



Make Out With A Merman

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Category: Fantasy

Description: How was I supposed to know the lake had a guardian?

And that he had gills, grudges, and plans for me?

I came to Driftwood Bay to teach glitter-fueled swim lessons, not awaken something ancient under the water.

Definitely not crash into Ryder Quinn—grumpy in a wetsuit, silver-eyed menace, and very much not human.

He watches me like I'm a problem he's already decided how to solve.

Follows me into the woods. Pulls me from the lake like I belong to it.

Like I belong to him.

I don't believe in soul bonds.

He doesn't believe in accidents.

But something's waking beneath this shoreline — and I think it knows our names.

Because this lake answers to him — and soon, so will I.

Read on for: merman obsession, grumpy-sunshine tension, lakeside magic, cursed rifts, soft swim chaos, and a heroine who might be fated to destroy—or save—it all. HEA guaranteed.

Total Pages (Source): 30

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CALLIE

The thing about glitter is, it never really goes away. Like, ever. You think you've washed it off, and bam there it is again. In your eyebrow. In your ear. On your date. Probably on your obituary.

Also, paddleboards are not built for speed, especially when you're hauling a duffel, a unicorn floatie, and what might be the last functioning boombox in the known universe. But I'm nothing if not committed to a dramatic entrance.

"C'mon, baby, one more push!" I huff, digging my paddle into the lake water like I'm a very disorganized Viking.

The camp docks finally come into view. Camp Lightring looks like something out of a fantasy Pinterest board: pine trees tall enough to gossip with the clouds, rustic wooden cabins dotting the shore, a floating platform shaped like a clamshell, and uh oh.

Oh no.

Uniformed figures lined up at attention on the beach. A whistle blows, sharp and judgmental. I slow my stroke and squint.

It's a drill. Like an actual, timed, synchronized swimming drill, complete with rigid straight lines and identical red safety vests. I see someone pacing at the water's edge with a clipboard like a military general. Tall. Broad. Blue shimmer catching the light like

Oh, hell. That's him.

The lifeguard. The merman.

I've heard whispers about him from the other new hires on the group chat. "Scary hot, emotionally constipated." "Makes the lake sign-in sheet look like the ten commandments." Someone even said he yelled at a butterfly for violating swimming protocols.

I'm not about to sneak past this guy unnoticed. Especially not when my paddleboard scrapes against the dock with a sound like a wet fart.

"Shit whoops!" My duffel tips. My unicorn floatie bounces once, twice, and then flops dramatically into the water.

The man with the clipboard stops pacing. Turns slowly. Looks directly at me.

Oh no, he's even hotter than the rumors said.

And even more pissed.

"YOU'RE LATE," he booms, voice like thunder dunked in espresso. "And you're interrupting a water safety drill."

"Well, good morning to you too, sunshine," I chirp, hopping off the board and into shin-deep water. Glitter sprays from my swim shorts like a sparkle bomb. I hoist the unicorn floatie up like it's a trophy. "I brought reinforcements."

A beat of stunned silence from the trainees. Then someone giggles. Another kid applauds. I wink at them.

Clipboard Guy is not amused. He strides toward me, and wow, up close, he's... intense. Silver eyes, slicked back dark hair, water beading on his blue-scaled shoulders like he just rose out of some fantasy novel. The guy looks like Poseidon's grumpy nephew.

"You're Callie O'Shea."

Guilty. "Yup. Swim instructor extraordinaire. Reporting for semi-duty."

"You were supposed to be here at seven a.m. for orientation. It's currently" he checks his watch, of course he wears a watch in the lake, "eight twenty-three."

I squint at him through wet lashes. "Isn't being fashionably late part of the camp charm?"

"It's not charming. It's irresponsible. These kids rely on structure and timing. You can't just float in here like it's a vacation."

"Ouch," I say, pressing a hand to my chest. "That floatie and I have feelings, you know."

He doesn't smile. Not even a twitch.

"You're disrupting training."

"Right," I say, hopping up onto the dock and dragging my gear after me. "Sorry. Next time I'll schedule my glitter explosion for later."

"Leave your floatation devices out of drills unless approved by the head counselor."

"Can I wear my flamingo hat, or is that also a federal offense?"

Another ripple of laughter from the kids onshore. Ryder, I assume that's his name, because if he's not Ryder then someone's worse, grits his teeth so hard I think I hear enamel crack.

"Let me make one thing clear," he says, stepping forward, eyes narrowing. "I don't care how many jokes you crack or how many inflatable sea animals you own. You will follow my rules, or you will not last here."

"And you're just a walking party pinata, huh?" I ask sweetly. "Bet you kill at karaoke."

"I don't sing."

"Obviously."

There's a weird moment where our gazes lock. Not in a swoony, rom-com way more like I've accidentally challenged a sea god to a duel. His jaw flexes. My breath catches, which is so inconvenient.

But instead of yelling again, he just snorts. "Dry off. Report to Julie. And stay out of my training zone."

"Oh, I'm gonna be in so many zones," I murmur, dragging my dripping duffel toward the main path. "You don't even know."

As I stomp up the hill, soggy and victorious, I hear him call out one last thing behind me:

"Next time you arrive on a stolen paddleboard, leave the glitter behind."

"Next time bring some snacks and a sense of humor!" I yell back.

The kids cheer.

Julie finds me ten minutes later outside the mess hall, trying to wring the lake out of my socks and debating if my unicorn floatie can double as a bean bag chair. She's petite, perky, and very mom-vibes-in-sneakers.

"You made quite the splash," she says, sitting beside me.

"Please tell me the merman isn't going to try and ban me from water entirely. Because I kinda need it to live."

Julie laughs. "Ryder's a little...intense. But he's a good guy. Rescues three kids a summer, hasn't missed a single training drill in three years, and makes the best campfire chili you've ever had."

"Wow. The man contains multitudes."

She side-eyes my dripping glitter trail. "You're gonna test every one of 'em, huh?"

"Look, I like structure in theory. But chaos has way better floaties."

Julie grins. "Just don't drown him in sparkles."

"No promises," I say, grinning back.

Later, after I've been handed a dry shirt and a camp schedule, I wander back down to the lake. The water is calm now, sparkling in the late morning sun. Ryder is still down there, clipboard back in hand, his expression unreadable.

I watch him for a moment, the way he moves sharp, focused, like every muscle is on alert.

I know his type.

The rule guy. The don't-touch-my-soul guy.

I also know how to unspool them. Not on purpose. Not to be mean. Just by being me.

And he already looks rattled.

Oh, this is going to be fun.

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RYDER

I knew it the second I heard the scrape.

That goddamn dock groan sharp and wet like something dying, rips through my drill like a cannon blast. Twenty-five kids turn their heads in unison, lifeguard whistles forgotten mid-command.

And there she is.

Paddleboard thief, unicorn floatie, and glitter demon, gliding in like some chaotic sea sprite summoned by my worst migraine.

What the hell is she even wearing? Her shorts sparkle like a disco ball drowned in a party store.

I grit my teeth while letting her know, in no uncertain terms, she's very much late.

She doesn't flinch. Just grins and tosses back some quip about sunshine and reinforcements. Of course she does. She's got the kind of grin that dares you to yell at her and laughs while you try.

I want to throw my whistle.

Instead, I clock the time: 08:23.

Orientation started at 07:00 sharp. I hand-delivered the schedule to every counselor's

bunk last night, like I do every damn year. Precision matters. Consistency matters. Especially here, where some of these kids have never known safety until this place.

Callie hops off her paddleboard like we're hosting a beach party, dripping glitter and bad decisions all over the shallows.

She leans over while I try to remind her of proper conduct, picking up one of her childish floaties, and mocks me with it.

I swear to all the old gods, she's trying to make my head explode.

The campers laugh. I'm not even mad at them, they're kids. But I am mad that she's already winning them over with nothing but chaos and a smile. The last thing I need is more disorderly conduct around energetic and unrestrained children.

Once she stomps up the hill trailing glitter like some manic fairy godmother, I blow the whistle again.

"Back to drills!" I bark. "Tread set, two minutes. Now!"

The kids jump like startled minnows, and order returns. Sort of.

But the damage is done. The edge is off them. The rhythm's broken.

I finish the session anyway, clipboard clenched so tight I'll probably snap it before lunch. When it's over, I send the kids to free swim with another counselor and head to the lake's edge alone. Water laps at my calves, cool and constant. Finally quiet again.

I dive in.

Below the surface, the world goes still. No glitter. No grinning maniacs. Just the sound of my heartbeat and the currents shifting around me like a second skin.

I swim deep, fast. Down past the rocky shelf where the water turns colder and the light fractures. Down to where my tribe used to gather, before the rupture took them.

Before I took them.

I clench my fists against the pull of memory. Not now.

Not here.

Not because of her.

When I come up, I rest my arms on a boulder slick with moss and stare out at the lake. Still calm. Still safe. But for how long?

I saw it this morning. The tremor. The way the water vibrated wrong just before she showed up. Maybe it's coincidence.

Or maybe the lake's waking up again.

I shake it off. I'll check the deep rift tonight.

Right now, I've got a clipboard to update.

Julie finds me mid-column on my incident report sheet. "You know you scared the hell outta her, right?"

I don't look up. "Good."

She chuckles. “Ryder.”

“She blew orientation. Interrupted drills. Used a unicorn floatie as a goddamn chariot.”

“She also pulled three shy kids into the session who’ve never gotten in the deep end before,” Julie says, voice gentler now. “Some of them are scared of the lake. She made them laugh.”

I scowl. “Laughter doesn’t save them when they’re drowning.”

Julie steps closer. “Neither does a clipboard if they won’t follow you into the water.”

I stiffen.

She sighs and pats my arm. “Just... don’t chew her up too hard, alright? She’s got heart. You might actually like her.”

Not likely.

But I grunt anyway, because arguing with Julie is like arguing with the moon.

Later, I spot Chaos Mermaid outside the mess hall, her unicorn floatie half-deflated and lounging like it’s seen war. She’s wringing out her shirt and humming off-key. Still smiling. Still... bright.

She doesn’t see me watching.

Good.

The last thing I need is for her to think she’s gotten to me.

But later that night, as I write my evening report and hear her laughter drifting from the campfire pit across the hill, I press too hard with my pen.

And tear straight through the page.

The torn paper stares back at me like a challenge.

I exhale hard through my nose and flip it over. Try again.

But the ink sticks. My hand hesitates. It's not the page that's the problem.

It's her.

For three summers, things have run like clockwork. I built this camp's aquatic program from the bottom of the damn lake up. Same drills, same shifts, same faces. Predictable. Manageable. Safe.

I don't do surprises.

And Callie O'Shea is a surprise wrapped in glitter, chaos, and ten pounds of reckless charm.

One day here, and she's already poked holes in my entire system. Not just with the paddleboard stunt or the floatie debacle but the way she looked at me. Like rules are optional. Like I'm the weird one for caring that they exist.

I hate that it's working.

The kids laughed today. Broke formation. Lost focus. A single weak link in this chain can get someone hurt, and I've already lived through that mistake once.

She doesn't understand that.

Hell, maybe she never will.

But I'll be damned if I let this camp fall apart because of a flamingo hat and a cocky smile.

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CALLIE

I 'm not saying I came to camp to stage a pool noodle rebellion on Day Two.

But, like... if the noodle fits.

"Okay, squad!" I shout, hands cupped around my mouth like a budget megaphone. "I want one group by the inflatable dolphin, one by the mushroom sprinkler, and one on Team Flaming Noodle. No, Braxton, you cannot dual-wield."

A dozen campers shriek with joy, pelting across the lake's shallow end like caffeinated ducklings. The floating unicorn rings bounce like bumper cars. The obstacle course I slapped together in forty minutes with some duct tape, plastic hoops, and blind optimism is holding up surprisingly well.

Miracles do happen.

I lean on my oversized pool net and squint toward the deeper water. Yup. There he is.

Mr. Saltytail himself.

Ryder stands on the opposite dock, arms crossed like he's the ancient guardian of the lake, watching my noodle circus with all the enthusiasm of a tax audit.

I ignore him. Mostly.

Because today, the kids are grinning. They're cheering each other on, even the shy

ones. Eliza who wouldn't put more than a toe in the water yesterday is now doing battle with a foam trident like Poseidon's tiny heir.

So yeah, I think I'm winning.

"Callie!" Leo, one of the youngest, flails from the giant flamingo float. "The noodle king is trying to cheat!"

"No cheating unless it's creative and dramatic!" I yell back. "Bonus points for flair!"

The flamingo capsizes with a whoop of laughter and an epic splash. I blow my whistle like I mean it and raise both arms. "Victory goes to Team Glittery Narwhals! MVP goes to Eliza for yelling 'I am the storm' before leaping off the floatie!"

The other kids cheer. Eliza beams like I handed her a trophy made of rainbows and spite.

Behind me, someone clears their throat.

I know that throat.

That's the throat of a man who files incident reports for fun.

"Ms. O'Shea," Ryder says, voice like ice sliding off a steel blade.

I turn slowly, smile locked and loaded. "Why hello, sir! Fancy seeing you emerge from your lake lair. Did the glitter lure you out?"

He doesn't take the bait. Just steps closer, silver eyes flicking from me to the water to the pool noodles currently orbiting a watermelon-shaped float like it's the moon.

“This isn’t on the approved activity list.”

“I’m fostering aquatic creativity,” I say, twirling the net like a baton. “You’d be amazed how many life skills are hidden in a properly executed noodle joust.”

“You’ve disrupted the shallow zone’s current system. You’re blocking my sightlines. And you’re exceeding the flotation device quota.”

“There’s a quota?”

“There’s a reason for the rules.”

“Sure,” I say, smile tight, “but are the kids laughing correctly under regulation joy standards?”

He doesn’t flinch. I can tell he’s barely hanging on to his last thread of patience.

I fold my arms and stare up at him. “Look. I get it. You’ve got your rhythm. Your charts. Your perfectly organized little lake kingdom. But this?” I gesture to the water full of squeals and splash fights and sunshine. “This is summer. It’s supposed to be a little wild.”

