know I messed up and won’t ever let it happen again. “I promise, Penelope, that mates are forever.”

I tug under her arms and bring her to me. She runs her hands in my beard as I take her mouth, promising her with my body what I said with my words.

The kiss lingers, a slow smoldering heat that’s more comfort than desire. I inch away and hold her delicate face between my palms. “Will you tell me what happened?”

She sits back, straddling my waist and looking at the fire. Her voice is hollow when she speaks again. “My parents surprised me for a visit and caught Daniel and me together. They loved him. He was everything they wanted for me.

“My dad comes from old money. I think Daniel realized that night that I would be a good meal ticket, and after that visit, we went public with our relationship. Professor positions are prestigious but not paid well and Daniel had executive taste. When we got engaged, my parents bought us a house and made Daniel the executor of my trust fund. As my husband, my family believed that he should be the financial and legal guardian of my affairs.

“You told me you think I’m fierce.” She laughs, but it’s a self-deprecating sound. “I think you’re the only one who sees that. I don’t even see it most of the time. Daniel lost interest after I turned twenty-one. I was in grad school and busy. I gained weight and he hated the changes. That was the first year he had an affair.”

“Fucking idiot. Like I said.” Penelope’s body is heaven. Soft and round and so fucking sweet.

She looks down at me, her violet eyes ablaze. “Yeah, fucking idiot.”

I squeeze her hips and run my hand along her belly. Her body is enough to sink into and get lost. She squirms atop me, but before she can protest, I ask, “What happened?”

Penelope sobers, looking at a spot behind my head. “I spent nights in the library a lot then, always working until they closed. It was near winter exams, and I was studying for a comp test. Our house was in one of the older neighbors on the edge of campus and I would walk home. This one night, I wasn’t feeling well, and I decided to come home earlier than usual. I saw him tuck a woman into an Uber. They kissed through the window, and the way he looked at her... I’d never seen him look at me that way.”

“You left him?” I tug her chin, forcing those eyes on me.

“Yeah,” she huffs, “eight years later.”

The look I give her is full of compassion. “Bad cycles are hard to break.”

“You don’t think that’s weak?”

“I think it sounds like you had enough and left to find something for yourself.”

She shakes her head, unconvinced, and squeezes her eyes tightly. “Want to know something awful?”

“I want to know everything about you.”

“Boy, for a man who started with botched bondage, you’re smooth.” She tugs on my beard, and I wrap my hand around hers.

“I want to know you.”

She takes a steadying breath and looks me in the eye. “Part of me thought it was my fault. He was critical of how my body had changed, what I was studying, the ways I failed to take care of our home. About everything in my life really, but especially the bedroom. I talked to him once about some of my fantasies. After the first two years we were together, we didn’t have sex often and I never came. My mind was always somewhere else, and I couldn’t connect to the moment.”

The words spill out of her, fast now, though they hurt to hear.

“When I told him I thought I was into kink and wanted to explore, that I wanted him to restrain me and take charge so I could focus on feeling and get out of my head, he said what I wanted was sick. He told me I needed to master vanilla sex before I could graduate to kink. I was devastated. I thought that if I could just be what he wanted, if I could prove that I was a good wife, then he would realize what he had and how much he loved me. It took me too long and a lot of hours in therapy to realize love

doesn't work that way."

I sit up and take her with me, pulling her into a hug. "Your needs and fantasies don't make you sick. They're a part of you. A beautiful part that I can't wait to explore more of. And you're right, it doesn't work that way, but it's easy to believe a lie and to feel it's truth."

"Like that you believe you should protect your family. True. And they died. Also true. So with that logic, you failed?"

"Yes," I grit the word, hating where this conversation is headed.

"But that's not true. The blame for their death is on the warriors who took your land. No one else."

"That doesn't feel like enough." No matter how good it feels being with Penelope, it doesn't change that I should have protected my family.

"Let's test the logic." She pulls back from our hug, eager now and talking with her hands. "Daniel wasn't satisfied in our relationship. True. And he sought connection outside our marriage. Also true. I used that logic to say it was my fault he cheated because I failed."

"No," I grumble, reaching for her.

She scoots away on the couch.

"He was an asshole who was too stupid to realize the treasure he had. I almost made the same mistake with you."

"Correct." She pushes her hand into the air in victory.

I crawl toward her and she scoots back again until she's flush with the couch arm. My knee nudges between her legs, my body crowding hers against the armrest. "And we should discuss the fact that you ran toward your captor, not away like you should."

"Correct."

"Why?" I tilt her chin until she meets my eyes.

"Because from the moment I met you, I felt the same way I did that first time I looked at the ocean."

"What way is that?" I ask softly.

"Like I was home."

Those words land in my soul. I brush my hand along her cheek, trace her cute nose.

"It was reckless."

"It was worth it." She gives me a saucy wink before turning serious, cupping my cheek. "Your family died. It's an awful loss."

I try to pull away from her, but she wraps her legs around me like tentacles and marches on.

"And you didn't have anyone to grieve with. You didn't only lose them, you lost everyone. I felt like I lost my whole world when I left Daniel. But even though I thought it sometimes, and blamed myself, the truth is that it wasn't my fault. This wasn't your fault either."

My chest rumbles, but it's not my Beast.

“You won’t win,” she says. “You know deep down I’m right. Because if you’re at fault, then I am too.”

I shake my head. I’ve given in to Penelope and the bond between us, but I don’t know how to let go of this.

“I’m not saying you have to believe it today. I don’t always believe my own truth. I have to remind myself often. The voices in our heads can be pressing and easy to listen to. But I’m gonna keep telling you it isn’t your fault, and maybe one day you’ll believe it.”

“Then I guess that means I’ll need to remind you every day that you’re beautiful and clever and sexy.” I wrap my hands around her and climb off the couch.

“Yes. I agree,” she teases, kissing my neck and collarbone. “Now take me to bed and remind me you’re my only one.”

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Chapter 17

Penelope

“ I s that the last of it besides the laptop—” Bjorn stands open-mouthed in the doorway of the bathroom of my rental. “Fuck, you look sexy in that.”

He stalks toward me in the small space and crowds my back, placing his hands on my hips and slowly circling them around my waist. His head falls on my shoulder, looking at me in the mirror.

Most of the time I wear leggings and jeans, T-shirts, or wetsuits. I like to be comfortable, and they make me feel cute. Today, I chose one of the few skirts I brought and paired it with a cropped T-shirt and sweater. It’s still casual. Hell, my usual rain boots are still in place. But the way he’s looking at me now makes me feel incredible.

When I gained weight in grad school, the changes in my body didn’t bother me like they did my ex. I was neutral about it most of the time and never tried to actively lose weight. Most days I like how I look. But it hurt that my husband didn’t find me attractive anymore. It feels good to be wanted like this, to hear that Bjorn finds me sexy and see it confirmed in the heat of his gaze.

Our little bubble out at the preserve is about to burst. We came to pack my stuff from the rental and grab some things from town. I need to head back to work tomorrow. Even though I want my stuff, I’m a little nervous about going back to the real world.

Being with him has been like a dream and I don't know if I'm ready to wake up.

He kisses my neck where his claim is visible. It looks like a tattooed necklace, the skin slightly raised. That's gonna raise some questions.

"You ready?" he asks.

"Yeah. Let me delete the files and we can go." I smile at him in the mirror and tug on his hand around my waist.

I make quick work of deleting the files and wiping the camera card, handing it off to Bjorn when I'm finished. "It's gone. I'll protect your secret."

"It's ours now," he says, handing me back the card. "And I trust you."

His warm palm finds the small of my back and he leads me outside. I lock the door but don't linger. This place was never my home, but where I'm going will be.

Bjorn helps me up into his Jeep, his hand on my ass as he places me inside. He leans over and buckles my seatbelt, pulling it snug and giving me a heated glance as my nipples pucker against my T-shirt in response. "Behave, Wildcat. The drive to town is short."

On the ride, he places his hand on my knee, his thumb brushing right at the soft spot of my lower thigh. I uncross my legs and open my knees slightly, teasing him. The rumble in his chest makes me shiver as his warm, calloused hand travels farther up my thigh. He squeezes, and the tips of his fingers brush along my underwear.

He groans. "Such a needy little mate. Can you get off on my fingers like this?" He teases me between my legs, brushing his knuckles up and down my center.

I push against his hand, seeking pressure. The roar of the wind from the rolled down windows matches the desire pounding in my veins. I squirm against him, loving how little he's giving me, how that teasing caress makes me wet.

He pulls away and shifts, coming to a stop at a light in the center of town. It's midday, the small village thick with people going about their Sunday errands. While we idle, he returns to teasing me. A car passes just as his finger pushes against the cotton and rubs my clit.

My legs fall open wider, stretching against the constraining corduroy of my skirt, and my chest rises against the band of the seatbelt. I want to pinch my nipples, let him fuck me on his fingers.

The light changes. I let out a little whine as he pulls his hand away to shift again. Bjorn chuckles, the dark sound a tug in my core.

All too soon, he's pulling into a parking spot. He squeezes my thigh and gives me an amused smile. "Come on."

I huff out a long breath, riled up and ready to scream with the desire to come. I want him to pull back out of the spot and drive out to the preserve while he makes me come on his fingers. And when we get back to the house?—

Bjorn cuts off my fantasy, opening the door and leaning across to unbuckle my seatbelt. His thumb brushes against my nipple and I close my eyes, trying to get myself together.

His dark laughter does nothing to ease the edge of my arousal, but I let him help me down. Bjorn tucks me under his arm, his hand possessively curling around my hip, and I sigh. This is nice, even if I'm horny as fuck.

The new phone finally finishes setting up and beeps with notifications. It's a flood of voicemails and text messages that ping and vibrate, one after another.

After we grabbed what we needed at the market, Bjorn made two other stops. One was to replace my busted phone and get him one, and another to a general-type store where he asked me to wait while he gathered what he needed for a project.

After he shifts the Jeep into park in his yard, Bjorn looks at me from the driver's seat, his brow furrowing. "Everything all right?"

I look at the transcript of the voice messages and wince. Daniel is pissed that I'm not answering. In my text thread, it's more of the same, with a few from work asking if I'm feeling better. I reply to all but Daniel, saving my ex for last.

"I've been out of contact for days. It's work and Daniel."

He nods, but it's a stiff movement. "You'll let me know if he bothers you."

"Yeah. It's nothing I can't handle."

"Good, because I'm hoping you can load this." He reaches into the backseat and grabs the bag from the phone store. "It can function as an e-reader too. For my new Tbr?"

My grin takes over my whole face. "You were serious?"

"Yup. Will you set it up while I work on lunch? Maybe after, you can read to me?" He leans over, his thumb brushing my cheek as he pulls me in for a kiss.

I sink into it, into him, the kiss hungry and wild.

My cell phone rings, and Bjorn pulls back, kissing my forehead. “You better get that and check in.”

I sigh but answer. Bjorn carries my stuff inside as I pace the yard. It takes me fifteen minutes to reassure my department chair that I’m fine. I walk her through a modified version of the last few days and assure her I’ve recovered from my dive. We laugh over the mistaken “Viking loot” I found, then I wrap up the call.

My postdoc research grant isn’t for something that I love researching, but Dr. Luz has always been supportive of me. If I decide to leave the university, she’s one of the only ones I might miss.

Next, I dial Daniel, but it goes to voicemail, so I shoot off a text telling him I’m fine and to drop it.

By the time I make it inside the house, Bjorn has already put my things away in the closet and set up a workspace for me at the small wooden table in the corner of the living room.

I find him in the kitchen, working on lunch. He’s all mountain man today, the Beast tucked away. He looks delicious with his unruly beard and golden-streaked hair pulled back from his angular face. His broad shoulders take up all the space in the room, and his rune tattoos are dark against his skin.

“We can get an office set up for you. Will that spot work for now? Tell me what you need, and I’ll get it,” he says without pausing his chopping.

“I don’t need anything special. Most of it is done in the lab, and we don’t know how long we’ll be here.”

He looks over his shoulder at where I’m leaning against the entrance into the kitchen.

“I want this to be your home. Ours. At least as a base. We have to move at some point. Time always catches up with me. But until then, I want you comfortable.”

I go to him and trace the rune on his wrist and up along the others up his arm. “All right, I promise I’ll make myself at home.”

His deep voice rumbles, his eyes narrowing on me. “That’s because you are.”

On tippy-toes, I kiss his cheek.

He half grunts, half growls. “Now, I think you have a naughty book list to curate.”

My laugh tumbles out and I bump his hip. “I’m on it.”

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Chapter 18

Bjorn

At the other end of the couch, Penelope leans against the armrest, reading aloud. Her knees squeeze together, and she lifts her hips slightly.

“Did I tell you to close them?”

She relaxes her hold and her knees spread, giving me a direct view of her pussy. My cock has been hard since she got to the fifth chapter when the demon fucked the heroine with his tail and his cock. That’s when Penelope’s nipples pebbled, and her arousal filled the air.

Her sweet, melodic voice has turned rich and heavy with lust. Without a real decision to do so, my beard morphs into curious tentacles. They taste their way up her calves until she is wrapped up to the thigh.

Penelope gasps and sits up on her elbows, placing the phone down. She licks her lips and shifts her hips.

“We were just at the good part. Don’t stop.”

She points an accusing finger at me, one dark eyebrow lifted. “If I’m reading, no touching. I can’t concentrate.”

“Read, Wildcat.” I rub along the outline of my hard cock as she watches with heavy-

lidded eyes.

I let her settle back in place and read for a moment before I start in on our little game again. My tentacles are still wrapped around her, keeping her open for me and sucking on her skin. Scooting closer, I brush a thumb over the edge of her panties. The touch is light, ghosting. I do the same to her center, and even that light touch makes a little wet spot on the cotton. Penelope's breath hitches, but she recovers and continues reading.

“Good girl. Keep reading. Let me listen to that hot filth pouring out of your mouth while I play with your pussy.”

My words cause her to shift her hips restlessly. I noticed the way she squirmed each time the lover in the book called his mate good girl. She likes praise, likes to know she pleases me. Knowing she wants to please me makes me rock-hard.

I lean between her legs and tug on her T-shirt, bunching it above her bra. Her nipples poke against the thin cotton. I roll one then the other between my fingers and cup her breast, applying a tight squeeze before backing away.

Penelope curses in frustration and flops back against the couch. She lets out a whiny breath but manages to read another sentence. My hands continue teasing between her legs, tracing back and forth along her wet center. I tug her panties to the side and expose her to me. She's pink and glistening, always so eager.

I rub my thumb back and forth along her pussy, then circle her clit. My finger dips inside and all pretense of reading is lost. I finger-fuck her in a slow glide that makes Penelope's hips rise to meet me as she tries to grind down on my hand. My tentacles lock her in place, two others lengthening to circle and capture each arm.

Going to my knees, I lean in and hover over her, watching as my fingers disappear

into her wet heat. Penelope's head rolls back and little needy noises escape. She's close.

"You're such a good mate. I love to watch you get turned on, to see how sexy you are. Come for me." I cup her throat and fuck her with my fingers, stretching her on each thrust.

I take her lips and kiss her until she surrenders to me, coming in waves. My hold on her throat loosens and I stroke my marks until she eases down.

I sit back against the couch and retract my tentacles. "Come here."

My violet-eyed Wildcat shimmies out of her shirt and bra, releasing her tits. They're big and round, the dark rosy nipples puckered. My cock strains against my jeans and I rub along the ridge, squeezing the head. She unbuttons her skirt down the center and tosses it on the floor. Her hands move to her waist to take off her panties and I watch as she reveals her plump mound and the small thatch of dark hair.

I unzip my jeans, my aching cock finally getting some room. Penelope crawls along the couch to me, her tits swaying with each move. I reach out, unable to resist the sight, and pluck them, rolling the stiff peaks between my fingers until she moans. She climbs over my lap and hovers as she undoes the buttons on my flannel. I help her until I've got it off, then I take her face in my hands, kissing her deeply.

I swat her ass and pull back. "Over my lap."

"Are you going to spank me?" she asks breathlessly.

"Do you want me to?"