He shakes his head. “Wild gets kids hurt.”

“Controlled gets kids bored. And bored kids stop showing up.”

There’s a beat. His jaw works like he’s chewing on something unpleasant and philosophical.

He mutters, “You should at least assign buddies.”

I grin. “Already did, Captain Grump. Braxton’s got Leo. Eliza’s got Tasha. Unicorn Squad is self-governed through glitter democracy.”

That actually gets the tiniest twitch at the corner of his mouth. Not a smile. More like his face briefly considered one and then changed its mind.

Progress.

I snap him a salute with my pool net. “Appreciate the consult, Lieutenant Seafoam. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got a noodle monarchy to maintain.”

He stalks off without another word.

But he watches.

All afternoon, I catch him glancing over from the main dock while I lead my chaotic gaggle through synchronized splash-offs and a very questionable interpretive water ballet.

And when Leo trips on a float line and goes under for a second too long, I see Ryder move before I even register the danger.

Fast.

Like cutting through the lake without friction. He’s there before I am, pulling Leo up, checking him over with all the calm authority of someone born for deep water and emergency chaos.

“You okay?” he asks Leo, gently but firmly.

Leo nods, sniffing. “Yeah. Just swallowed a noodle.”

I snort. “Mood.”

Ryder glares at me, but softer this time. Like he's not quite sure how to file me in his mental cabinet anymore.

After the kids go in for lunch, I sit cross-legged on the end of the dock, peeling a wet sticker off my knee.

Ryder passes behind me. Slows. Doesn't stop.

“You did good out there,” he says.

I blink. “Did you just compliment me?”

“It's not a habit,” he says over his shoulder.

“Aw, come on, give me a second. I wanna write this in my journal.”

He doesn't answer. Just keeps walking.

But there's a twitch in his tailfin as he dives off the edge.

And I swear it looks suspiciously like a smirk.

After dinner, once the sun's dipped low and the lake's gone all gold and glassy, I sneak away to the quiet dock behind Cabin 3 with my journal, a half-broken pencil, and a juice box I stole from the counselor fridge.

I flop onto my stomach, legs kicking in the air, and open to a blank page.

Camp Log: Day 2.

Chaos quotient: high.

Glitter ratio: satisfactory.

Lifeguard tolerance: pending.

Today I led a full-scale inflatable uprising and only lost one child to the Noodle Abyss (he survived, thanks to our resident sea-sergeant). Eliza said I'm her "sparkle general," which I'm definitely putting on my resume.

I chew the end of the pencil for a second, then frown. Tap it against the page.

Also... what's Ryder's deal?

I stare out at the lake. It's empty now, calm like it's pretending to be normal. But I saw it today how fast he moved, how he knew exactly where Leo had slipped under, like the water whispered it to him.

He's so... contained. Like every muscle is on guard.

Like he's waiting for something to go wrong. Or already thinks it has.

I don't buy the whole "rulebot with no emotions" act. Not fully.

There's something else there. Something deep. And old. And sad.

I pause, pencil hovering.

And it makes me want to know more.

Which is stupid.

But I still do.

I blow out a breath, scribble a little glitter heart next to the word “stupid,” and snap the journal closed.

The stars are coming out, and I swear the lake hums when I sit still long enough.

And Ryder?

Yeah, he hums too.

But I don't think he knows it.

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RYDER

There's a flamingo in my emergency zone.

Again.

The inflatable monstrosity floats like a smug pink beacon of anarchy, bobbing just beyond the twenty-meter swim line.

Kids shriek and climb over it like it's a jungle gym. Water is sloshing where it shouldn't slosh.

And there on the diving platform, wearing a tiara made out of pool noodles like some kind of demented swim queen is her .

Callie O'Shea.

"Alright, my splash demons!" she yells, voice carrying over the lake like it was made to. "This round is reverse noodle joustwinner gets an extra juice box and my undying admiration!"

A roar erupts from the kids.

I squeeze the whistle between my teeth, hard.

My hands are clenched so tight around the clipboard that the plastic creaks. I march to the shoreline and signal to my junior lifeguard, who gives me a half-hearted shrug

and points toward the madness like, what do you want me to do about it?

I want to say.

I want her stopped.

Instead, I log the violation. That's the fourth one today. And it's only 11:15.

She's a walking incident report in a sunburn and freckles.

By the time I manage to wrangle my zone back into something resembling functional, she's leading a floating conga line set to music I'm pretty sure is coming from a waterproof speaker duct-taped to her unicorn floatie.

I don't speak. I just turn on my heel and walk straight to Julie's office.

"Another complaint?" Julie doesn't even look up when I step inside. She's balancing a tray of muffins on one hip and typing with the other.

"She's endangering the kids," I snap. "Again."

Julie sighs. "What now?"

"She had campers jumping from the diving dock to the flamingo float. No spotters. No safety checks. No flotation limits. There was a kid trying to joust using two noodles taped together like a medieval weapon."

Julie blinks, then laughs under her breath. "Okay, that one's at least creative."

"This isn't funny." I drop the clipboard onto her desk like it's Exhibit A in a murder trial. "She's breaking protocol every fifteen minutes and treating it like a damn

sitcom. If someone gets hurt”

“No one has,” Julie cuts in, meeting my eyes. “Not yet. Not once. You’ve logged twenty-three minor infractions, and every single one of them has been paired with higher camper morale, faster swim assessments, and zero safety incidents.”

“She’s lucky.”

Julie shakes her head. “She’s talented. In a way you don’t like because it isn’t yours.”

I grit my teeth. “That’s not what this is about.”

“Isn’t it?” she asks, soft but firm.

I don’t answer. Because maybe it is. Maybe it’s a little about the way she throws the whole place off its axis. How she doesn’t flinch at rules. How she looks at me like I’m the uptight weirdo in a cartoon musical.

And I hate how often she’s right.

I run a hand through my hair, exhale slow. “I’m not asking you to fire her. I’m asking for boundaries.”

Julie finally sets the muffin tray down and gives me her full attention.

“You want her reined in. Fine. I’ll assign her the Advanced Water Skills week with you. Co-leads.”

I blink. “That’s not”

“You want boundaries? Teach her your rules. She wants freedom? Show you can

bend. If you two survive it, the campers will be better for it.”

“This is a terrible idea.”

“I think it’s the best one I’ve had all morning,” she says with a smile that makes me want to throw something into the lake.

I stare at her for a full five seconds. “You’re serious.”

“As a noodle joust duel,” she says cheerfully.

Back at the dock, I catch sight of Callie leading cleanup. She’s got the kids doing a relay game to gather scattered floaties and pool toys, turning chaos into order in her own ridiculous way.

She catches me watching and tosses me a salute with a pool noodle.

“Captain Rules!” she calls. “Care to inspect the battlefield?”

I don’t answer.

But I do keep looking longer than I should.

She’s dripping wet, hair plastered to her cheeks, freckles brighter in the sun. Her laugh bounces across the water. It’s loud and messy and sincere. And it hits me like a punch to the sternum.

Disaster. Wrapped in freckles.

And now she’s my disaster to manage for a whole week.

As I'm gathering cones and resetting boundaries for the afternoon swim block, I hear footsteps slap onto the dock behind me.

"You know," Callie says, voice way too chipper for someone who's singlehandedly disrupted my entire week, "if you squint hard enough, you almost look like you're having fun."

I don't turn. "I'm not."

"Right," she says, sidling up anyway. "Because 'fun' would violate subsection twelve of the Camp Lightening Lifeguard Grump Act."

I face her. She's grinning like this is a game.

"It's not a joke," I say. "What you did today? That float-jump stunt? Someone could've hit their head."

She rolls her eyes. "They didn't. You think I don't know how to watch for that? I'm not reckless, I'm just not terrified of spontaneity."

"No, you're allergic to order."

"No," she counters, stepping in, "I just don't think your version of control is the only one that keeps people safe."

We're close now. Closer than I meant to be. Her freckles are dusted with lake spray, and her eyes are fire.

"You've got one week," I say, voice low. "You and me. Advanced Skills. Stick to the schedule. No unicorns. No surprises."

“Sure,” she says sweetly, stepping back. “As long as you promise not to drown in your own ego.”

She spins on her heel and walks off, hips swaying just enough to make my jaw clench.

Disaster, I think again. Loud, chaotic, infuriating disaster.

And somehow, she’s under my skin already.

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CALLIE

The minute I step onto the Advanced Water Skills dock with Ryder standing next to me like a statue built entirely out of disapproval and muscle, I know we're doomed.

"Morning, campers," I chirp, tossing my clipboard into the supply bin like a frisbee. "Today we're conquering the canoe challenge!"

"Today," Ryder cuts in, voice like it's been sandblasted smooth, "we're beginning our joint instruction with a controlled multi-paddler navigation drill. Objective: teamwork, balance, and protocol."

The kids blink at him. One of them coughs. Another whispers, "Is he a robot?"

I slap a smile on my face and clap my hands. "Translation: we're gonna paddle stuff and not crash. Hopefully."

Ryder's jaw ticks.

Jason, who's helping us kick things off, hands out life vests with a grin so wide it makes up for the glacier standing next to me. "All right, team! Who's ready to show off their paddling prowess?"

All twenty kids scream "ME!" and charge for the canoes.

Ryder flinches like he's been shot.

“Chaos,” he mutters.

“Optimism,” I counter.

Fifteen minutes later, we’ve got three groups in canoes, paddling erratically toward floating markers. I’m with Team B, trying to coach a left-handed eleven-year-old who insists on paddling only in reverse. Ryder’s in the rescue kayak, hovering like a very stern water vulture.

Jason’s floating nearby on a raft with a waterproof whiteboard, because he decided without telling us that the kids should score our teamwork on a ten-point scale.

This is going great.

“Callie,” Ryder calls out across the water, “you’re off-course by twenty degrees.”

“Appreciate the update, Your Saltiness!” I call back. “Now if we can get Bennett to stop yelling ‘I’m the Kraken!’ we might actually make it to the buoy.”

“I’m THE KRAKEN!” Bennett yells gleefully and jumps, which rocks the canoe so hard I grab both sides and shout, “Hold formation! I repeat, HOLD THE”

The canoe flips.

Like, spectacularly flips. Full 180. We go in backward, Bennett howling with glee while I go under and come up sputtering lake water and glitter from my freaking bathing suit.

“Oh my gods,” someone on the dock yells, “they sank it!”

Ryder’s there in two seconds flat, gliding over like the current obeys him. “Callie.”

“I’m fine,” I say between coughs, trying to gather my braid and my dignity. “I’ve been dramatically tossed from floaties twice as big.”

He eyes me. “You’re bleeding.”

I glance down and see a neat little scrape across my shin from the edge of the canoe.

“It’s a scratch,” I say, brushing it off. “I’ve had worse from tripping over lawn flamingos.”

“Get on the raft,” he orders, pulling it beside us with one hand.

“Bossy,” I mutter, climbing on.

“You’re lucky that wasn’t a head injury,” he snaps.

“You’re lucky I didn’t drown the Kraken.”

Jason’s wheezing with laughter. “Ten points for drama! Eleven for unintentional capsizing!”

The kids are chanting now.

“TEAM CALLIE! TEAM CALLIE!”

I glance at Ryder. His face is locked tight, unreadable.

And for a half-second, I wonder if I actually messed up.

Back on the dock, I towel off and try not to shiver while Julie hands me a band-aid shaped like a frog.

“Okay,” I admit, “maybe I should’ve vetoed the Kraken roleplay.”

“Maybe,” Julie says, trying not to smile. “But they loved it.”

Ryder is drying his equipment with surgical precision. Not speaking to me.

I nudge him. “Hey. Look. No fatalities. Only mild soaking.”

“You flipped a canoe.”

“I was adding excitement to the lesson.”

“You added a liability to the lesson.”

I sigh. “You can’t control everything, you know.”

“I can damn well try.”

I pause. “You always like this?”

He glances at me. “Like what?”

“Tightly wound. Like if someone moved your clipboard an inch to the left, the world would implode.”

His voice drops. “That clipboard keeps kids alive.”

I stop.

Because that... that isn’t snark. That’s heavy.

Before I can ask more, Jason jumps between us like a game show host. “Aaaand the camper consensus is... Ryder gets an eight in performance, minus one for no smiles. Callie gets a solid ten, bonus point for yelling ‘I am a canoe witch!’ mid-capsize!”

“I did no such thing,” I lie.

“You 100% did,” Jason says, handing me a juice box.

Ryder walks off without another word, shoulders tight, tail flashing once as he hits the water.

I sip my juice. Apple grape. Definitely not worth almost drowning for, but hey points are points.

Later, after the kids are at dinner and I’m drying my backup clothes on a branch like a swamp raccoon, I spot Ryder by the lake, half-submerged, staring out at nothing.

I almost leave him there.

Almost.

But something about his silence makes my feet walk before my brain agrees.

“You good?” I ask, plopping down beside the rock he’s leaning on.

He doesn’t look at me. “Fine.”

“You mad about the flip?”

“Not mad,” he says, flat. “Just done.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Done with what?”

“With pretending chaos is okay just because it’s loud and people cheer for it.”

“Ouch.”

He still doesn’t look at me. “These kids trust you. That means something. Use it well. Don’t waste it trying to prove a point.”

That one lands.

I nod, quieter than usual. “Noted.”

We sit like that for a minute. Just lake breeze, distant camper laughter, and the flick of water on rock.

Then I say, “You know, if you did want to smile, now and then, I promise it won’t fracture your spine.”

Still nothing.

But when I stand and walk back toward camp, I swear I hear the faintest sound behind me.

A single, exhausted, barely-there laugh.

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RYDER

And Callie is nowhere to be found.

Again.

The whistle hangs from my neck, untouched, like it knows there's no point. I check the clock clipped to the lifeguard tower. Check it again. Just in case time started lying to me.

Nope. Still late.

This is the second day of our Advanced Water Skills co-lead. We're supposed to be covering lateral rescue techniques. But right now, I'm covering the dock in increasingly aggressive pacing grooves while the campers play hacky sack with someone's flip-flop.