The thought of my palm prints on her ass, marking her skin as mine all over again, of

bringing her pleasure though my claim, makes my dick throb. I love this side of her, how needy she is for me. The fact that she trusts me with her vulnerability is a gift I plan to never squander.

She gives me a slow nod, her expression shy. I growl and move her until she's situated over my thighs. My hands caress up and down her back and over the swell of her ass until she relaxes against me. When I'm ready to begin, my tentacles aid me, wrapping around her arms and binding them behind her back. Another two pull her legs apart.

I strike my hand against her ass once, squeezing her cheeks and pulling them apart. "Such a juicy ass. I want to watch it bounce while I bury my cock between these cheeks."

"Please," she moans.

I repeat the process twice more before I swat her with my palm in an alternating rhythm that turns her ass red in splotchy patches. When she's writhing against my lap, covering my hard cock in her honey, I stop and knead her cheeks. A tentacle slips between her crack and slicks her back hole, circling and teasing until it pushes inside. My fingers stroke her pussy then strum her clit as my tentacle coats her in slick.

"Bjorn—"

"What do you need?" I fuck her pussy in slow glides of my fingers as my tentacle in her ass expands, stretching her to take my cock.

Penelope whines. "Your cock and your tentacles. Take me, please."

I sit her up and kiss her lips before turning her around. My cock nudges through her slick pussy, then against her tight back hole. I push in slowly. She's slick from my

lube but so fucking tight around my cock. Feelers sprout along my shaft, easing my way in with little vibrations.

“Relax for me.”

“Oh, shit,” she whimpers and tilts her hips, leaning back against me to take a little more.

We both groan at the stretch.

“That’s a good mate.”

Eager, my tentacles wrap around her and bind her arms, thighs, and neck. Another spirals her waist and inches toward her pussy. They suck and squeeze, every part of my body tuning into the feel and taste of her. I reach around her and tug on her nipples as she grinds her hips, taking more of my cock into her ass as my tentacle pushes deeper into her pussy.

She looks over her shoulder and meets my eyes. “You feel so good. Everywhere... I—” she slurs the words, drunk on the pleasure between us.

I take her lips, telling her with my mouth that she’s perfect, sexy, and mine. My chest rumbles, mirroring my satisfaction.

I glide my cock in and out of her, thrust my tentacles into her pussy, and bind her to me with all that I am. She pants into my mouth, mewling little sounds that match the twisting and thrashing she does against her bindings. My tentacles pull her arms around my neck and her fingers dig into the skin there, her tits thrusting into my palms. Suckers latch onto her clit as my orgasm races toward me. I fuck her deep, close to my peak. The tentacle in her pussy latches onto her walls and she goes off.

“Mmm, that’s it, my mate. Take your pleasure. Come all over me. Squeeze my cock dry.”

Her orgasm freezes her in a silent scream, her pussy squeezing my tentacle and making her ass even tighter. I thrust, lodging deep as I fill her ass with ropes of warm cum.

I hold her to me as our breathing comes down, then I unbind her and pull out in a rush of cum. She whines at the loss until I situate her in my lap and wrap my arm around her. She snuggles into my chest but lets my tentacles tend to her pussy, massaging the special cream into her walls.

My hand finds her hair and my Beast vibrates in my chest, soothing our mate. Long moments stretch between us, and I simply hold her. We sit together until she stirs, peeking at me from behind her hair.

“Wanna go for a swim?”

I laugh and pick her up, heading to the kitchen. “Hydrate first. Then we can take a swim.”

She wraps her arms around my neck and pecks my lips. “Then early to bed. I have work tomorrow. But maybe this time you can read the bedtime story.”

I laugh and set her on the counter. “All right. I want to know what happens when their bond is revealed to the outer realm anyway.”

My chest seems to take flight and my stomach swoops, but it isn’t coming from me. It’s Penelope. As our bond grows, I’ll feel more of her. The knowledge that our connection is growing, that love will bloom between us, settles within my bones. She is everything I didn’t know I needed and never want to let go of.

Chapter 19

Penelope

“Y ou’re sure you don’t want me to come and help?” Bjorn asks, packing the last of my gear into the trunk of my car.

We spent the morning out on Bjorn’s boat, recollecting samples and data so I can get back into the lab today and make progress on my project. With Bjorn’s help and my new abilities, I was able to gather more in a couple of hours than I’d lost initially.

“Not this time. I don’t think I’ll get any work done if you’re there.”

He comes around the side of the car and places one hand on the roof and the other on my hip, caging me in. I look up into his ruggedly handsome face and he smirks, the right side of his mouth twitching under his beard.

“And why is that?” he asks, his deep voice sparking a pool of heat in my core.

The door handle digs into my side, but all I can feel is his warm hand rubbing back and forth along my hip and the spark between us pulling me toward him.

“Because you can be very—” My thoughts scatter as he sucks along the column of my neck.

“I can be what?”

Bjorn doesn't let me answer. Instead, he pulls me closer, his hands finding my ass and his lips taking mine in a heated kiss that leaves me breathless. When he finally pulls back, I'm wet and dazed.

I brace against the car and try to get my breathing under control. "You are definitely banned from the lab until I'm not tempted to get naked with you every second."

He chuckles as I force myself to get it together enough to get in the driver's seat. I turn on the car and roll down the window.

Bjorn reaches into the pocket of his worn jeans and pulls out a choker, dangling it between his fingers. "I made this to cover my claim marks. That way people won't ask questions."

He leans in and drapes it around my neck as I pull up my hair. His warm hands on the back of my neck as he locks the clasp in place make me shiver.

"I love it. Where did you get the charm?"

"I made it early this morning before you were up," he rumbles, eyeing my neck with a heated look of possessive satisfaction.

"You made this?" I ask, feeling as if I have stars in my eyes. Has anyone ever done something so thoughtful?

He nods, giving me a shy smile.

The gift is a simple band of purple velvet ribbon, wide enough to cover my throat, with a small wooden tentacle charm that hangs in the center. I reach so I can see myself in the rearview mirror, tracing my hands along my throat. It's perfect. A reminder of him that allows me to keep our secret and still feel close to him.

“It’s beautiful, thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He leans his forearms on the windowsill. “Now, go be productive. I’ve got a project I need to get working on anyway, but don’t be surprised if I turn up bayside to ride home with you. What time do you think you’ll be done?”

It’s already after ten since we went out collecting this morning, and I need to make up for lost time. “Probably late. After five.”

He nods and taps the roof, backing up so I can turn around. With a resigned sigh, I drive away, feeling as if I’m leaving my heart at the lighthouse.

About halfway down the long, ambling drive through the forest, a blurry figure emerges in my side mirror. I slow to a stop as the speeding figure comes closer. Bjorn catches up faster than would be possible for a human and leans into my window.

“You forgot this,” he explains before kissing my cheek and handing off an old steel lunch pail he packed for me this morning.

“Sorry!” I wince.

“Nah, I distracted you.” He’s not angry I forgot, his lips tugged up into an amused smile. My apprehension dissipates at his easy acceptance. “Have a good day at work, Wildcat.”

Xavier, one of the permanent NOAA lab employees, pops his head around the doorframe as I’m lining up the sample. “I’m heading out. You’ll lock up?”

I nod but don’t look up. “Have a good evening.”

Turning the fine adjustment knob of my light microscope, I bring the sample into a

clear view and watch for motility of viable sex cells. I find some irregularities in the sample and log them before moving on to the next.

Now that everyone has left for the day, the lab is quiet, and I find it easier to hunker down. My stomach grumbles, reminding me that the lunch Bjorn packed was ages ago, but for now I ignore it, focusing on the next slide.

“You always did have the ability to hyper-focus like no one else.”

My ex-husband’s smooth voice startles me, and I knock the glass slide out of place, my vision scattered. I turn to see Daniel leaning against the door jamb of the lab. He just turned forty and usually looks the part of the distinguished handsome professor. He’s always been a sharp dresser, the salt-and-pepper sprinkled in his meticulously styled hair adding to the tailored clothes and giving his features an air of distinction.

But right now, he looks haggard. Dark splotches dot the skin under his eyes, and his normally put-together look is ruined by the rumpled shirt and coat he’s wearing. I recognize both, which is unusual. He hardly ever wears the same thing two years in a row.

“Shit. You scared the hell out of me, Daniel. What are you doing here?” I ease back from the microscope and brace my hands on the lab table.

“You didn’t answer your phone. I was worried.” The false concern in his voice grates on my nerves. He’s only interested in me when he needs something.

I stare him down. “It’s been that way. We’re divorced, going on five months.”

“And whose fault is that, Penelope? I miss you. Us.” He steps toward me, and I busy myself by packing up my samples. “We were inseparable, Pen. Now you won’t even act like an adult and call me back after you had an accident on a dive?”

“I’m fine. It wasn’t a big deal.” I roll my eyes at his suggestion that he’s worried about me or that we were as close as he pretends.

He’s never been interested in the details of my work, never wanted to learn more than where I could get published or what research awards it would make me eligible for. Daniel hates the ocean. As a result, he steered clear of anything related to my work in the field.

Daniel moves closer, brushing his fingers along the tools laid out on a workstation. “You forgot to mention in your email that you got hurt. I had to hear about it from Luz. Can you imagine how embarrassing it was to find out from her that my wife got in an accident?”

I toss my samples inside the biohazard disposal bin and turn on him, hands on my hips. “I’m fine.” I shake my head and hold my ground. “Besides, it’s not your concern. Nothing about me is anymore.”

“But it could be. Come home, Pen. This shows how much you need looking after. You know you need me. We work, you and I.” He gives me a wry smile that at one time would have pulled me back into his orbit. Now though, I see through his bullshit. When I raise my eyebrow but don’t soften, his smile falls. He moves closer, crowding me against the table and leaning in. His fingers brush along my neck, flicking Bjorn’s choker. “Come home.”

My skin crawls at the unwanted touch. The kiss he’s aiming for doesn’t come. I duck out of his grasp and return to my lab station, hastily cleaning up for the evening. “You saw that I’m fine. Leave. We’re finished, and I don’t want you here.”

Daniel doesn’t listen, coming up behind me and hovering too close to my back. “Let’s try again, Pen. I’ve changed. I know what I need now.”

What he needs isn't me, it never was. The light clicks on. Duh, Penelope. The rumpled look and last season clothes—he's burned through the last of the money.

I turn on him and push my finger against his chest, stepping forward so he walks back. "I don't have access to the funds, Daniel. I can't give you what you need. My trust reverted back to my father when we divorced. Remaining married was a stipulation, remember?"

"I want you, Pen," he pleads. "It would make your family, me, so happy if we can reconnect. Come home."

For years I stayed when he would plead like this after I'd caught him cheating. I thought it was me. I convinced myself I was the problem. I see through the mask now, know the truth. "You're not my home anymore."

"Pen," he says softly, clasping my hand where it's pointed at his chest. He looks devastated, but I can see the twitch of his jaw.

"You never were my home." I shake my head, pulling away from him. Bjorn is home, and with him, I'm going to build a life so vast I can't even grasp it fully yet. But I know deep in my soul that it's right.

"I can be." He gives me a heated look that comes off as more angry than sexy. He lunges, twisting me around in one smooth move that lands with me pushed against the lab table, my hand held behind my back. "I can learn to give you what you need, Pen. I find it easier to imagine punishing you now. I want to spank your ass for leaving."

His body crowds into mine, too close, and it feels like little prickles caught in my skin. Bile, hot and thick, rises in my mouth and I yank against his control, freeing myself and pushing away.

“That’s not happening. You don’t get to touch me anymore.” I hold out my arm, pointing at the door. “Leave. Now.”

He stalks closer, his eyes angry and his movements jerky. “Isn’t that what you wanted, Pen? You get wet at the idea of a spanking for being a naughty girl?”

“Fuck you, Daniel,” I hiss. The way he said those words, he meant to cause shame. And they did, for years. I felt as if everything I wanted was twisted and that needing those things made me unlovable.

Books. Therapy. Distance. They taught me he was wrong. And now, Bjorn is teaching me what it can look like when my desires have free rein.

“Gladly,” he snarls. “Let me fuck that smart sass right out of you, then I’m taking you home.”

He pulls me against him, diving in for a kiss, but I push his chest hard. He stumbles back but rights himself.

“You disrespectful bitch!” he shouts, lunging for me.

In a show of strength, he grabs hold of me roughly, knocking me into a nearby lab stool. It falls to the floor beside me, the metal clanking against the linoleum as I scramble to get out of his hold. Daniel’s hands grip my arms too tightly, and he jerks me toward the open door.

Fear courses through my veins, making it feel as if my insides have turned over. Daniel is a cheating asshole with a vicious tongue, but he’s never gotten violent before and right now he sounds crazy. But he’s also never been without my money before, and the desperate edge in his voice scares me.

“What the fuck, Daniel? You’re hurting me. Let me go.” I fight against him, bucking in his grasp and clawing at his grip, digging my nails into his coat.

He grunts, using all his weight to overpower me, and we stumble toward the door.

“You don’t want to make up?” he snarls, squeezing me too tightly.

I punch and kick, landing some blows, but all it does is make him angrier. His face is twisted into that of a true monster, all fierce teeth and seething rage.

“I tried to do this the amicable way. You don’t want to be married? Fine. You’re a lousy fuck. But with you gone, the assets are frozen. You owe me, and you’re going to help me make my own fortune.” We slam into the door as he pushes us forward. His body presses against me, trapping me, his breath hot in my face. “The rune, it’s a lost symbol. And a discovery like that would mean collectors. Help me secure the artifact and we’ll part ways.”

Shit. Bjorn’s mark and my stupid email.

“You can’t be serious!” I jump forward, trying to spring free, jabbing my elbow into his chest.

Daniel grunts but doesn’t budge. Panic floods my system as I realize I’m truly trapped with my desperate ex. He’s acting crazy and reckless, and I have no idea who this man holding me is. I’ve never seen him so out of control.

The burning ember in my chest flares. Bjorn is coming for me. How this mate thing works is still somewhat of a mystery to me, but there is no way that Bjorn hasn’t felt my stress in the bond. He must not be close enough that I can hear him, but that ember is burning in my chest, reassuring me that he will protect me.

Even though it should make me feel better, it causes more panic to rise. Shit. The problem is my mate will protect me. He's a warrior and a kraken shifter. If he deals with Daniel, there's no way my ex will live through the night. And if Daniel disappears, it won't be just Bjorn's secret we expose. It would lead back to me. I'll be a suspect, or we both will. Bjorn and I will start our life together on the run.

I want a life of adventure with this man, but not like that. That future isn't one where my wounded kraken can heal, where I can figure out who I want to be, or where the two of us could build a life. We'd be constantly worried and hiding for the next decade. Maybe more. What would happen if we wanted to have children? We would have to hide and that's not the future I want to imagine for us.

I try to stall or convince Daniel this won't work. He can't get anywhere near the water, my Bjorn, or that symbol. "I told you it was from a party cruise."

"Bullshit. You know you didn't find a party cruise token. I've seen the marking once before on a weapon and I know it would spark interest. Now, let's go. Where is the dock for the lab?" He pushes me harder into the door, scowling.

"I'll draw you a map, but we can't go out there. We don't have equipment. It's gonna be dark soon," I explain, lowering my tone and trying for compliance to see if I can get him to back down. "We could go tomorrow. Let's cool off, come up with a plan. We can start fresh in the morning."

"No. I don't trust you not to recover it for yourself. The money is frozen where you can't touch it either. The boat will have what we need. Now lead me to it." He jerks on my arm, and I stumble behind him, trying to pull from his grasp.

We spill out of the office into the lobby, and he makes a grab for me. I try to stop us in place, planting my feet. His hold on me pushes past too tight, fingers digging roughly into my flesh.

“You’re hurting me,” I yell.

Daniel pulls on my hair, yanking my head back and dragging me through the lobby and into the parking lot. It’s empty. I scream anyway.

He tugs on my hair again, this time so hard I suck in a breath, and his hand covers my mouth. I bite his palm and thrash against him, kicking. Daniel curses but doesn’t back down, violently stuffing me in the backseat of his car with quick, hard movements. He shoves my head onto the seat and slams the door. I scramble for the handle, push on the unlock button, but it’s childproofed.