Jason walks by, coffee in one hand, yogurt in the other.

"Ryder," he says, not stopping, "your forehead vein's about to file a restraining order."

"Have you seen Callie?"

"Nope," he calls over his shoulder. "But if I had to guess, I'd check the canoe shed. That's where the glitter incident started yesterday."

Glitter incident.

I still have specs of it embedded in my towel. It's like her DNA is invasive.

I march toward the canoe shed, each step a silent plea to whatever higher power monitors camp discipline to give me a break today.

The door creaks open.

And there she is.

Standing on a milk crate, wrapping duct tape around what appears to be a floating obstacle shaped like a giant banana. She's singing. Off-key. Something about friendship and jellyfish.

"Callie."

She jumps and knocks the tape roll into a bin of googly eyes.

"Oh. Hi! You're early."

"It's 07:48."

She looks at her wrist. There's no watch there. Just a friendship bracelet shaped like a slice of pizza.

"Huh. Time flies when you're banana engineering."

I pinch the bridge of my nose. "We're supposed to be demonstrating rescue strategies."

“We are, ” she says, hopping down. “Banana buoy scenario: sudden storm, raft capsizes, jellyfish swarm. Improvised flotation and escape route drills.”

“That’s not what’s on the schedule.”

She shrugs. “Yeah, but it’s better. ”

I stare at her.

She smiles at me like she knows something I don’t. Like she always does.

“I have a plan,” she says, lifting the banana buoy like a trophy.

“That’s what I’m afraid of.”

By 08:15, the campers are laughing so hard half of them can’t tread water properly. There’s a plastic jellyfish tied to a string, a noodle gauntlet, and a challenge where two kids have to save a third using only paddles and one towel.

It’s chaos.

But somehow... it works.

Bennett our resident Kraken actually follows instructions. Eliza, who panicked last week in open water, floats across the lake tied to a banana while giggling like a maniac.

And me?

I’m standing waist-deep, arms crossed, watching my structure crumble in real time.

“Ryder!” Callie calls from the dock. “Don’t just glower, join the chaos!”

“I’m monitoring for hazards.”

“Monitor this!” she shouts and launches a water balloon at me.

It hits me dead center in the chest. Cold. Sudden.

The kids explode into cheers.

I slowly look down at the burst, at the wet bloom on my shirt.

“Ma’am,” I say, raising my voice like it’s a court hearing, “that constitutes an assault on a certified safety instructor.”

Callie grins. “Guess you’ll have to write me up in glitter pen.”

Gods help me, I almost smile.

Almost.

After lunch, we’re in the gear hut cleaning up. I’m checking inventory. She’s balancing goggles on her head like it’s fashion week.

“You’re impossible,” I mutter.

She hums. “You’re rigid.”

“I’m prepared.”

“You’re constipated with rules.”

“I’m ensuring nobody dies.”

She sighs, flopping into a beanbag someone clearly smuggled in from the arts cabin.

“You ever stop to think that safety doesn’t always look like control?”

“Control is how I survived.”

That comes out faster than I mean it to.

She looks up, quieter now. “Ryder.”

I ignore the way she says my name. Ignore the tug it plants in my chest.

“This camp,” I continue, keeping my voice even, “only works because it runs like a system. People trust systems. They don’t trust improv acts.”

She tilts her head. “You really think the campers are trusting my glitter noodle games because they believe in structure?”

“No,” I say, voice hardening. “They trust you because you make them feel safe by pretending nothing’s serious. But that’s going to break the second something goes wrong.”

She straightens. “And you think that’s not already in my head every time I lead a session? You think I’m not calculating risk just because I’m not barking orders?”

I pause.

She’s standing now, soaked in lakewater and sunlight, eyes blazing.

“I’m not here to ruin your system,” she says, voice shaking a little. “I’m here because

I'm damn good at helping kids swim through the hard parts. You do it with structure. I do it with sparkles. But don't stand there and tell me I'm not taking it seriously."

There's silence.

Even the lake wind goes still.

"I never said you weren't serious," I murmur.

"Feels like you did."

We lock eyes.

I don't know what I want more, to walk away, or to grab her by the shoulders and ask why the hell her chaos makes me feel steadier than any schedule ever has.

But I do neither.

Because rules are rules.

And I have a feeling she's going to keep breaking every single one of mine.

The next morning is smooth.

Too smooth.

The lake's glassy. The kids show up on time. Even the paddleboards are stacked properly for once.

I'm halfway through my checklist when I hear it.

A splash wrong and sharp.

Then silence.

“Help!”

The voice is high. Panicked.

My head snaps up to see Max, one of our quietest campers, thrashing in the deep zone, his eyes wide and wild.

Before I can move, Callie’s already in.

She dives clean no hesitation, no wasted movement. Breaks the surface near him with a calm, easy stroke like she’s made of instinct.

“I got you, Maxie,” she says, low and firm. “You’re okay. Just hold on.”

He clings to her with that frantic, frozen look I’ve seen before. She keeps talking. Keeps her tone steady. Doesn’t rush. Doesn’t jolt him with instructions. She just is there.

And somehow, that’s enough.

She paddles them both to the shallow shelf, guiding his legs like she’s done it a thousand times. He’s crying quietly. She crouches beside him, running a hand through his soaked curls and whispering something I can’t hear.

But I don’t need to.

I see it in the way he breathes easier.

In the way she stays kneeling even after he's safe just in case.

Julie's already with them now, wrapping a towel around Max. Callie walks back toward me, dripping wet, her face unreadable.

"You alright?" I ask.

"Yeah," she says, rubbing water from her eyes. "He just panicked. Didn't realize how deep it got."

I nod. "You handled it well."

She shrugs. "Instinct."

But I know better.

That wasn't just instinct. That was experience. That was someone who's been watching more closely than she lets on.

And for the first time since she cannonballed into my life, I realize something:

Callie O'Shea isn't a problem to solve.

She's a force to trust.

Even if she drives me insane.

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CALLIE

It's past lights-out, but sleep's playing hard to get.

My bunk creaks every time I shift, and the campfire smoke from earlier is still lodged in my hair like a ghost with commitment issues. I've read the same line in my book six times. Even my journal gave up on me, my last entry just says, "Glitter = good. Ryder = ???"

So when I slip on my hoodie and step into the pine-sweet night air, it's not because I'm chasing anything.

It's because something's pulling.

The moon's full tonight, heavy and yellow like a coin tossed across the sky. Camp Lightning's quiet, the way it only gets this late when the last marshmallow's been roasted and even the raccoons have tapped out.

I follow the path toward the lake, barefoot, the dirt cool beneath my feet.

And there he is.

Ryder.

Knee-deep in moonlight and water, back turned, hair slicked like he just surfaced from a dive. His arms are crossed, his shoulders wide and still. Even from behind, he looks... heavy. Like the lake's holding up more than just his body.

I think about going back.

But I don't.

Instead, I step softly onto the dock and sit, letting my legs dangle over the edge. He doesn't move, but I know he knows I'm here.

"Told Julie you'd be the moonlit brooding type," I say, voice light. "You're making me look real psychic right now."

He doesn't answer at first.

"Couldn't sleep."

"Yeah. Me neither." I swirl my toes in the water. "Too quiet in the cabin. Also, my bunk mattress is trying to assassinate me."

Still nothing.

So I try something softer.

"You come here a lot at night?"

He nods. Just once.

"It's different then," he says, voice low. "The water. It listens more."

I glance at him. "You talk to the lake?"

"Sometimes it talks back."

I go still.

Because he's not teasing. He means it.

And for the first time since I met him, Ryder's not wielding silence like a weapon. He's using it like a story.

I shift, just a little closer.

"You said once you had a tribe," I murmur. "Back before... all this."

He nods again. Slower this time. "Yeah."

"What were they like?"

He's quiet so long I think he's not going to answer.

Then he says, "Loud. Fierce. Wild."

I blink. "Sounds like my kind of people."

His mouth twitches. Not a smile. But not not a smile.

"They lived deep," he says, still watching the water. "Past the shelf. Where the light dies and the real world stops. Magic's thicker down there. Slower. It clings to your bones."

My breath catches.

He's not performing. He's remembering.

“We weren’t supposed to come up often,” he goes on. “Surface living was... novelty. Dangerous. Some of us went anyway. Curiosity, I guess. But I was born curious. Couldn’t help it. Wanted to know what starlight looked like underwater.”

I say nothing. Just listen.

“One night, there was a breach. A crack in the trench that shouldn’t have been there. Old magic. Something collapsed. Whole outpost went dark. My parents, my sister, my mentor, gone.”

My stomach knots.

“I swam for hours,” he says, voice steady but cracked around the edges. “Looking. Screaming through the current. By the time I got to the top, the rupture had sealed itself.”

He turns toward me now. Not fully. Just enough that I see his profile, his jaw set, his eyes dark, rimmed with silver light.

“I was fifteen,” he says. “And alone.”

The only sound is the lapping water and the frogs somewhere in the reeds.

And I can’t make a joke.

Can’t flirt or sass or spin a metaphor out of grief.

So I just say, “I’m sorry.”

And mean it.

He shrugs. “That’s the thing about the deep. When it takes, it doesn’t give back.”

I inch closer, not touching him, just... near.

“But you came up,” I whisper.

He nods. “Camp offered me a job three years ago. Said they needed someone who understood the water.”

“And rules,” I say, gently.

“And rules,” he echoes, softer.

“You think you’re holding it all together,” I say. “But maybe it’s okay to let someone else swim beside you.”

He looks at me then.

Really looks.

His eyes in the moonlight are silver glass. Not cold just unguarded.

It feels like a held breath.

Like a wave that hasn’t crashed yet.

Then he turns away, just a little, and says, “You ever talk this much at night?”

“Only when I’m trying to get broody lifeguards to crack,” I say, voice shaky but teasing.

It earns me a small, tired snort.

I'll take it.

We sit there, two silhouettes against a quiet lake, long after the moon's shifted and the air's gone crisp.

And for once... I don't need to fill the silence.

Because he's filled it with something real.

As the night stretches on, I sit there a little longer, the quiet between us settling like a comfortable weight. The water laps softly against the dock, and the stars flicker above us like scattered confetti. Neither of us speaks. Neither of us needs to.

I catch myself glancing at him more than I probably should. The way the moonlight hits his jawline, the steady rhythm of his breathing, the slight shift of his posture whenever he thinks I'm not looking.

It's maddening how much he pulls at something in me I'm trying to ignore.

"Ryder," I say quietly, breaking the silence. "How do you know when to let go?"

He looks at me, the silver in his eyes reflecting a question I hadn't even fully formed yet.

"Let go of what?" he asks, voice low.

"Of... everything. Of control, of being the one who holds the weight of the world together. How do you know when to stop holding on so tight?"

He doesn't answer right away. Instead, he turns to face me fully, his movements slow, deliberate. His gaze flickers to the water, then back to me.

"I'm still learning," he says, almost like it's a confession.

I smile, my heart light in my chest. "We all are."

And then, without thinking, I shift closer. Just a little. Close enough that I can feel the warmth of his body despite the cool night air. His scent, faintly salty like the lake, fills the space between us.

He doesn't move away. Doesn't back up.

Instead, he holds my gaze, his face softened in a way I haven't seen before.

"Callie," he says, voice barely a whisper. "You drive me crazy."

I bite back a grin. "You're not the only one."

Before either of us can second-guess it he leans forward, just enough that our foreheads almost touch. His breath mingles with mine, soft and steady.

I feel a flutter in my chest, something unfamiliar but not unpleasant.

For a moment, we just stay there, so close I can feel his heartbeat syncing with mine.

I don't know who moves first, but suddenly, his lips are brushing against my ear, his voice a quiet murmur.

"If I let go," he says, "what happens?"

I close my eyes for a moment, letting the question settle in. “We find out,” I whisper back.

And for the first time in a long while, I’m not scared of the answer.

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RYDER

I wake choking on saltwater.

Except there's no water.

Just my bunk. Cold sheets. My skin slick with sweat.

The dream fades in pieces. Cold hands. Whispers in the current. Something pulling, dragging me down into the dark.

My heart is hammering like it wants out.

I sit up, swing my legs over the edge, and rub a hand over my face. It's still dark out. Just a sliver of moon through the window. A breeze stirs the edge of my curtain, soft as breath.

It shouldn't rattle me. I've had dreams before. Every one of us from below has. That's what happens when you leave the deep, you don't get to forget it.

But this one felt different.

Older.

I stand, dress quickly, and head out toward the lake. Can't sleep now. Not when the dream's still clinging to my ribs like seaweed.

The air is heavy tonight. Not humid. Just... thick.

The lake is calm. Too calm.

Even the bugs are quiet.

By mid-morning, I've almost convinced myself I imagined it.

Almost.

Then the riptide hits.

We're running our group course on the west end of the lake, canoe handling under light wind conditions. I've got three campers paddling figure-eights between the buoys. I'm scanning the water, routine, alert but relaxed.

Callie's on the dock with the next group, teasing Jason about sunscreen and tying juice boxes into a floatie wreath like it's art class.

Then I feel it.

A shift.

Like something inhaled just under the surface.

I snap my gaze back to the water, Group Two's canoe is drifting. Not paddling. Drifting fast.

"Eliza, brace left!" I shout. "Paddle back into current!"

They try, but the water isn't obeying anymore. It's yanking the canoe sideways, faster

than the wind accounts for. Faster than the kids know how to handle.

The buoy jerks from its anchor. Water sloshes in unnatural pulses. And I know this isn't just a current.

This is magic.

"Callie!" I bark, already diving.

I hit the lake like a blade.

Cold. Fast. Pure instinct.

The current fights me, but I've trained for worse. I push through the drag, find the canoe just as Eliza starts to panic, her paddle spinning uselessly.

"I've got you," I growl, grabbing the side. "Keep it balanced."

Her friend is shaking. I lock eyes with him. "Hands on the rim. Now. Don't move unless I say."