Fuck.

By the time I half-climb into the front, Daniel is in the driver’s seat. He shoves me hard, and I fall back against the leather, whacking my cheek on the side of the headrest. Getting up quickly, I try to knock him over, pushing and shoving to get control of the car and stop him from leaving. He backhands me hard and I land against the seat, stunned.

I press my hand against my busted-up cheek and laugh, the sound unhinged. In the front seat, Daniel carries on about his plans, ignoring me. I’ll give him credit for working the angle of the artifact. Daniel spends his life around showy antiques dealers through his work at the university archives and as a resident expert in the area. He knows the money he could collect if such a thing were real. But the idea that he could secure an artifact—if there was one like he thinks—on a night dive is half-cocked and laughable. None of his ramblings are founded on the logistics of diving or knowledge of the water. No one in their right mind would think this was a solid plan. Obviously, he’s not in his right mind.

It would be funny—how little my ex knows about me, my job, or the water—except with every moment, we’re drawing closer to the inevitability of Bjorn getting to

Daniel before he even makes out of the bay.

Daniel takes a deep breath and fixes the collar of his shirt, visibly trying to regain his control before he turns on the car, and my fear spikes. How the fuck am I ever going to get us out of this? I try the door again, but it's useless, so I sit back and eye Daniel, hoping like hell he'll come to his senses. Daniel keeps muttering as he drives around the research lab until he takes the cutoff toward the docks.

It's empty, all the boats tied up for the evening and staff gone. Daniel parks then opens the passenger door. I kick at his legs, screaming, and he drags me roughly from the backseat.

"Daniel, stop!" I plant my feet and pull against him, trying desperately to get him to leave with me. I can feel my mate's presence and I panic, swinging and bucking desperately.

But there is no stopping the inevitable. One step onto the dock and my kraken explodes from the water.

Chapter 20

Bjorn

My tentacles rip the man's hold from my mate and wrap around him. I yank them back to me, hurtling him from the dock. He shrieks as he plunges into the bay. I sink with him, squeezing him tightly with my tentacles and pulling him to face me.

His eyes are wide in panic, his face etched in horror, but he's immobilized in my grasp. This man will die for touching her, but I want him to suffer first. It was already too long before I got to her.

I shudder at the memory of the bolts of fear her distress call sent to my heart. History will not repeat itself tonight. She is mine and I will protect her. I won't fail her.

My feelers crawl until they find skin, their jagged hooks piercing his flesh, stunning my prey. My ink clouds around us, the poison thick. It will distort his vision, detaching his mind from reality and sending him into a hellscape.

Penelope's shaking voice calls through the bond. "Bjorn, you can't hurt him. Come back to me."

I squeeze the man tighter, increasing the pressure.

My Wildcat tugs on me, a sharp twitch in the bond that matches the pinching sound of her voice in my head. "Now, mate. I can feel your resistance, but a disappearance is too risky, and you're not allowed to kill my ex. Only rough him up a little."

Her ex? That makes the need for vengeance rise. We are at war, my Beast and I, though for once, we're on the same side. We want to obey our mate's demand. At the same time, we need to protect her, keep her safe. I already disliked her ex. Now I want to make sure he never puts his hands anywhere near her again.

I let this happen, let him get close to her.

The fear that I am losing her is not something I want to live through again. I can't lose Penelope; I would never recover. She has brought her sunshine-soaked curiosity into my world, and I never want to lose her light.

Her voice shakes in the bond when she speaks again. "I know you're scared. Come back and we'll solve it. Together. But this isn't the way."

My hold does not let up, but I rise from the muddy bottom of the bay, surging through the water until I'm floating near the surface.

Penelope huffs. "Bjorn, don't make me wrestle a kraken."

The sound of Penelope's exasperated determination tugs me the rest of the way to the surface. She would wrestle a kraken shifter and I have a feeling that I'm about to see her do it.

When I poke my head out of the water, she's standing on the dock, arms crossed, glaring at me. I do not relinquish my hold on her ex, but my lips twitch in amusement at the stubbornness etched on her face. She's pissed and I want those fierce lips on mine.

Her eyebrow lifts.

Despite how cute my mate is when she's ready to battle, her safety is serious.

“Penelope, he laid his lands on you?—”

“He did. The asshole.”

My chest rumbles and anger rushes through me again.

“But you’re not in a shifter world anymore. I want a life exploring with you, not a life on the run. So, you’re going to have to let him go.”

“Sweet Violet—” I plead. He can’t put his hands on her and be allowed to live.

“They’ll come for us. It could expose your secret. Or I could go to jail for murder. Or?—”

I sigh and heave the man from the water with my tentacles, dropping him onto the dock. If I’m too rough, I don’t plan to apologize.

I could make him disappear. This is not a problem. The problem is my mate. Life was easier under shifter law. I’ve been a ghost in the human world, surviving but not living for too long. But I’m going to live in Penelope’s world now. Or at least we’re going to find some compromise between the two. I would do anything to protect her. I guess this is one of those things.

Climbing from the water, I shift, returning to my human skin. As soon as I stand, I’ve got my arms full of my mate. I hold her for a long moment before pulling back to check her over. She’s sporting a bruise on her cheek and her nails are a mess. My instincts flare, pulling me back toward the man.

Penelope squeezes her arms around me, latching on like a mollusk and climbing me until I pick her up. She squeezes her arms around my neck. “Thank you for protecting me.”

“He’s still there! And I was late. He hurt you.” I pull back enough to look at her face, my thumb tracing along the puffy skin of her cheek. My heart twinges with sadness and shame.

“No, you don’t. This was on him, not you.” She clasps my face, her eyes pleading with me. “You weren’t late. The fact that he will live but I’m safe means that you protected me. All the rest, that’s his fault, not yours.”

“He never should have gotten this close. I’m sorry I wasn’t here sooner,” I murmur, leaning my forehead against hers and breathing her in, letting her scent calm my raging desperation.

She’s safe.

“I know. I was scared too, but I’m okay. We’re okay,” she says softly.

We stay like that, dripping wet and clinging to one another until my world tilts back into balance.

“What did he want?” I ask, needing to understand what happened.

“Money. My trust fund was frozen by my family when I left. At first, Daniel tried to win me back, and when that wasn’t working, he thought I could help him get the artifact so he could sell it.”

“Is that when he laid his hands on you?” I squeeze her tighter, my chest rumbling. “I want to strangle him?—”

“I think you did! He will live, right?” Penelope asks, peeking around me to look at her ex laid out on the dock.

“I assume,” I grumble.

Penelope tugs on my ear. “You have to check!”

I grunt and set her down, then I kneel beside him. Calling on my Beast’s enhanced sight, I assess her asshole ex. I roll him to his side and beat on his back until his lungs clear. “Unfortunately, he will live, but he’s injured, and I can’t vouch for his mind.”

“What do you mean?” Penelope leans over my back, staring at the wreck I’ve made of him.

“I’m a warrior, Wildcat. One of our strengths in battle is the ability to use our ink to distract our prey’s mind. I have a poison in my ink that confuses the mind, causes hallucinations. It helps to weaken an opponent—with the added bonus that if they live, they’re confused about what happened. Only the Knights ever learned to battle against it.”

“Does that mean he won’t remember you? Will he remember anything?”

“It’s hard to say, but it’s likely most of the last memories will be distorted. It will feel like a dream.”

“What’s it made of? How does it work?” Penelope sucks in a breath and she’s off, curious as ever, leaning over to inspect her ex. “Have you ever accidentally inked yourself? Am I immune? Does it also make fish trippy?”

“Slow down, Wildcat. I don’t know and I’m not gonna be your lab rat. It’s magic. That’s how it works.”

Penelope sits back and looks at me with wide eyes. “That’s kinda badass. Is it bad that I think that’s badass?”

I laugh, picking up my mate and tucking her against me in a bridal carry.

“Where are you going? You’re naked! And he’s passed out!” she shrieks, swatting my chest playfully.

I look down into violet eyes, my sign of hope. I’m in love with everything about her and I can’t wait to discover more with her. She reaches up, seeking a kiss, and I brush her lips with mine. “I could have lost you.”

She tugs on my beard and murmurs into my lips, “But you didn’t.”

“I spent lifetimes in the darkness until you brought your light, and I won’t settle for anything less than lifetimes to love you.”

“I was waiting to love you too.” She brushes her soft lips against mine, smiling into the kiss. “Let’s go home.”

“Home. But first cover our tracks. Then I’m pinning you to bed where you can’t ever leave again.”

She taps my nose like a bad puppy. I laugh at her put-out expression. “What’s the first lesson in bondage?”

“Never let you go.” I carry her up the steps and toward the research facility.

Penelope makes an angry buzzing sound. “Wrong.”

We tease one another all the way back to the lab and through the cleanup, making sure to remove any evidence of her ex ever having been there. After Penelope assures me no one will notice, I steal a pair of scrubs from the lab.

The drive back down to the docks is quiet, the somber mood returning. After we wipe down Daniel's car, Penelope goes to the dock and gives her ex one last look. He's laid out on the wood, soaked and worse for wear, but he will wake soon. Probably with one hell of a headache and no idea how he got there.

She turns away from him, her heart aching and tugging on mine in our bond. Despite how well she's been rolling with tonight's events, my fierce Penelope is also delicate-hearted. And my mate is wrecked by what happened. Both of us are.

"Come on, my mate. Tonight has been shit and I want to hold you in my arms. Let's go home."

Chapter 21

Penelope

Bjorn pulls the brush through my wet hair, and I close my eyes. We're in bed after finally getting home from this awful night. The rhythmic trail over my scalp is calming. Memories from earlier this evening try to push their way in, but I focus on the present. I ground myself in the heat of his thick thighs cradling me, the luxurious feel of the brush, and the deep rumbling sound coming from his chest behind me. I melt into the moment, breathing in the intimacy of the two of us.

"What's going on in that curious head of yours?" he asks. "You've been quiet since we left the dock."

We've both been quiet. No words were spoken on the drive home. Or when he carried me inside and prepared a bath, washing me with such reverence that I felt his devotion in every touch.

"Processing, I guess. But this feels good."

He grunts in agreement as he parts the hair at the top of my head, then he pulls the strands into a braid. He tugs and weaves, the motions soothing, until he's got my hair secured. He twists a rubber band around the end and brushes a kiss along the back of my neck. When he's finished, I turn around, crawl into his lap, and wrap my arms around him.

"How are you holding up? Did tonight bring up old memories?" I run my fingers

through his beard, scratching along his jaw the way he likes. That rumbling sound in his chest grows louder. It makes my muscles turn to jelly at the same time it sends tingles to my clit.

His arms wrap around my back and he pulls me closer, my center rubbing along the hard ridge of his cock in his sweatpants. “It was rough before I got to you. Touch and go while I had him in the water.” The heat of his palm settles into my skin as he traces my side with his calloused hand. “It’s better when I hold you.”

I hum my agreement, resting my head on his shoulder and taking comfort from his embrace. His hands work their magic as he soothes me with long caresses. Tonight was awful, but I’m proud of how I stood up to Daniel and of how Bjorn and I worked together to compromise during a crisis. I never want something like that to happen again, but it solidifies my resolve that if it does, we can make it through.

We cling to one another for a long time, holding tight until some of the raw edge of the evening has dissipated. When tears well in my eyes, I’m not sure where they come from. It’s a battering of emotions, all of them swirling and thundering together until I’m full of a deep aching.

Bjorn holds my face between his hands, his expression tender. He kisses my forehead, then right under my eye where the tears flow, and finally my mouth. The kiss is slow and soothing, a balm to my soul. It says what I can’t find the words for and yet somehow, he understands. His mouth trails kisses down my exposed neck, over my collarbone, and between my breasts. My fingers dig into his wavy hair, holding him closer.

I want him to override my memories, replace the angry hands of my ex with his loving ones. “Make me forget,” I whisper into his neck.

He inches away, piercing me with his gaze. “You don’t need to forget. You need to

remember. I'm yours. This is forever."

His palm clasps my throat, not too tight but enough to awaken his claim. His calloused thumb traces one of his marks and I close my eyes as the touch sends a little zap of possession and pleasure racing up my spine.

"Show me," I plead.

Bjorn flips us in one smooth movement, landing in the cradle of my hips. His mouth hovers over mine, our breaths mingling, and I reach for him. He teases me with the kiss for a moment, nipping at my bottom lip until his mouth finally claims mine.

My hands roam his strong back, my nails digging into muscle. He moans into my mouth and thrusts his hips, his hard cock heavy against my center. Normally there's a buildup between us where we touch and explore, but I want none of that. I tug on the band of his sweats. Bjorn pulls back from our kiss enough to help me get them off before returning between my legs.

Dominant and in control, he secures my arms over my head with one of his large palms. The weight of him and the feel of my bound arms helps loosen my muscles. I give in to his hold, reveling in his claim.

His mouth sucks and kisses across my chest. He uses his other hand to take hold of his cock and rub it through my wet pussy until he nudges inside my entrance. He gives a shallow thrust, the head of his cock stretching me. I try to lift my hips, but he uses his weight to still me.

The burn and the feel of his possession is what I need, an anchor tethering us together. "I can take it. I want to."

"I don't want to hurt you, sweet Violet," Bjorn murmurs, his voice deep and on edge.

“You won’t, but I want to feel it. Please,” I beg.

He answers me with a thrust of his hips, sinking deeper inside. The stretch makes my vision white-out. The feel of him pushes away all other thought.

“Like this? You need to feel me stretch you? Show you where you belong?”

“Yes,” I moan. “It’s perfect.”

Bjorn pulls back, his thick cock dragging along my walls. The feelers add to the pleasure, sending little vibrations through my channel. On the next thrust, he stuffs me fully. Tears return to my eyes, but it isn’t painful. It’s exactly right. Bjorn traces one with his thumb, then licks the salty tear before pressing kisses against my cheek, my eyes, my nose.

He fucks me slowly, letting me adjust to him. The world beyond this bed ceases to exist. It’s only our bodies as we affirm for one another that we made it through the night, that we’re each here and safe. Pleasure and passion pass back and forth between us. He’s everywhere. His mouth, his cock, his hands, and the burning ember inside my chest are all-consuming.

When I’m desperate to be able to touch him and my core is pulled tight, he flips us and lets me loose. I straddle his lap as he sits up, one of his palms tucking around the back of my neck and pulling my mouth to him. The other clings to my hip, steadying me as I grind down on his cock until I can feel the bulge of his knot. With a lift of his hips, his knot locks inside me. Finally. Blissfully. I’m his again.

“Sweet mate,” he coos, trailing kisses along my neck. “I love you and no one will come between us.”

“Promise?” I plead.

“With my life,” he answers.

That glowing ember inside my chest expands. The blaze burns through all the residual fears and aches until only he remains.

Pleasure surges as I cling to him, riding his knot and letting his big body cocoon me. My orgasm washes over me, starting from deep in my core until my limbs tingle and my body shakes. Tears flow freely but they’re cleansing, bathing me in the promise of the two of us.

He kisses me through it, pumping his hips and filling me with his cum. That sets me off again, and I shake and clench at the feel of his seed inside me, holding on as my body lets go.

When the tremors have subsided, he cradles me against him, laying me on top of him. His knot stays in place and the fullness of it settles deep in my soul.

“Love you,” I say softly, resting my cheek against his chest.

I listen to the steady, rhythmic sound of his heartbeat as he caresses my skin in long soothing swipes that lull me to sleep.

Chapter 22

Bjorn

When Penelope's ex arrives in the evening a few days later, it doesn't come as a surprise. My Beast alerts me of his presence in our territory and I brace myself for whatever comes next, protective instincts on high alert. Penelope and I have agreed on how to let this play out, but if Daniel tries anything stupid again, all bets are off.

"He's here." I wipe my hands on a kitchen towel and go to her.

The morning after his attack, we discussed the possibilities and decided that our plan was one of denial. After all, what could he prove happened? I insisted on going with her to the lab that morning, unable to let her get too far, but he was long gone and hasn't shown up since. Nor has there been any talk at the facility about anything unusual.