They listen. Thank the gods, they listen.

I kick hard, using my tail to stabilize, shifting the boat's angle while assessing the flow.

It's not natural. It's not right. It moves like it's got a mind. Like something underneath is stirring, testing the surface.

It pulses again.

My spine prickles. I grit my teeth and push through it.

Takes everything I've got to drag the canoe out of the drag zone. Once it clears the invisible line, the pull vanishes just like that.

Gone.

Like it was never there.

I guide them back, breathing hard, jaw locked so tight I taste blood.

On shore, Callie's already helping the kids out, calming them with that voice of hers, warm and strong like a campfire on a bad night.

"You okay?" she whispers as I haul myself onto the dock beside her.

"No," I mutter.

She frowns.

I shake my head. "That wasn't wind. That wasn't water physics."

"You think it's the rupture?"

"I know it is."

She swallows, quiet now. "How bad?"

I glance out at the lake, where the surface ripples soft and innocent.

"It's waking up," I say. "And it's hungry."

Later, I'm in the staff lodge with a towel around my neck and the old depth charts spread out on the floor. Julie crouches beside me, reading the notations in quiet horror.

"I thought it was sealed," she says.

"It was. But seals weaken. Magic isn't static."

Callie walks in with a thermos and sets it in front of me without speaking.

I take it, nod once. She doesn't smile. Doesn't tease. Just sits down beside me, cross-legged, serious.

"Tell me what we're looking at," she says.

I point to the rift zone on the south map. "That's where it pulled them. It was mild this morning. Barely a grab. But if it spreads"

"we could lose someone," she finishes.

I nod.

Julie exhales. "What do you need?"

"Restricted swim zones. Deep alert training for all staff. And I want the magical anchors reactivated."

"They haven't been used in"

"I know," I cut in. "Get them."

She leaves, already texting.

Callie stays.

Her fingers brush mine on the map. Brief. Warm.

“I saw the way it hit you,” she murmurs. “Like it knew you.”

I look at her. “It does.”

She doesn’t flinch. “Then we fight smarter. Together.”

There’s no sass in her now. No quips. Just steel under freckles.

And I realize something:

She’s not just glitter and chaos.

She’s grit. And guts.

And if this rift opens all the way, she’s exactly the kind of fire I want beside me.

Later that night, I meet Torack down by the old boathouse. He’s waiting in the shadows, arms crossed, sea-stone beads threaded through his beard like silent warnings.

I don’t waste time. “It’s active.”

He nods once. “I felt the shift this morning. Thought maybe I was imagining it.”

“You weren’t.”

Torack's eyes flick to the lake, dark and still under the stars. "Is it waking slow? Or is it coming hard?"

"It's probing," I say. "Testing the edges."

His jaw tightens. "Same as before."

"No." I shake my head. "Worse. It feels older."

Torack goes quiet.

"You think it's the breach at Wren's Hollow?"

"No." My voice is steady. "I think it's the core fracture under Lightring itself."

He curses under his breath. "You'd better be wrong."

"I'm not."

He sighs, dragging a hand down his face. "We always knew the camp sat too close to deep water. Too much magic. Too much pressure. We made it work because you made it work."

"It's not just campers anymore," I say, voice sharp. "Max went under today. If Callie hadn't been there, I don't know if he'd have come up."

Torack nods grimly. "And it's not just Max."

I stiffen. "What do you mean?"

He doesn't blink.

I stare.

Then it hits me. Cold and deep.

“You mean?”

Torack nods. “That kid in Cabin Seven. Short, loud, eyes too old for her age.”

My blood freezes.

My voice comes out like gravel. “Lillian.”

“Yeah.”

Torack’s voice softens, but only just. “It’s not just magic or protocol. It’s personal.”

I nod, once. Tight. “Understood.”

“You tell me what you need, Ryder,” he says. “Anchors, markers, old rituals, we’ll give you everything.”

“I’ll stop it,” I promise, voice like stone. “Whatever it takes.”

Torack clasps my shoulder. “Good. Because if we don’t stop it this time...”

He doesn’t finish.

He doesn’t need to.

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CALLIE

It starts with a shout.

High, sharp, and wrong.

I spin on the dock just in time to see two campers, Zoe and Gabriel tilting too far to one side in their canoe. The water around them ripples weird, like it's breathing in.

Suddenly, they vanish.

The boat doesn't flip. It sinks .

Straight down, as if the lake decided, nope, I'll take that now.

I'm moving before I know it. Jason's yelling something behind me, but I'm already at the edge when I see him.

Ryder.

He explodes out of the water like he was waiting for this moment.

No hesitation. No wasted movement. He cuts through the current like it's begging to part for him. One second he's on the surface, the next he's under again, arms sweeping, legs disappearing in a swirl of foam and silver flicker.

Seconds pass. Too many.

Then he breaks the surface again, Gabriel in one arm, Zoe clinging to his back, wild-eyed and coughing.

I run down the shallows to meet them.

“Got ’em?” I shout.

“Safe,” he grits out, hauling them both through water that still wants to pull them back.

Zoe starts crying when her feet hit sand. Gabriel clings to my side like a barnacle.

I glance at Ryder.

He looks furious.

Not at them.

At the lake.

Like it betrayed him.

And for the first time, I see it, that edge in his eyes isn’t just control.

It’s fear.

Some people love coffee. Some people love long walks on the beach.

I, apparently, love arguing with a brooding merman about water safety at eight in the damn morning.

“You can’t just tape off half the lake like it’s a crime scene,” I snap, hands on my hips. “We need those zones for training.”

Ryder doesn’t flinch. Just finishes wrapping a bright red cord around the main dock post, ties it like he’s angry at knots. “We almost lost two campers yesterday.”

“Almost,” I say, stepping closer. “You pulled them out. We learned from it. We adapt. That’s how this works.”

He straightens, towering over me, shirt clinging to his chest like betrayal. “We don’t adapt after someone drowns.”

I roll my eyes. “I’m not saying we play dodgeball in the rift. But we can’t just throw up warning signs and pretend the water stops existing.”

His jaw clenches. “I’m protecting them.”

“No,” I say, poking him in the sternum, “you’re controlling everything.”

His gaze sharpens. “And you’re dismissing risk like it’s optional.”

I laugh, short and sharp. “You think because I wear floaties and talk glitter I don’t see danger? I saw Max’s face when that current hit. I see it, Ryder. I just don’t let it rule me.”

He steps forward, close enough to feel the heat rolling off him.

“Then start acting like it matters,” he growls.

My blood spikes, hot and furious. “Don’t you dare talk to me like I’m not out here every day keeping them safe in my own way.”

A beat.

His chest rises and falls once. Twice.

He says, quieter, “You have no idea what’s coming.”

I stare at him, my heart thudding so loud I think the water hears it.

“What do you mean?”

He looks away, jaw set like he wants to say more, but won’t. “Just keep them away from the south channel.”

“No.” I fold my arms. “Not until you tell me what’s really going on.”

“Callie”

“Ryder.”

We lock eyes.

His hand twitches like he’s debating grabbing me, or maybe running.

And then

“Callie!” Jason yells from across the dock. “We got a kid too close to the drop!”

My heart flips. We both bolt.

By the time we get there, the camper, Tyson, from Cabin Five is safe. A little freaked out, a lot wet, and very confused about how he “just started floating the wrong way.”

Ryder kneels beside him, voice low and calm, checking vitals, asking questions. His whole demeanor shifts in these moments focused, fierce, a soldier in deep water.

I crouch beside them, resting a hand on Tyson's back.

"You okay, buddy?" I ask softly.

He nods. "Yeah. But it pulled weird. Like... fast but quiet."

Ryder and I glance at each other.

The same thing Max said.

The same wrong current.

Back at the main cabin, I corner him again.

"Ryder, talk to me. "

He shakes his head. "You don't want to know."

"I do."

"It'll change how you see the camp."

"Good. Because something's already changed, and I'm not going to stand by and pretend this is just another summer."

He exhales hard, rubbing the back of his neck. "It's not just a current. It's a rift. Underneath us. Old magic. Something from before this lake was a lake."

I blink.

“Oh.”

He watches me carefully, like he expects me to laugh it off. Float away.

But I don't.

“Okay,” I say.

He narrows his eyes. “Okay?”

“You thought I'd freak out?”

“I thought you'd run.”

I laugh. “You're ridiculous. I once taught a swim lesson during a thunderstorm. You think some ancient lake magic's gonna make me pack up my glitter and go?”

Something changes in his expression.

Like a crack in ice.

He steps closer. “You're not afraid.”

“Terrified,” I say honestly. “But I'm also here. And I'm not going anywhere.”

His breath catches. Barely.

And then we're close again. That same too-close distance from the dock, from the canoe, from the fire pit after dark.

“Callie,” he says, voice low, “you make me crazy.”

“You said that already.”

He nods, stepping even closer. “I meant it more now.”

We’re centimeters apart.

He smells like lakewater and lightning.

And I hate how much I want to lean in.

“Are we really doing this right now?” I whisper.

He breathes out a laugh, surprised, rough. “No. But I don’t think I can stop.”

Neither can I.

But before either of us can close the space, a horn blows from the other side of camp.

Training time.

He pulls back first. Regret etched in his shoulders.

I try to catch my breath, but my lungs are still in the argument.

Still in the way he looked at me like I was gravity.

And maybe, I look at him the same way.

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RYDER

Something's wrong.

Not just a twitch-in-the-gut, off-season algae bloom kind of wrong.

Deep wrong.

Old wrong.

The lake is colder than it should be for late summer. The wind's blowing west when the clouds say east. And this morning, I pulled three silver scales off the dock that weren't mine and they hummed .

No one else noticed. Not yet.

But I do.

I've lived in this skin too long not to know when the deep is whispering.

And it's not whispering anymore.

It's warning.

"Julie," I say, stepping into her office mid-lunch, clipboard in hand but forgotten.
"We need to talk."

She looks up from her soup like I just handed her a dead fish. “Oh no. That tone. That’s your ‘camp’s doomed’ tone.”

“I’m serious.”

She gestures at the seat across from her. “That’s even worse.”

I sit, hard. “The lake’s changing.”

“Because of the rift?” she asks, already reaching for her notes.

“Yes. But it’s more than that. It’s behaving intentionally. ”

She arches a brow. “Water doesn’t have intent.”

“It does when it’s ancient,” I say, voice low.

That gets her attention.

“Ryder,” she says slowly, “how ancient are we talking?”

“Pre-human settlement. Maybe older.”

Julie sits back like someone pulled the floor out from under her chair.

“Shit.”

“Exactly.”

I pull a soaked page from my bag one of the old ward maps Torack sent up. She leans over, eyes narrowing.

“This symbol,” I tap it, “only activates when sentient aquatic magic starts probing borders. It’s glowing.”

Julie swears again. “You’re sure?”

“I felt it in the water.”

A beat.

She looks at me, careful. “And how bad is it?”

I pause.

My instincts scream the answer. Bad enough I should be pulling every camper from the water and ringing the old bells.

But I also know panic spreads faster than magic.

So I lie. Softly.

“It’s manageable. For now.”

She studies me. “That’s not the whole truth.”

“It’s the truth I need you to act on without evacuating the entire camp.”

Julie closes her eyes, sighs like it hurts.

Then nods. “What do you need?”

“Permission to deploy the anchor stones. The big ones. And to reroute all swim drills

to the north curve.”

“Done.”

“And Callie needs to know.”

Julie raises an eyebrow. “You sure?”

“She’s in it. Whether she likes it or not.”

“Or whether you like it or not,” she mutters.

I ignore that.

Mostly.

Later, I walk the shoreline, checking tide marks. There’s a slick, dark ridge I haven’t seen in three years, left by surge-magic as it retracts. The reeds twitch like they’re breathing.

And I swear, when I kneel at the edge, I hear something humming in the silt.

The same hum from my dream.

It knows I’m watching.

Worse?

It’s watching back.

She finds me near the boathouse, crouched in the grass by the tide ridge, running my

fingers through a smear of dark silt that stinks like old copper.

“Hey,” she says, voice softer than usual. “You look like you’re trying to solve the lake with angry touching.”

I don’t look up. “It’s bleeding.”

“What?”

I hold up my hand. Black water drips from my palm. “It’s coming from deeper than before. And it’s old.”

She steps closer, crouches beside me. Her eyes scan the shoreline, the ripple pattern. She’s learning. Fast.

Then she says it.

The obvious thing.

“The lake’s this bad... why don’t we shut it down?”

I meet her gaze.

And I hate the answer.

“If we shut the lake,” I say, “we shut the camp.”

She frowns. “So?”

“So every parent pulls their kid. Every sponsor yanks funding. The board panics, and this place turns into an abandoned cautionary tale.”

Callie stares at me.

“So it’s PR,” she says slowly. “That’s what’s keeping us in the water.”

“It’s more than that.” My voice tightens. “This camp is the only place some of these kids feel safe. If we lose it, really lose it, we don’t get it back.”

She doesn’t say anything at first.

“That’s a hell of a line to balance.”

I nod. “I’ve been walking it for three summers.”

She touches my arm. Just lightly. “Then I guess I better learn to walk it with you.”

And the weight on my shoulders shifts.

Not lighter.

But less lonely.

That night at dinner, I try to focus.

I do.

The kids are loud, the stew’s bland, and Julie keeps sneaking glances at me like I’m going to announce doomsday between bites of cornbread.

But my eyes keep drifting.

To her.

Callie's on the far end of the table, perched on the bench backward, laughing with the junior counselors as she re-enacts something dramatic with a juice box and a fork.

The kids near her are in hysterics. She's radiant, wild and full of light like a bonfire that doesn't burn but pulls you in anyway.

And I hate how often I'm pulled in.

She catches my gaze mid-laugh. Doesn't stop smiling. Just lifts an eyebrow, like what are you looking at, lifeguard?

I look away.

Pretend to read the safety roster again. But the names blur. The numbers don't land.

Because all I can think about is her voice echoing in my head.

Then I guess I better learn to walk it with you.