Penelope looks up from where she's working at the small table in the living room, her eyes wide. "Okay."

She lets out a long breath, wrapping her arms around my waist and resting her head on my stomach. I run my hands through her hair and tug until her violet eyes meet mine. I push reassurance through the bond, let her see my Beast in my eyes.

"No matter what, I'll keep you safe." I brush my lips against hers, tracing the line of her necklace with my fingers as a reminder of my claim.

“I know,” she murmurs between kisses.

The rumble of an engine outside lets me know he’s arrived, followed by the sound of a door slamming and heavy footsteps. An insistent knock sounds at the door.

Penelope gets up and I follow her, my palm resting in the center of her back. She takes a deep breath and opens the door. Her ex-husband looks worse for wear, his clothing stained and rumpled, his eyes sunken and clouded by shadows, and his body bowed with pain. It probably shouldn’t be satisfying, but it is.

He takes me in, a shiver racing down his spine before he collects himself, his arrogance returning. My ink may have distorted his memories, made it so he doesn’t understand what happened, but his body knows that I’m a predator and he’s prey. He can posture all he wants, but this isn’t going to end like he thinks.

“Pen.” He says the shortened version of her name as though it owns her and the sound of it bristles, chafing against my skin.

I hold myself still, assessing.

“Daniel. What are you doing here?” Penelope’s voice sounds surprised, and I squeeze her hip in praise. Nothing about her sounds off, even though her anxiety pulses within the bond.

“You were easy to find. It’s not like you kept the affair secret. The locals pointed me right here.” He takes me in again, this time all false bravado and superiority. “Heard you shacked up with the first man who would have you. A local and the town recluse. Did she mention the part where she was married?”

I can feel Penelope’s anger, and my own grumble sparks in protest. She does not belong to him; she never really did. The urge to hit him is overwhelming, but I force

my instincts back, letting this play out as we planned.

“We’re divorced. Which you seem to have forgotten. Why are you here, Daniel?” Penelope’s voice is cold, detached.

“I came all this way. Aren’t you going to invite me in?” Her ex leans against the doorframe, crowding into her space.

“You’re not taking one step inside our house. You got something to say, it can be said right here,” I say, the words low and full of menace.

“Why are you here, Daniel?” Penelope asks again.

“I wanted to see you, make sure you were okay.” He ignores me and my Beast pushes to the surface, eager to teach him some manners. “I talked with Luz and came as soon as I knew you were hurt.”

“As you can see, I’m fine. You, however, look like shit. Worry less about me and take care of yourself, Daniel.”

His eyes narrow and his jaw tics. “Did you locate the artifact?”

“There is no artifact. I already told you that. It was a silly mistake. Go home, Daniel. Whatever you’re looking for, you won’t find it from me.” Penelope moves to shut the door on him, but he steps closer.

That’s it. I tuck Penelope behind me and stomp onto the porch, forcing her ex to back away.

“We’re finished here.” I let my eyes flash with my Beast for the briefest moment. “You threw what you had with her away. I won’t make that mistake. Penelope is

mine to care for, and if you return, it will be the last thing you do.”

It’s a warning and Daniel knows it, his body going rigid. He looks confused for a moment, lost in a horrible memory, then he’s stumbling off the porch.

I cross the yard behind him, hovering near my ax where it’s lodged in a stump near the wood pile. I don’t plan to use it, but it’s effective all the same. Daniel runs to his car, eyes wide with fear as he backs away.

Penelope’s small hand touches my back and I pull her against my side.

“Do you think he remembers?” she asks.

“Enough to be afraid but not remember. He won’t return.”

She clings to me, and I hold her tightly, letting the feel of her in my arms lessen the urge to go after him and make sure he can’t haunt her again.

“Either way, when this project is finished, I want to start living and exploring. Let’s build a life far away.”

“Wildcat, this life is ours. We can make it whatever we want.”

“Good.” She goes to her tippy-toes, brushing a kiss against my cheek.

I pick her up and claim her mouth, walking through the yard and back into the house. The kiss is hot, all panting breath and clumsy, desperate mouths. I pin her to the wall, flushed and trembling. Clothes hit the floor in hurried movements. Hands and mouths find skin, kissing and sucking.

When I stroke her center, she’s wet for me. Back and forth, my fingers rub her pussy

until she's squirming and bucking. My tongue fucks into her mouth, then I fill her, sinking in two deep to the knuckle. She gushes around me, sucking me tight with her greedy pussy as I swallow her moans.

"I love how eager you are for me, Wildcat. So fucking sexy the way you show me how turned on you get." My cock twitches and my tentacles sprout along my chin, eager to taste and tease her.

"It feels so good." She squeezes her breasts together, plucking at her nipples.

For a moment, I watch her play with her tits, mesmerized. They're more than a handful, spilling from her grasp. The sway of her movements highlights the blush rising on her skin and I can't help but bury myself in them, sucking and nipping at her stiff nipples. My feelers join in, binding her breasts tightly for me to tease and suck. Everything about her body makes me want to worship her, bury my cock and tentacles inside her until I'm swallowed by her soft curves and the two of us are one.

Penelope gets restless, turning into my Wildcat and grinding down on my fingers. I groan, sliding back into her slowly and pushing her harder against the wall with my hips. My cock is leaking pre-cum, hard and aching for her, but I don't want to stop the sight of her bound breasts in my tentacles while she rides my fingers, mouth open in ecstasy. It's the picture of eroticism, so fucking sexy and full of life. This beautiful, wanton woman is mine, and I don't know that I'll ever tire of watching her come alive for me.

My voice is low, barely hanging on when I say, "Be a good girl and come all over my hand. Let me use it to slick my cock."

She opens her eyes, and I hold her gaze. Inside those violet eyes is everything. Penelope's pussy clamps around me the moment my feelers suck her clit, but her eyes never leave mine. Her climax explodes in the bond between us. We both moan into it,

my forehead falling to hers when the last of her tremors subsides.

“You’re so fucking beautiful when you let go for me. Such a sexy mate.” I breathe near her ear, my hand easing away from her pussy and digging into her fleshy ass.

“Take me,” she pleads.

I pull myself out and slick my shaft with her release. The head of my cock notches into her soaking pussy, and I angle my hips, filling her in one deep glide. She gasps, and I swallow the sound, kneading the flesh of her ass and pumping my cock into her tight channel. I’m desperate for her, swimming in the scent of her arousal and the feel of her softness all around me. Giving into my need, I let rut take over. I fuck her in fast strokes, more Beast than man.

“Yes,” she cries. “Harder.”

Her nails dig into my shoulders, her mouth sucks along my neck, and her pussy squeezes my shaft. A tentacle wraps around her throat and her mouth opens, letting loose a keening, needy noise that goes straight to my dick.

I pick up the pace, holding her to me while I take her in deep, fast strokes until I’m grinding my knot against her entrance. My cock erupts, ropes of cum filling her pussy and causing her to gush around me. Her sweet pussy squeezes out every last drop, making my cum spill down her thighs. I scoop it up and nudge it back in before thrusting one last time to lock her on my knot. She spasms around me, sending little bolts of pleasure to my spine.

“Fuck,” she whines, her legs trembling and her arms clinging to me.

“For the rest of our lives,” I assure her, giving a solid swat to her ass.

She yelps, but her pussy twitches.

“You’re mine.” My perfectly naughty little mate loves being reminded who her body belongs to, and I love reminding her.

I take a moment to catch my breath before taking her to the couch by the fire. My body feels relaxed, and I bask in the hazy cloud of bliss created by having her scent around me and her weight in my arms.

We stay locked together until dusk gives way to night. I finish dinner while she works on her research, then we eat by the fire. Penelope reads to me until we get lost in the story, falling into bed hours later with whispered words and slow kisses.

It’s a quiet intimacy. The start of a life full of color and adventure, but mostly peace. The knowledge that we get to do it all again tomorrow, that we have lifetimes to love one another, settles into my soul and I send a prayer of thanks to the gods and the sea. They sent me salvation in the form of a curious human who isn’t afraid to love a beast, and I’m going to make sure she never regrets the chance she gave me.

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 4:07 am

Penelope: Five months later

“That’s the last of it. Do you want to go down to the cliffs one last time?” Bjorn’s rumbling voice calls from behind me.

I look over my shoulder as he checks the connection on the hitch, making sure the Airstream is secure. That will be our home for the next... well, however long. We don’t know exactly where we’ll end up, but we’re heading south for now.

“One last time. I want to take a picture down by the rocks.”

“I left your camera out. Let me grab it and I’ll walk with you.” Bjorn smiles that secret one that’s barely there. The one he makes when he’s amused by something.

It might be that I’ve taken “one last picture” of every spot of the reserve. Realistically, it could be decades before we come back to the place I met him. So I’ve been on a mission to capture all of it. I want to turn them into illustrations and make them into the story of us. Next time we return, I want to add the story to his collection. He doesn’t know that, but he indulges me all the same.

He pulls the camera strap over my head and plants a kiss on my hair. “Come on, Wildcat. One last picture.”

Bjorn takes my hand, and we amble down the trail. The rocks are slick and the path narrow. Bjorn helps keep me steady as we slowly make our way down the cliff. The winter wind is icy, and the sea is frothing this morning. But the sun is shining and nothing could dim the happiness inside me.

I finished my research project at the end of January, four months after meeting Bjorn. The first week of February, Bjorn returned with me to the university, and I formally dropped out of the postdoc program, handing over my final research but refusing to continue.

Next, I contacted my parents and officially broke ties. They had already made their opinions clear, but I wasn't after their money. I let them know I would be traveling, and I wouldn't stay in touch. After, I didn't bother staying in town. We cleaned out my storage unit, sold my car, and hauled my stuff in a rental to Claw Bay.

It's taken us another three weeks to pack up and prepare. But that might be because we've spent a good chunk of our time in the ocean and the other half in bed, so we didn't leave ourselves much time for prep. We've been researching and talking about this trip for months though. What was left to do but enjoy our last days at the preserve?

We have three days before we're expected south. Bjorn's got a contract with a historical society to repair a lighthouse off the coast of Florida with a small crew. While we live there, I'm going to study the native wildlife. But this time, the way I want to—with hiking boots, a canvas, and a camera. Maybe I'll even turn it into a book.

Bjorn stops abruptly and I bump into his muscular back, lost in thought. He picks me up and carries me the last of the way over the slippery rocks. The sea spits, and I gasp at the mist coating everything. It's enchanting, ethereal. I memorize the smells and the feel of the salty air, trying my best to take in every moment.

My camera is next, and I take several pictures before making my gruff mountain man cheese with me for my secret project. He groans but complies, picking me up and twirling me once so that when I take the picture, I'm breathless and laughing, our faces half out of the frame. It's perfect like this, a moment in time of what we are.

He sets me back down on the rocks and cups my face, kissing my nose and my lashes before settling on my lips. It's a kiss made with grins, more excitement than lust, though there is always that there too.

I pull away from the kiss and tug on his hand, pulling him toward our future. "Want to start with the playlist or the audiobook?"

Bjorn follows me, bracing his hand on my hip. "Depends on whether it's a slow burn or not."

"Can't stand the heat for that long?" My laughter trails behind me.

Bjorn crowds against me, hands roaming over my hips and ass, and sucks along my neck. "Definitely not with you next to me, teasing me for hours."

"Yeah, that's usually your job."

He swats my ass. "Yes, it is. Now let's get a move on, Wildcat. We want to get to the campground before dark."

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 4:07 am

I wish that my magic allowed me to stop time so I could freeze this moment. Penelope's dark hair glows almost purple in the fading light of the sun. She chews on her bottom lip, staring at her easel, lost in thought. But whatever she was thinking about has put a dreamy look in her violet eyes.

My tool belt drops on the picnic table, and in two steps, she's in my arms. She softens as my hands find her hips and my lips nibble along her neck. I kiss her hair and pull her back against my chest, swaying and squeezing her tightly. The feelers in my beard circle her throat, tasting and scenting her after being away from her all day.

I hold her for a long moment, reacquainting myself with the feel of her. It's always like this between us, magnets being pulled together. I've been on this job for months and coming home to her at the end of the day is always the best part.

Penelope dances from my arms, twirling to crook her finger at me. "Come on. Let's go for a swim."

She hastily tugs off her tank top and drops it in the grass, darting down the trail.

Our camp site in the reserve for this job is in the brush and only about a quarter mile from the water on the protected side of the inlet. We usually swim in the evenings after I get home from work before heading in for dinner. This place has become our own little slice of the world, away from the caretaker's grounds where the rest of the crew is lodging.

We've made friends with a few folks in town. That's all Penelope, whose bubbly curiosity is hard to resist. We've gone out for drinks and dancing, volunteered at the

aquatic shelter, and attended a few events in town. There have been dinner dates and BBQs with the crew. But my favorite moments are these, when it's us in our own world.

I trail behind her, appreciating the sway of her hips and the jiggle of her ass, her laughter carrying on the salty breeze. She's sexy as hell when she's carefree like this, all blinding color.

Penelope hops around, pulling off her shorts and discarding them on the dune before splashing into the calm water. I take my time, enjoying watching her play in the last rays of sunset as I strip down to join her.

When I reach her, I'm already half shifted. I tangle her in my tentacles, pulling her into a game of chase. My kraken plays with her, letting her unravel and swim away before wrapping around an ankle or a thigh and pulling her to me for a kiss.

Over and over, I catch and release my mate. I squeeze her tightly in my tentacles and massage between her legs over her bathing suit. Sometimes I rake my claws along the exposed skin under her bikini top and let my feelers suck deep hickies on her skin. She releases bubbly laughs until my touches send her into garbled moans.

We surface in a frenzy, mouths pressed together. She wraps one arm around my neck, forehead pressed to mine. I use the top of my claw to trace the seam of her slit, working her over until she's squirming for me. Something about the barrier of her swimsuit makes it feel deliciously naughty. I edge the tip just under the band of the bottoms, teasing her for a moment before releasing the fabric and cupping her mound.

Penelope rocks against my center, the movements sending little waves splashing around us. Two of my tentacles bind her ankles and another slips around her waist. My mating tentacle aches with the need to stuff her sweet pussy, but I force myself to tease her with the clubbed head, pushing and retreating at her entrance over and over without fully slipping inside. Each time I tease her open, we both groan.

Her nipples are tight beads against the teal fabric, so fucking sexy. I run my claw back and forth along one then the other, scratching and circling the tips until Penelope's pussy flutters around my cock. She sucks my lip into her mouth, needy noises spilling from her as she rolls her hips into my touch.

"I love playing with your pretty tits." I growl, leaning in to suck her nipple through the fabric. My tentacle pushes inside her entrance, and I sink into her wet heat. "You get me so hot. It makes me want to stuff you full and watch you come for me."

"It feels so good. More," Penelope's voice is breathy, achy with passion.

I use my tentacles to keep her steady as she rides me. It vibrates as I thrust, sending waves of pleasure through my whole body. She stretches around my tentacle, and I slowly glide in and out of her. I tease her pussy until I latch onto that spot deep inside that makes her go wild. She's slick and tight, her pussy squeezing my cock. It feels so good that I can't hold back any longer.

"That's my precious Wildcat. I love how you take my cock so good."

She thrashes for me as I fuck her in fast strokes, my tentacles working her nipples and sending pulsing vibrations through her core. I take her lips, my groans and snarls swallowed up by my Wildcat as she grinds on me. She sucks on my tongue, and I moan. My claw tip finds her clit and I circle it.

"Oh, fuck," Penelope gasps.

"Come for me, my sweet Violet."

I flick and tease her clit until she clenches down on me and gushes on my cock. Her body freezes, tensing as the shocks of her orgasm blast through her.

"So sexy when you come." I pull her closer, fucking her through her climax. My

Beast roars, my cock spurting my seed in long waves as I fill her pussy.

We cling to one another, riding out the last of the moment until our breathing has returned to normal. I float, laying her on my chest as we both look at the sky, the calm water lapping around us. My tentacle stays locked inside her sweet center until the stars have filled the sky and my stomach is growling.

It's time to go inside, but instead, I hold her a little longer.

"I love this life I've made with you," she murmurs.

"Me too, mate."