And that shouldn't matter more than tide shifts or anchor placement.

But gods help me, it does.

The lake is changing.

But so am I.

And I don't know which scares me more.

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CALLIE

If I've learned anything this summer, it's that lakes don't wait.

They don't give warnings. Don't send polite memos saying, "Hey, gonna toss a squall your way, grab your floaties and hold tight."

They just go.

And today, the lake goes feral.

It happens fast.

One minute we're running a basic treading drill in the east bay, sun high and warm like it hasn't figured out it's supposed to be cursed right now. The next, clouds roll in like they've got beef with the horizon, and the wind turns from lazy breeze to slap-you-in-the-face cold.

I look up and everything drops.

Temperature. Pressure. My stomach.

"Everyone to shore!" I yell, voice sharp. "Now!"

Kids start kicking toward the dock, splashing more from panic than propulsion. I'm about to dive in to help steer the stragglers when I hear it, screaming.

High-pitched. Distant.

And familiar.

“Penny,” I gasp. “Oh gods”

She’s out past the marker line, where the water gets real and fast. A wave slams her sideways, swallowing her for a breathless beat.

Then she pops up, flailing, mouth open, gasping.

“RYDER!” I scream before I even finish my thought.

He’s there.

Of course he is.

One second he’s on the dock, next second, slicing through the water like he was born in it.

I dive in behind him, because instincts be damned, I’m not watching this from shore.

The lake is angrier than I’ve ever felt it.

Not just wind or chop. It pushes. Like a fist under the surface.

I can barely keep my bearings, but I follow Ryder’s silver trail, eyes locked on Penny’s bobbing head.

She’s crying now, barely paddling. Water crashes into her from all angles.

Ryder reaches her first, arms circling under hers. “I got you,” he says, calm and deep like thunder.

She sobs, clinging to him like he’s solid land.

I reach them a breath later, grabbing her hand. “Hey, Penny. Deep breath, babe. We’re right here.”

“I can’t” she coughs. “It pulled”

“We know,” I say. “We’re getting you out.”

Ryder nods at me, jaw clenched. “On three. You take her left. I’ve got right.”

We move together without speaking, without thinking. I don’t even feel the cold anymore. Just her weight, her shaking, and his strength steady beside me.

When we hit shallows, I trip once in the drag, knees bruising on rock but we don’t stop until she’s flat on the sand, coughing, pale but breathing.

Jason sprints over with towels and blankets. Julie’s radio crackles in the background. Campers crowd at the edge, worried but silent.

And me?

I fall backward into the mud, chest heaving, and start laughing. Hysterically.

“Of course the lake has weather mood swings now,” I gasp. “Why not? Next it’ll start texting threats.”

Ryder drops down beside me, soaked and silent, eyes locked on the lake like it

personally offended him.

“That,” he says, voice rough, “was too damn close.”

“She’s okay,” I whisper, more to convince myself than anyone else.

He nods, jaw flexing. “That squall wasn’t natural.”

I glance sideways. “You think it’s connected?”

“I know it is.”

The weight of those words sits heavy in my chest.

We sit there for a minute, shoulder to shoulder, soaked in silence.

And I realize, not for the first time, how much this man carries.

Not just rules and rotas and rescue drills.

Everything.

And somehow, when I’m next to him, the world feels a little steadier. Not calmer, necessarily. But anchored.

I don’t say any of that.

I just sit there with him, letting our shared breath and muddy clothes be enough.

Behind us, Penny’s getting checked out, Jason cracking jokes to distract her, Julie directing the rest of the kids back toward the main cabin.

The moment passes.

But something under my skin shifts.

Not a crush. Not a spark.

Something deeper.

And I don't know what to call it yet.

But I know it's real.

We help Penny back to the lodge, stick close until Julie declares her officially fine, fussed over, and fed.

The rest of camp slowly slips back into routine, like the lake didn't just try to eat someone an hour ago.

But Ryder lingers.

And so do I.

It's not awkward.

Not really.

More like a tension stretched between us, taut and hot and humming just beneath the surface.

When he glances at me across the firewood pile, something shifts in his eyes. Softer than usual. Like he's seeing me not just as the chaos-maker or the glitter delinquent,

but as something steadier. Something real.

“Hey,” I say, voice a little lower than usual.

He looks up, brows drawn. “Yeah?”

I shrug. “Thanks. For... y’know. Jumping in with me.”

He nods, and something flickers across his face, complicated and unreadable and so him.

We’re close again. Not touching, but I feel him. Every inch of tension between us.

And for one terrifying, delicious moment, I think he might kiss me.

I think I might let him.

His eyes drop to my mouth.

Mine do the same.

And then, BOOM.

A deafening crack explodes from the mess hall. A cloud of blue smoke billows out the window. A chorus of shrieks follows.

“What the”

Jason sprints past, cackling like a man possessed, wearing a snorkel, a tutu, and two pots strapped to his chest like armor.

“PRANK WAR IS LIVE, LOSERS!” he screams, launching a water balloon at a junior counselor. “LONG LIVE THE JELLYFISH KING!”

Ryder blinks.

I blink.

And the moment collapses into laughter.

I double over, wheezing. “I, he, was he wearing pasta strainers on his arms?”

“Affirmative,” Ryder deadpans, but his eyes are dancing now.

Jason zips by again. “NO ONE IS SAFE! I HAVE UNICORN GLITTER BOMBS!”

“I swear to the gods,” I gasp between giggles, “he’s why we can’t have nice things.”

Ryder chuckles, quiet and deep, and for just a second, he looks at me like we’ll pick this up later.

And I think, yeah.

We will.

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RYDER

I avoid her for two days.

Not on purpose at first.

I tell myself I'm busy. That the lake demands more of me now. That Penny's close call and the signs in the deep mean I need to stay focused. Stay ahead.

And that's not a lie.

But it's not the whole truth either.

Because every time I close my eyes, I see her.

The curve of her grin, salt-touched and breathless.

The way her wet curls stuck to her cheek.

The way her mouth moved toward mine like gravity was in on the joke.

She didn't kiss me.

We didn't touch.

But I felt it.

And now it's everywhere.

I can't concentrate. My drills run slow. My patrols get looped. I nearly miss a knot in the southern anchor rigging, and Torack gives me a look like pull it together, soldier.

Julie notices. Of course she does.

"You sick?" she asks while handing me a roster with two new transfer campers.

"Fine."

"You're acting like you stepped on a sea urchin and it crawled up your spine."

"I said I'm fine ."

She eyes me, unconvinced. "This about Callie?"

I stiffen.

"I avoid complications," I say flatly.

"Yeah, well, some complications glitter and bite back."

I don't answer. Just take the roster and head for the waterline.

Because she's right.

And that's the problem.

At dinner, I sit at the far end of the table.

Far from the junior counselors and their chaos.

Far from her.

But it doesn't matter.

My eyes find her anyway.

Callie's laughing, knees up on the bench, swiping frosting from her nose after Jason surprise-attacked her with a cupcake ambush. She's got one of the kids braiding yarn into her hair and another trying to paint her arm like a jungle cat.

And she glows.

Not like fire.

Like something wilder.

Something that shouldn't be caged.

When she glances over just once, barely a flick of her gaze, I pretend not to notice.

But the air shifts. Like she feels it too.

I shove another bite of food in my mouth to block the ache.

This isn't the time.

Not with the rift shifting.

Not with magic coiling under the lake like it's dreaming about storms.

Not when distraction could cost someone their life.

Later that night, I walk the perimeter of the north path.

The water's calm again. But it's the kind of calm that comes before something breaks.

The reeds shiver when there's no wind.

The dock creaks like it's breathing.

And in the dark, I swear I hear her voice.

Not her.

But the thing in the lake.

The thing that remembers me.

That wants something I can't name.

I stand there until my muscles lock, jaw clenched so tight I could bite through steel.

Then a sound behind me.

Footsteps.

I don't have to turn to know.

It's her.

She steps up beside me, arms crossed, silent for once.

We don't speak.

Not yet.

"You good?" she asks, voice low and casual.

"Fine."

"You keep saying that."

"Because it's true."

She scoffs. "You're about as fine as a soggy firework."

I don't look at her.

Because if I do, I might say something stupid.

Or worse, true.

Instead I say, "I'm keeping people safe."

"Who says you're not?"

"I can't afford mistakes."

She's quiet a beat.

"You think I'm a mistake?"

Her voice doesn't rise. Doesn't snap. But it cuts.

I look at her.

And gods help me, she's just standing there, not angry, not smiling. Just waiting.

I take a breath.

"No," I say, honest and hoarse. "You're a risk."

She smiles, just a little. "So are you."

And then she walks away, her steps light on the path, vanishing back toward camp like moonlight on moving water.

And I don't breathe again until she's gone.

Because every second I spend near her, my grip slips.

And I don't know if I want to catch it again.

The silence stretches after she leaves.

Too long.

Then rumble.

Subtle, at first. Like a groan in the bedrock. A ripple of sound under my feet, not through the air but through the earth.

The water near the west dock ripples outward in a perfect circle.

No wind.

No splash.

Just motion.

And then screaming.

I'm running before the second note hits.

It's coming from the south cove.

By the time I round the trail bend, two kids are huddled near the canoe rack, eyes wide, pointing.

"It was in the water!" one shouts. "It looked at me! "

I crouch fast, eye level. "What did you see?"

"A face," the boy stammers. "Under the surface. Glowing eyes. Like green fire."

The other nods, pale. "It smiled."

I freeze.

Because I know what that means.

The Watcher.

The guardian that once lived near the trench's edge before the fracture. It doesn't smile.

Not unless it's warning us.

Or welcoming something worse.

Julie's there in seconds, breath short from the sprint. "What happened?"

I answer for them. "The rift moved again. It's watching now."

She stiffens. "How close?"

I glance at the lake, the ripples still widening.

"Too close."

And deep inside, something ancient unfurls in my chest.

The part of me that remembers the trench. The magic. The loss.

It's awake now.

And it's coming.

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CALLIE

The rain starts as a drizzle, a gentle patter that turns the air misty and gray. I'm scooping up a pile of rubber ducks, my sneakers sinking into the wet sand of the pond's edge, when Ryder's voice slices through the damp breeze.

"We need to move."

I straighten, squinting. "Yeah, it's raining. But they're called raincoats for a reason, right?"

His expression stays flat. "This isn't a rainstorm. It's a monsoon."

As if on cue, thunder rumbles in the distance, low and ominous. Shadows spill across the pond's surface, the water turning the silvery color of storm clouds churning overhead.

I scrub through my hair, frizz already forming at my temples. "Great. My first disaster of the day and it's got special effects."

Ryder snorts, but it's not amused. It's edgy. Tense. His eyes dart toward the water, then back to me. "Shelter. Now."

He doesn't wait for me to agree or argue. Just grabs me by the wrist and starts hauling us toward a crooked little hut halfway up the beach, its wooden sign that once read "BOAT SHACK" now half-rubbed away by wind and time.

Lightning splits the sky, the sudden flash of white illuminating the pond, turning the beach bone-pale. The wind howls through the pines at our backs, spraying needles like confetti.

I glance over my shoulder, but the pond is already blurred behind a curtain of rain or something else, something thicker, grayer, like mist with teeth.

When we reach the boat shack, Ryder shoves the door open so hard it skitters against its rusty hinges, and practically flings me inside.

Then he slams the door shut just as the storm hits its first real blast and not a second too soon, because the rain comes down in sheets so thick and heavy they could drown a fish.

The air inside the shack is musty, but warm and surprisingly dry. I lean against the doorway, brushing rainwater from my arms and hair, the shivers already starting.

Ryder mutters under his breath, rummaging in a dusty corner and tossing me a slightly moth-eaten blanket. "Here. You're soaked."

I catch it, the fabric scratchy against my chilled skin. "So are you."

He shoots me a dry look. "Fish don't get cold."

"But don't you get, like, mad scales when you dry out?" I say, wrapping the blanket around me with a shiver. My hair is plastered to my forehead, frizz starting to bloom like a cloud of red thunder above my eyes.

His lips twitch, but he doesn't take the bait. "Merfolk don't dry out. We're not actual fish."

I do appreciate biology lessons. But right now, with the storm swirling outside and the air inside the shack getting thicker by the second, I'm more focused on the way his silver eyes are lingering and how my heart skips, just a little, because he hasn't looked away yet.

"I think this is the first time you've ever been nice to me," I blurt.

He inclines his head, brow arching. "Taking shelter isn't nice. It's logical."

"Oh, you have logic now?"

"I always did." He leans against the wall, watching me as I peel my wet shirt away from my skin uncomfortably. "You've just been too busy breaking my rules to notice."

"Right. Because your rules are so important," I shoot back, reflexively defensive. The banter covers up the tension, the charge in the air. "More important than keeping campers alive," I add sarcastically.

His expression darkens, and he straightens, the muscles in his bare arms tightening. "They are."

The admission hangs between us for a beat, pregnant with something heavy. Then, quietly:

"They have to be."

He's closer now. Too close. My heart pounds against my ribcage, wild and traitorous, as I tilt my chin to meet his gaze. "Or what? The sky falls?"

His fingers brush against my cheek, startling in its tenderness. "Yeah. Or that."

The world narrows to the space between us, heat simmering as he leans in, slow and measured, giving me time to pull away.

I don't.

His mouth finds mine, tentative at first, a feather-light brush of lips that sends electricity skittering down my spine.

I gasp, surging forward, pulling him closer by his shirt and he responds in kind, one hand tangling in my hair, the other splayed against my back, pressing me into him so hard the air leaves my lungs.

The kiss deepens, tongues tangling, all the tension and banter between us igniting at once. His skin is slick and hot under my fingers.

I tug at his shirt, and it's gone, tossed aside like an afterthought, his lean torso all taut muscle and smooth scales that gleam even in the dim light of the shack.

"Callie," he murmurs against my mouth, voice low and rough.

My fingers trail down his chest, tracing a line to his waistband, where the human skin fades entirely into scales.

"Ryder" I start, but he cuts me off with another searing kiss, hands roaming my body like he's mapping me, learning every dip and curve.

The storm is raging louder now, wind howling against the walls of the shack, but all I can hear is the quickening of his breath, the rustle of fabric as things shirts, jeans give way to heat and skin.

The air in the boat shack is electric, charged with the intensity of the storm and our

sudden, desperate need for each other.

Ryder's hands are firm on my hips as he hoists me up against the rough wooden wall, his lips never leaving mine.

His kiss is both punishing and tender, as if he's trying to erase all our arguments and tension with a single, searing connection.

I wrap my legs around his waist, and he moves his hips against mine, his cock pressing against my opening. I gasp into his mouth, my pulses racing so fast I can barely breathe. His fingers dig into my ass cheeks, holding me steady as he enters me with a low, feral growl.

"Ryder" I manage to get out between kisses, "this is"

But I can't form a coherent thought, not when his mouth is on my neck, trailing hot, wet kisses along my collarbone.

His fingers find the hem of my shirt, tugging it over my head, leaving me bare from the waist up.

A sliver of cold air hits me, but he doesn't give me a chance to shiver; his hands are already exploring every inch of my exposed skin as he drives into me.

His mouth is on my breast, his tongue flicking over my nipple until I cry out in pleasure.

"Ryder!" My fingers tangle in his dark, wet hair, pulling him closer. He responds with a sharp nip, a playful bite that sends fireworks shooting through me. "Fuck, Ryder, deeper. Now."

I feel him smirk against my skin, and he pulls back just enough to lock eyes with me. Even though the shack is dim, his silver eyes are sharp and bright, locking onto me with a possessiveness that makes heat pool between my legs.

He pulls out slowly, keeping eye contact, teasing me until I let out a childish huff of impatience.

He smirks, and in one fluid motion slams back into me, his bare body flush against mine.

I can feel him, all of him, rock-hard and driving relentlessly into my pussy.

He reaches down, his fingers brushing my slit, finding me slick and aching.

He teases for just a second, and I squirm, trying to get him to move faster, to take me harder.

"Ryder," I pant, "stop play"

But he cuts me off by thrusting into me deeper, filling me completely in one smooth motion. I cry out, the sharp pleasure-pain of him overwhelming everything else. My back arches, and he pulls almost all the way out again before slamming back in with a groan.

"Damn it, Callie," he growls into my neck, his pace brutal and relentless. "You were always too much. Too loud, too reckless, too fucking perfect."

I claw my nails down his back, meeting his thrusts with every ounce of strength I have.

The wood groans behind us as he fucks me against the wall, my toes barely grazing

the floor.

The storm outside is a cacophony of thunder and rain, but my world is narrowed to his body and the way he's driving into me with punishing force, hitting all the right spots over and over again.

I can feel it building, a swirling, pulsing heat inside me, ready to burst. I clutch him tighter, digging my fingers into his shoulders, and Ryder leans back just enough to look at me, his dark hair falling into his silver eyes.

"Come for me, Callie," he demands, his voice ragged. "I want to feel you fall apart."

And like that, I do, shattering into a thousand pieces as pleasure rips through me in unstoppable waves.

My body convulses around him, and he follows seconds after, his arms tightening around me with an almost bruising force as he buries himself deep inside me, his groan of release muffled in my hair.

For a moment, we stay like that, pressed together, breathing hard and listening to the storm rage outside. I can feel his heartbeat against mine, erratic and wild, and I wonder how we got here, why it feels like my world just realigned itself around him.

But then the moment shatters as abruptly as it began, and reality comes crashing back. We've broken all the rules, my rules, his rules, the rules of the camp, and probably a dozen other unwritten laws between humans and merfolk. And no amount of excuses or banter is going to save us now.

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RYDER

The morning air's too sharp.

Not cool. Not fresh.

Like it's slicing through me on purpose.

I haul myself up from the shoreline just before dawn, boots wet, shirt stuck to my back from dew and regret. The camp's quiet. Still sleeping. Still innocent.

But I'm not.

Not after last night.

Her skin's still on mine. Her laugh's still echoing in my head like a storm that hasn't passed. And the weight of what we did, what I let happen, it claws at me with every step.

I shouldn't have gone to her.

Shouldn't have stayed.

I curse under my breath, trying to shake her out of my head like she's just lakewater and not the damn fire eating through my chest.

But it's too late for pretending.

And too dangerous to keep going.

I see her at breakfast.

She's barefoot, wearing one of those oversized shirts she knots at the waist, hair a tangle of curls that looks even better messy.

She catches my eye like it's nothing.

Like we didn't...

No.

Nope.

She waves a spoon in my direction and grins. "Hey, Grumpzilla. Want some coffee or are you surviving on pure angst this morning?"

I blink.

Then walk the other direction without answering.

Her grin falters.

But she doesn't follow.

That makes it worse somehow.

Julie corners me during equipment checks like she's got a sixth sense for guilt.

"You avoiding your co-lead now?" she asks, clipboard in one hand, coffee in the

other.

“She’s fine running the lake drills on her own.”

Julie squints at me. “Is that your official excuse, or are we pretending we don’t know what happened between you two last night?”

I don’t answer.

Julie doesn’t need me to.

“You know,” she says, “some people let themselves be happy for more than one night.”

“This isn’t about me being happy,” I snap.

“It never is with you,” she mutters, walking off before I can reply.

I stare at the equipment bin like it might explode just to end the conversation.

Callie finds me at the edge of the north dock just before the advanced swim block. Her voice is light, but her eyes aren’t.

“You mad at me or just allergic to human connection?”

I don’t turn. “You shouldn’t be here.”

She laughs once, bitter. “Wow. Straight to the classics.”

“This isn’t a game, Callie.”

Her arms cross, and the fire I usually love in her starts to flare. “You think I’m treating it like one?”

“You’re not listening.”

“Oh, I’m listening ,” she shoots back. “Loud and clear. You’re retreating, Ryder. Don’t try to spin it like it’s for my protection.”

“It is for your protection,” I say, turning now, voice sharp. “You don’t understand what’s coming. What this place is. If something happens to you because of me”

She steps in close. “Something already happened. And it wasn’t a mistake.”

“I didn’t say it was.”

“But you’re acting like it.”

I clench my fists. “This isn’t about what I want.”

“Bullshit,” she says, eyes blazing. “It’s only about what you want. You think pushing me away is noble? It’s cowardly. You don’t get to protect me from you. That’s not your call.”

My chest tightens.

Because she’s not wrong.

But it doesn’t change the facts.

“The rift’s growing,” I say, softer. “The magic is pulling harder every day. If it opens, if it drags this whole place under, I have to be ready. I can’t be distracted. ”

“You think I’m a distraction?”

“No,” I say, broken. “You’re the only damn thing that feels real.”

She blinks.

Then turns away.

And walks off.

No jokes.

No sass.

Just gone.

And I hate myself for letting her go.

But I hate what might happen to her more.

Later that afternoon, I’m standing at the far edge of the swim zone, scanning the water like I’ve done every day for years.

The sun is out. No wind. Not a cloud in the sky.

The lake should be calm.

But it isn’t.

Out near the buoy line, the water dips.

Just barely.

Like something exhales.

A whirl of ripples shudders outward, and then pull.

Fast. Jagged. Wrong.

I don't hesitate. I dive.

By the time I reach the center, the pressure's changed again. It drags sideways now, not down. A twisting motion, unnatural, like hands trying to spin the lake into a drain.

No one's in the water.

Thank the gods.

But the fact that it showed up now when everything's calm, when no trigger's present?

That's new.

And bad.

I tread there for a moment, letting the current fight me, cataloging the shift. The taste of the water is sour now. Like old copper and something burned.

When I surface and swim back to shore, my chest is heavy. And not just from the effort.

It's happening.

The rift's not just waking up.

It's growing bold.

And next time?

It won't wait until the water's empty.

After nightfall, I go back.

I wait until the camp's quiet until even the fire pit's gone cold and the wind's dropped off into silence. Then I slip down to the southern cove alone, no flashlight, no gear. Just instinct and dread.

I don't know why I return.

Only that I have to.

And I feel it before I see it.

A pulse in the silt. A vibration beneath the skin of the lake. Like something ancient breathing through stone.

I wade in.

Shallow at first. Then deeper. Waist-high. Chest-high.

Then I reach down.

My fingers close around something smooth. Cold. Etched.

I pull.

And when it breaks the surface, my knees nearly buckle.

A shard of dark coral. Twisted, braided through with silver. My tribe's binding pattern. A sigil I haven't seen since the collapse. Since the loss.

It shouldn't be here.

It was buried swallowed whole by the rift's maw.

But now...

It's surfaced.

Thrown up.

I grip it tightly in one fist, heart hammering.

This isn't random.

It's a message.

The lake remembers me.

And it's calling me back.

CALLIE

Ryder's avoiding me again.

And this time, it's worse.

Because now I know what his hands feel like on my skin. I know what his voice sounds like when it isn't armored in protocol and silence. I know what it's like when he lets go.

And now he's walking around like it didn't happen.

No glances. No banter. Just clipped commands and tight jawlines.

So I follow him.

Out past the cabins, down the slope to where the lake's starting to turn purple with the setting sun. He's pretending to do an inventory check on the gear shed like it requires military-grade focus.

"Hey," I say.

Nothing.

"Ryder," I repeat, louder. "Talk to me."

Still nothing.

So I do what any emotionally repressed camp counselor with a rage kink does.

I kick over the nearest paddleboard.

He turns fast, like he's ready to fight, but stops when he sees me. Really sees me.

"What the hell was that?" he growls.

"Your attention-grabbing intervention, " I snap. "Now that I have it, let's go. Talk. Right now."

"There's nothing to talk about."

"Like hell there isn't."

I march closer, arms crossed. "You think you can just shut down after everything? Pretend it didn't happen? Avoid eye contact like we're awkward teenagers who bumped knees at prom?"

He says nothing.

His jaw flexes.

So I push harder.

"Look, I get it. Control freak. Big scary lake. Monsters under the surface inside your head, too, probably. But that night"

"That night was a mistake," he says.

The words hit like a slap.

But I don't back down.

"Bull. Shit."

"It distracted me," he snaps, stepping forward. "I let it. And now the riptide's surging even when the skies are clear, and kids are seeing glowing eyes in the water. I don't have room for mistakes right now."

"Oh, so I'm a mistake now?"

"I didn't say that."

"You don't have to."

We're toe to toe now. His breathing's sharp. So is mine.

"You hide behind this 'must protect everyone' routine like it's noble," I hiss. "But it's not. It's a shield. A big, shiny 'do not feel anything' excuse."

He glares. "And you? You joke your way through every crisis like none of it matters. Like if you just smile hard enough, nothing can touch you."

"Maybe because I have to," I shout. "Because if I stop laughing, I'll break in half!"

That shuts him up.

For a second.

"You don't take anything seriously," he says quietly. "Not this camp. Not what we're facing."

My throat tightens. “You think that? After everything I’ve done for these kids? Everything I’ve risked ?”

“I think you bury your fear so deep in sparkles and sass that you forget how to be real.”

“And you think fear’s the same as weakness.”

He doesn’t deny it.

He just looks at me.

Wounded.

Like I peeled something open he wasn’t ready to show.

“I found something,” he says finally, voice low. “Last night. In the lake.”

“What was it?”

“A relic. From my tribe. It shouldn’t be here.”

I breathe in slow. “That’s why you’re shutting down.”

“It means the rift is opening,” he says. “It’s not just magic anymore. It’s intent. And if I let my guard down, if I let you in, someone might die.”

I reach for him before I can stop myself, fingers brushing his wrist. “Ryder...”

He steps back.

I let my hand fall.

“Screw distance,” I say, voice cracking. “I’m not the danger here. I’m the one who swims beside you when the water gets dark. And you know that.”

He doesn’t answer.

But his eyes say everything.

He knows.

And it’s killing him.

“You think you can just keep pushing me away,” I say, stepping forward again, “and that I’ll just bounce back like one of Jason’s stupid pool noodles.”

“Callie”

“No. You don’t get to say my name like that. Like it still means something if you won’t let it.”

His jaw tightens again, but there’s something in his eyes now cracks. Big ones. Like if I press just a little more, the truth will come pouring out.

“I never asked for this,” he mutters.

“You think I did?” My voice is sharp, cutting. “I was supposed to come here, have a weird little summer job, teach kids to float, and maybe kiss someone normal. Not you. Not this.”

“That’s the point,” he says through clenched teeth. “You deserve normal.”

“I deserve the truth, ” I snap. “I deserve someone who won’t slam every damn emotional door in my face just because his feelings scare him.”

He turns away, breath ragged. “You don’t understand what loving me costs. ”

“Oh my gods, Ryder,” I say, tears now threatening but not falling. “It’s not a curse. It’s not some ancient monster prophecy. It’s you. And me. And this. And maybe, yeah, it’s messy and terrifying but that doesn’t mean you get to run from it just because it’s not on your daily checklist.”

He doesn’t move.

So I do the stupid thing.

The brave thing.

I grab his shirt and yank him around to face me.

“I’m here, ” I say, barely above a whisper. “I’m scared, too. But I’m still here. And I’m not going to stop fighting for this just because you keep trying to shut it down.”

His eyes meet mine, blazing.

He opens his mouth like he’s going to argue again.

But nothing comes out.

Because there’s nothing left to say that hasn’t already been shouted.

We just stand there.

Breathing.

Buzzing.

Breaking and wanting all at once.

He turns and walks away.

I walk back to my cabin with my arms crossed tight, not because I'm cold, but because if I don't hold myself together, I might splinter all over the pine needles.

The path is empty.

The frogs are loud.

And every step feels heavier than the last.

By the time I reach my bunk, I don't bother with the lights. I just flop down on the mattress and stare at the wooden ceiling like it owes me answers.

What am I doing here?

This was supposed to be a fun detour. A reset. Campfire songs and floating glitter rings and a few cute crushes.

Instead, I'm knee-deep in monsters, heartbreak, and some ancient water magic that might eat us all.

And worse?

I let myself feel something real.

And I let him matter.

I close my eyes and press the heel of my hand to my chest.

It's still tight there.

Still hurting.

And I don't know how to make it stop.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:58 am

RYDER

The lake doesn't sleep.

Not really.

It waits. Breathes. Watches.

And this morning, it feels like it's watching me.

The sky's overcast, water flat and gray like dull glass. There's no wind, but the trees are restless. Everything's too still in that way that makes your skin crawl like nature's holding its breath.

I stand thigh-deep in the cove just before dawn, the water cold against my legs, the relic from last night still in my hand.

The coral's gone darker. Almost black now. The silver braids pulsing faintly under the surface like veins.

It's calling something.

And it's not subtle anymore.

I close my eyes.

Let my fingers drift.

Feel the pulse of it. The rhythm.

The hum of the lake in my blood.

It answers like it always has quick and sharp. Like muscle memory. Like instinct.

And before I know it, the water moves.

Around me.

With me.

A soft swirl at first. Gentle.

Then sharper.

A current spiraling outward like a ripple pushed through time.

I don't have to touch it. I am it.

And it should feel right.

It used to.

Before I broke it.

Julie finds me on the dock an hour later, dripping and stone-faced.

She doesn't speak. Just folds her arms and waits.

"I summoned," I say flatly.

Her eyes go wide. “On purpose?”

I nod.

“Ryder...”

“I needed to test the boundary. The artifact’s a trigger, it’s echoing through the old currents. Something’s responding.”

“You’re sure it’s not just you responding?”

I glance up sharply. “I’ve kept it buried since I was sixteen. I felt what it could do.”

Julie’s face softens. “You were a kid. And it was an accident.”

“An accident that shattered someone’s spine.”

“That was during training. A panic surge. No one blamed you but”

“I blame me,” I snap.

Because I do.

Because the second I realized what I could do, I stopped.

Dead stop.

No summoning. No control trials. No deeper dives into my tribe’s current craft.

Because it scared me.

Because I scared me.

But now?

I don't get the luxury of fear anymore.

"Ryder," Julie says gently, "you're the only one here who can match what's waking up under us. If you keep locking this down, we're going to lose."

I don't respond.

Because she's not wrong.

And that's what terrifies me most.

After she leaves, I sit on the dock, feet dangling in the water, palms pressed flat against the planks. The lake laps softly against the posts, but underneath, the power coils like a live wire.

I could pull the tide.

Split it.

Turn it inside out.

I used to dream about what I'd become if I wasn't afraid of it.

Then I hurt someone.

And I decided that was the end of the story.

But stories don't end just because we quit telling them.

The lake still remembers me.

And now it wants me to remember it back.

The sun's up now, but it doesn't help.

The light feels thin. Weak. Like even it's afraid of touching what's waking up under this lake.

I walk the perimeter once more, half hoping for quiet, half expecting the ground to split open.

It doesn't.

But something shifts.

In me.

I feel the power still humming under my skin. Still waiting.

And all I can think is, I didn't struggle to access it.

I wanted to.

Some part of me wanted to move the water. To show the lake I still had it in me. To prove I could bend it to my will again.

That part scares the hell out of me.

Because if I stop being afraid of it, what else do I stop being afraid of?

What happens when the current doesn't answer me?

What happens when it does , too much?

I remember the scream. The boy in my arms, blood in the water. My own hands trembling.

And worse, the moment of exhilaration before the fear set in.

I dig my fingers into the dock rail, gripping hard enough to splinter wood.

I'm not a monster.

But I'm not sure I can keep saying that out loud.

Not when the deep wants me back.

Not when I might want it, too.

Later, I pass the arts-and-crafts tent on my way back from the shoreline patrol.

The wind carries laughter, high-pitched, familiar.

I pause.

Callie's there, sitting cross-legged on the wooden bench, surrounded by three other counselors.

They're painting rocks. Or maybe stabbing glitter into mason jars.

Honestly, I can't tell what it's supposed to be, but she's got paint on her nose and a half-finished tie-dye towel draped over one shoulder.

She's laughing.

But it's different.

Too quick. A little sharp at the edges.

I know that laugh.

It's the one she uses when she's trying to cover the ache.

When she wants everyone to think she's fine.

I watch as one of the girls jokingly flicks a paintbrush at her. She dodges it, shouts something teasing back, even flashes that infamous Callie smirk.

But her eyes don't catch light the way they used to.

She's still the brightest thing in the room.

But something in her is dimmed. That usual spark in her eyes has gone low, quiet. Her heart's not in it.

She's going through the motions of being her usual, spunky self.

And I know it's because of me.

I should go to her.

Say something.

Tell her that night together meant everything to me. That she was the first person I felt I could open up to, be alone with. The first person whose voice I found more comforting than solitude.

Fix it.

But I don't.

I turn and walk the other direction, toward my cabin. Toward the quiet.

Because what could I possibly say now that wouldn't make it worse?

What could I possibly give her that wouldn't break again in my hands?

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:58 am

CALLIE

I haven't slept.

I do that thing where you lie on your back and count the knots in the ceiling wood like they're stars that owe you answers. Only the answers never come, and neither does peace.

So I get up.

Sometime after midnight, barefoot and pissed off, armed with a hot glue gun, a toolbox, and one hell of a need to do something other than feel.

Because if I let myself feel for too long, I'll spiral. And I'm way too stubborn for spiraling.

So I build.

On a folding table under the crafts tent with a mug of overly sweetened coffee and a playlist of angry pop girl ballads blasting in my earbuds, I make something.

Something bright.

The idea hits me like a shot of adrenaline and spite. The lake's gotten dangerous, right? Unpredictable. Especially at night. But the kids still want to sit by it, want to belong near it. Magic or not, this place is home to them.

So I build a guide.

A floating ring system solar-powered, water-safe, soft-glow panels fixed to reworked pool noodles and clear tubing. It's messy and a little janky, but the lights pulse soft and golden in my test bucket.

Like fireflies on the water.

I design it to link together. A net of light to outline the new safe swim zones.

But that's not the part that keeps me up until 4 a.m.

It's the centerpieces.

Five larger float markers. Black and silver etched with sea-runed patterns I pulled from the sketch in Ryder's notebook he left on the dock once and probably thought I hadn't seen.

Each of them glows blue. Soft. Steady.

Like a memory that doesn't hurt as much when it's shared.

A tribute.

To his people.

To the ones he lost.

To the ones he's still trying to save.

At sunrise, I drag the whole setup down to the southern dock.

Ryder's already there.

Of course he is.

He's always up before the sun. Always in the water before the rest of us remember how to function.

He's chest-deep, arms crossed like he's arguing with the lake itself.

When he sees me coming with a tarp full of tangled tubing and glitter-smeared float rings strapped across my back like some chaos hydra, he blinks like I'm an illusion.

"You building a raft to escape camp?" he asks, voice low but not unkind.

I drop the load on the dock. "Tempting. But no. You're stuck with me, barnacle boy."

He raises an eyebrow.

I gesture to the mess. "It's a safe float system. Night-lit. Linked for visual boundary guidance."

He stares.

I grin. "In English? It glows. It floats. It helps the kids not die."

His eyes drop to the larger center rings, the ones with the markings.

And that's when he stills.

I fidget suddenly. Which I never do. "I, uh, copied the patterns from that notebook you left out. The one in your cabin. I figured they weren't just doodles."

“They’re not,” he says softly.

We both go quiet.

The lake licks the dock gently, like it’s listening.

He steps closer.

Touches one of the glowing blue rings.

His thumb runs along the markings, so reverent it hurts to watch.

“These... these are deathlights,” he says.

I blink. “Wait, what ?”

He looks up quickly. “Not in a bad way. They’re tributes. Beacons for those lost in the trench. They glow to show their spirits the surface. They’re used during mourning ceremonies.”

“Oh.” My voice goes small. “I didn’t know.”

He shakes his head. “You shouldn’t have known. But you still made them. ”

I shrug, awkward now. “I just figured... even warriors deserve stars.”

His throat works around the silence.

“No one’s ever done anything like this. Not for them. Not for me.”

I don’t know what to say.

So I step closer. “They’re for the kids, too. To feel safe. To see where the danger ends and the trust begins.”

He nods.

Still doesn’t speak.

His eyes are bright now, too bright for the sun just yet.

And when he turns away to blink fast, I pretend I don’t notice.

Because some grief deserves dignity.

Even when it glows.

We’re still standing by the dock, the float rings gently bobbing in the shallows, when heavy footsteps crunch behind us on the gravel.

Torack.

He’s always got the presence of a thundercloud that learned how to walk shoulders wide, arms crossed, beard braided with enough sea-stone to qualify as a small weapons cache. Obviously his daughter Lillian’s work.

He stops at the end of the dock, staring out at the glowing markers without a word.

In that low, slow rumble of his: “Did you make this?”

Ryder doesn’t hesitate. “No. She did.”

Torack’s thick brows twitch. He turns to look at me like I’ve just shapeshifted into a

full-blooded trench sentinel.

I brace for sarcasm. A snort. A dad-joke about noodle glitter warfare.

Instead, he grunts.

Then, flat as dry toast: “Good job.”

I blink. “I, what?”

“Shows initiative,” he adds.

I blink harder.

Ryder smirks, just barely.

And me?

I open my mouth. Close it.

Then finally manage, “Thank you?”

Torack nods once like he’s just delivered a full emotional speech, then turns and walks back toward camp without another word.

I stare after him, stunned.

Ryder leans in, low and amused. “Speechless?”

“Shut up,” I whisper. “I’m having a moment.”

We stand there a little longer, just the two of us again, the lake breathing slow beneath the web of light I made.

Ryder doesn't say anything for a moment.

"You should feel proud."

I glance sideways. "Because Torack didn't insult me?"

He shakes his head. "Because what you made matters. You saw a problem and built a solution that's smart, safe, and " he hesitates, then smirks, "annoyingly clever."

I laugh once, sharp and surprised.

Then he says, more gently, "You're a good engineer, Callie."

The breath gets knocked out of me.

Because no one's said that to me in... a long time.

Not since I left the internship back home. Not since I swapped out schematics for sunblock and safety vests.

I swallow. "Thanks," I say, but it comes out small.

And it makes something tighten in my chest.

Because that word, engineer, carries a whole life behind it.

Deadlines. Expectations. Pressure. A version of me that wore pencil skirts and pretended she knew what she wanted.

I didn't run to Camp Lightring just to escape job hunting.

I ran from growing up.

From being serious. From being stuck.

From becoming someone who stopped laughing.

But hearing it from him , in that voice, with that look in his eyes, doesn't feel like a trap.

It feels like maybe I could be both.

Maybe I already am.

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RYDER

The moon's high and the air's thick with lake mist and regret.

She's out there on the dock again. Same as last night. Legs dangling over the edge, arms looped around her knees like she's holding herself together with sheer willpower.

I should walk away.

Should let her have space.

But I can't. Not anymore.

The distance isn't helping. It's killing me.

And the truth is, I've already chosen her. I just haven't told her yet.

So I walk the length of the dock, each step slower than the last. My boots are silent on the worn wood. I stop when I'm close enough to see the glint of the lake reflected in her eyes.

She doesn't turn.

"I thought maybe you'd keep avoiding me another week or two," she says, her voice light, but tired.

“I was wrong,” I say.

That gets her attention.

She glances up at me. “About what?”

“About thinking I could keep you out.”

The silence stretches. She studies my face like she’s looking for the cracks.

“You think saying that’s gonna magically undo the way you shut me out after we”

“It’s not about undoing,” I cut in. “It’s about starting. Right. This time.”

I sit beside her. The moonlight makes her look unreal. Like something summoned from salt and starlight.

Her voice drops. “Why now?”

“Because I can’t do this halfway anymore,” I say. “Not with you. Not with what’s coming.”

She stiffens. “What is coming?”

I pause. Look out over the lake.

The water’s too calm. Too quiet. Like it’s listening.

“It’s moving again,” I say. “The rift. It’s close.”

“How close?”

“Close enough I can feel it in my spine. The deep’s turning over. It’s breathing up.”

She exhales slowly. “And you still want me near you, even with that?”

“I want you because of that,” I say, voice steady. “Because I’ve never had someone look straight into the storm and not flinch.”

She watches me for a long time.

Then, quieter than I’ve ever heard her: “Ryder... I’m scared.”

I nod. “Me too.”

I lean in.

Her lips meet mine halfway.

And everything else, lake, sky, past falls away.

It’s not a perfect kiss.

It’s better.

It’s real. Raw. Us.

When we break, I rest my forehead against hers.

“No more fear,” I whisper. “No more distance.”

She nods. “Okay.”

We sit like that for a long time, wrapped in silence and each other.

But underneath it all, I feel it again.

The rumble.

Faint. Deep.

The rift's not just coming.

It's awake.

The warmth of her lips still lingers, but the air around us shifts.

It's subtle, at first. A strange pressure in the back of my skull. A low hum rising through the soles of my feet.

Then the lake stirs.

Not visibly.

But deeply.

Like something rolling over in sleep. Something ancient. And pissed.

I go still.

"Ryder?" Callie's voice is soft but sharp. "What is it?"

I lower my head, eyes locked on the black water.

“It’s the rift,” I murmur. “It’s not just pulsing anymore. It’s pulling.”

She sits up straighter. “How bad?”

“Bad enough I can feel it in my chest. Like it’s dragging the tide inward.”

She doesn’t say anything for a second.

Then: “What does that mean?”

“That it’s waking. It’s... opening. For real this time.”

Her hand finds mine.

Warm. Solid.

Real.

“Then we face it together,” she says. “Whatever it means.”

I shake my head. “Callie”

She grips tighter. “No. No more ‘protecting me’ by shutting me out. No more distance. You said it yourself. I’m here. I’m not going anywhere.”

I look at her.

Really look.

And I see it not just bravery, but choice.

She chose me.

And I don't deserve that. But gods, I want to try.

"Okay," I whisper. "Together."

The rift's waking.

And we'll be there side by side when it rises.

We don't go back right away.

Not after that.

Instead, we sit at the end of the dock, toes dipping into the lake, the soft glow of the float rings bobbing around us like stars caught in water.

She leans her head on my shoulder.

I don't flinch.

I don't overthink.

I just let it happen.

The weight of her warm and present settles something in me I didn't realize was still screaming.

She hums a tune I don't recognize. Soft and low, like maybe she's only half-aware she's doing it.

I glance down at her. “What is that?”

She shrugs. “Old lullaby. My mom used to sing it when I couldn’t sleep.”

“It’s nice.”

She smiles. “Don’t act so surprised, saltwater stoic. I’ve got layers.”

“I know,” I say, and I mean it.

She shifts, angling toward me. “So do you.”

I raise a brow. “Yeah?”

“Oh, for sure.” She taps my chest. “Grumpy layer, heroic layer, weirdly hot lake-beast layer, and somewhere under all that, big softy.”

“I am not a big softy.”

“You totally are,” she laughs. “You just hide it under all that brooding.”

I look at her, at the curve of her grin, the way moonlight catches in her hair like fireflies frozen midflight.

I brush a loose curl from her cheek.

She stills.

Then leans into the touch.

And I realize I’m not afraid right now.

Not of her.

Not of the lake.

Not even of myself.

I lean in again, slower this time. Like we're not rushing toward anything, just letting the gravity between us do what it's always wanted to.

When I kiss her, it's different than before.

Not urgent.

Not desperate.

Just ours.

Her hand finds the back of my neck, fingers threading through my hair like she's memorizing the way I feel.

And I let her.

When we pull apart, we don't say anything right away.

We just breathe.

Together.

She says, "Do you ever wonder if this is what peace feels like?"

I nod. "And I wonder how long we get to keep it."

She looks out at the lake. “However long it is, I want it with you.”

And gods help me, I want it too.

So I wrap my arm around her waist and pull her closer.

And for one long, moonlit stretch of night, we don’t talk about monsters or magic or rifts trying to eat the world.

We just exist.

Together.

Exactly as we are.

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CALLIE

T en minutes.

That's all it takes for everything to go sideways.

One moment, we're doing morning warm-ups, half the campers groggy and dragging their feet across the sand like hungover sea turtles. The next chaos.

"Where's Evan?" Emily yells, her face pale.

My heart hiccups.

I do a fast headcount.

I come up two short.

"Sam and Evan were right behind us," someone says. "I saw them by the snack table, I swear"

I don't wait.

I take off sprinting.

Ryder's already moving, faster than me. His boots hit the dock like war drums.

My lungs burn, but I don't stop until I'm at the water.

And that's when I see them.

Just past the shoreline Evan and Sam.

Standing ankle-deep in the lake like they've wandered into someone else's dream.

Their eyes are... wrong.

Wide.

Blank.

Like they've been hypnotized by a thousand years of drowning.

I shout their names, but they don't flinch.

Ryder's already in the water. He moves fast, cutting through the shallows like he's part of it. He reaches them, puts a hand on each shoulder, and that's when they blink.

Both boys shudder like they've just come up from underwater, even though they've barely moved.

"I... I was floating," Evan mumbles.

"But I didn't go in," Sam adds. "It was calling. I just..."

He trails off.

I grab a towel, drop to my knees beside them as Ryder guides them out.

"You guys okay?" I ask, voice too sharp, too fast.

Evan blinks at me. “Are we back?”

I don’t know what that means.

And I don’t like it.

Later, Ryder and I sit on the cabin steps while the boys sleep off whatever spell they wandered through.

Julie called the doc on standby, some old sea medic who’s half mage, half conspiracy theorist. He’s checking for magical residue now.

But I don’t need him to tell me what I already know.

This was the lake.

And it wasn’t subtle.

“They were drawn,” I say.

Ryder nods. “The rift reached.”

My throat tightens. “And they heard it.”

“It’s escalating.”

He looks tired. More than tired haunted.

I bump my shoulder into his. “You okay?”

“No,” he says. “But I’ve got you.”

That shouldn't make me melt.

But it does.

Because it means he's letting me in.

Really in.

"I should've seen it," I say quietly. "Should've been faster."

"No," he says firmly. "This wasn't you."

"But they were my campers."

"They were ours," he corrects. "And we got them back."

I don't say anything.

Because part of me wants to believe him.

But part of me still hears Evan's voice, soft and lost.

Are we back?

What happens when one of them doesn't come back?

What happens when we don't?

Ryder shifts beside me, arms braced on his knees, staring out at nothing.

Then he says it.

Quiet. Heavy.

“The magic is growing sentient.”

I freeze.

“What do you mean, growing ?”

“It wasn’t like this before,” he mutters. “The rift’s always had pull. It feeds on emotion, memory... instinct. But now? It’s thinking. It’s targeting. ”

I turn toward him fully. “You’re saying it knew those boys would come to the water?”

“I think it called to them.”

The bottom of my stomach drops.

He continues, voice tight. “It’s not just reacting anymore. It’s choosing. Learning.”

I shake my head. “That’s not how wild magic works.”

“It is when it’s old enough. Deep enough.”

“But... how? Why now?”

Ryder looks at me, and for once, he doesn’t hold back.

“Because I’m here.”

“What?”

He swallows. “Because I came back. And the part of me that’s connected to it, it knows. It’s not just reaching for prey now. It’s reaching for me.”

The silence between us pulses like a heartbeat.

“And maybe,” he adds quietly, “because it knows I’m not afraid of it anymore.”

I reach out, grab his hand.

He lets me.

“You’re not alone in this,” I say. “Not anymore.”

He looks at our joined hands like it’s the only thing tethering him to the shore.

“Let’s hope that’s enough,” he says.

And neither of us dares say the rest out loud.

What if it isn’t?

Later that night, when the camp finally goes quiet and even the lake seems to rest, I sneak out of my cabin.

I’m not heading to the dock this time.

Instead, I duck into the storage shed behind the old staff building, the one Julie keeps locked with a charm and a lie about “rusty nails and aggressive raccoons.”

I picked a similar charm while trying to escape detention in high school. It works.

Inside, the smell of dust and salt hits me hard.

I flick on the hanging bulb and move straight to the back shelf, fingers tracing old spines of leather-bound manuals and arcane first-aid guides.

I find what I'm looking for wedged between a rusted anchor and a jar of glowbeetle resin.

Tethered Tides: Wardcraft for Elemental Water Dwellings.

It's ancient. Heavy. Probably illegal in at least three dimensions.

I crack it open and start flipping.

Most of it is gibberish. Runic phrasing, enchantment matrices, elemental focuses stuff way above my magic grade.

But some of it?

Some of it makes sense.

Not enough to do anything with. I'm not a witch. I can't cast this stuff. But I can learn.

I can prepare.

Because the rift's not just rising, it's thinking.

And if I'm gonna stand beside Ryder through this, I need to know more than just how to float.

I make notes. Sketch sigils. Dog-ear pages.

I don't tell him.

Not yet.

Because if this goes bad, really bad, I need something to fall back on.

Something even the lake won't see coming.

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RYDER

The lake doesn't pull tonight.

It presses.

The surface is smooth, too smooth. Like it's waiting. Like it's bracing.

I'm thigh-deep by the northern cove, checking the anchor markers on the float system. Callie rigged some extra solar lines through the mid-zone. Smart as hell. She's been a step ahead of me lately, and I hate how much I like it.

The air shifts. The water stills.

Then I feel it.

Not a breeze. Not a wave.

A pulse.

Like something exhaling beneath the lakebed.

The water slams against my ribs like a fist.

I stagger, one arm thrown out for balance, but another pulse hits, harder.

My head snaps back. A high-pitched hum screams in my ears.

The magic's not just stirring anymore.

It's rupturing.

"Shit," I choke, trying to retreat but the current turns sharp, fast, impossibly strong.

It yanks my legs from under me.

I'm dragged down.

Water floods my ears.

I kick, twist, reach for anything.

My hands scrape silt.

Boom.

A soundless crack splits through the water like the world's spine breaking open.

Pain blooms in my chest.

Bright and instant.

Then everything goes black.

When I come to, I'm choking.

Air burns like fire in my lungs.

I'm on the dock, on my back, soaked, shaking.

Callie's over me, knees planted, hair soaked, hands pressed to my chest.

"Ryder?" she says, voice wrecked. "You with me? You gotta be with me."

I cough hard.

Lake water spills down my cheek.

"Hey!" she snaps, half a sob, half a command. "Come on. "

My eyes open. Barely.

She exhales in a rush and slaps my shoulder. "You absolute dumbass. Don't ever do that again."

I wheeze. "Didn't plan on it."

She lets out a sound something between a laugh and a cry and falls forward, bracing herself over me with both arms.

"I dove in when I saw the pulse hit," she says. "You didn't come up. I thought gods, Ryder, I thought the lake took you."

I reach up, slow and shaking, and grab her wrist.

"I felt it rupture," I rasp.

"I saw it." Her voice is sharp. "The float lights went out. Every single one. It knocked two canoes off their hooks."

I sit up, groaning, and look out at the lake.

It's still.

But it shouldn't be.

Callie crouches beside me. "What the hell was that?"

"A warning," I say.

"No," she whispers. "That was a threat. "

We sit in the dark, dripping, cold, and quiet.

The lake doesn't move.

But something in me does.

Because this time, I didn't just sense the rift.

I felt it break.

We sit on the dock for a long time.

My breath finally evens out. Her fingers don't leave mine.

The lake looks innocent again.

Glass and moonlight.

But we both know it's a lie.

"Callie," I say, voice like gravel, "I need to tell you something."

She looks at me, brows drawn. “Yeah?”

I force myself to meet her eyes.

“The next time it calls” I pause. Swallow hard. “It’s not going to let go.”

Her grip tightens. “Don’t say that.”

“I’m serious. That pulse? It wasn’t meant to scare me. It was testing me. Seeing how deep it could pull without breaking me. And next time” I shake my head. “Next time it’ll pull harder. ”

She’s already shaking her head. “Then we stop it before that. We plan. We fight. You’re not going under. Not like that. Not alone. ”

“It wants me,” I say, softer now. “I don’t know why, not completely, but it does. It’s tied to my blood. My tribe. My power.”

She cups my face with both hands. “I don’t care what it wants. It doesn’t get to have you.”

I close my eyes.

Because gods, I want to believe her.

But deep down, I can still feel that current in my veins.

Still hear the hum of the rift calling my name like it already owns me.

And I don’t know if I can fight it off forever.

But I do know this:

If it takes me, if I let it, I won't go without a fight.

And I won't go without saying goodbye.

We end up back at my cabin.

Not because I suggest it.

Callie just grabs my hand, gives me that look, don't fight me on this and leads the way.

She doesn't say a word as she pulls off my soaked shirt and tosses me a dry one from the footlocker. Doesn't flinch at the new bruises blooming along my ribs. Doesn't comment on the shaking in my fingers when I sit on the edge of the bed.

She just moves around the space like she belongs there.

And gods help me, I want her to.

She tosses me a blanket. Then wraps one around her shoulders, sits beside me on the bed, and exhales.

"That was the worst ten minutes of my life," she says finally.

I lean back on my elbows. "You handled it."

She looks at me. "That doesn't mean it didn't wreck me."

Her voice breaks on the word wreck, and something cracks open in me right

alongside it.

I reach for her hand, thread my fingers through hers.

“You’re allowed to be scared,” I say.

She leans her head against my shoulder. “I don’t want to lose you, Ryder.”

“You won’t.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I don’t,” I admit. “But I know this, if I do go under... you’re the last thing I want to remember.”

She turns her face to look at me.

And I see it in her eyes, everything she’s not saying.

So I say it first.

“I love you.”

She doesn’t gasp. Doesn’t freeze. Just melts.

Slow and sure, like every wall she’s ever built just forgot how to stand.

“I love you, too,” she whispers. “You absolute disaster of a man.”

I smirk. “Takes one to know one.”

She kisses me.

Not rough. Not rushed.

Just real.

The kind of kiss you give someone when you're anchoring them to the here and now.

When you're choosing them, even with everything trying to tear the world apart.

She crawls into the bed beside me, curls against my chest, and lets out the softest sigh I've ever heard.

"Just stay here," she mumbles.

"I'm not going anywhere."

And somehow, I believe it.

Because right now, in this room, in her arms.

The lake can wait.

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CALLIE

I t takes me three cups of coffee, half a cinnamon roll, and two full circuits around the lake before I admit it to myself.

I can't lose him.

Not to the lake.

Not to the magic.

Not to anything.

So I do what any desperate, emotionally compromised non-magical camp counselor would do.

I track down Hazel.

Thirteen years old. Popular. Probably enchanted her lip gloss. Known throughout camp for two things: mid-level spellwork and maximum-level sass.

I find her at the arts and crafts tent, surrounded by a gaggle of wide-eyed acolytes who are watching her braid her hair with fireflies. I swear to all that is holy, this kid has a glitter god complex.

She spots me before I even speak. "You're looking for me."

“I am.”

She raises one perfectly arched brow. “Obviously.”

“Hazel, I need a favor.”

“Everyone does.” She sighs dramatically and waves a hand, dismissing her audience.

“Leave us, mortals. The coven requires privacy.”

I try not to laugh as a ten-year-old boy actually bows and backs away.

Hazel perches on a bench, kicks her feet up, and folds her hands like she’s royalty.

“Okay, Callie. Spill.”

I lower my voice. “It’s about Ryder.”

“Ohhh.” She leans in. “Is this about the lake pulling him under?”

I blink. “You heard about that?”

“Please. Half the camp knows. Jason’s been reenacting it with water balloons and spooky sound effects.”

Of course he has.

“I want to keep him here,” I say. “Anchored. Protected.”

Her eyes narrow. “You want a binding charm.”

“Yes. Something strong enough to keep the lake from taking him.”

She whistles. “That’s advanced stuff. You’re not a caster.”

“I know. That’s why I came to you.”

Hazel leans back, chewing on the edge of one of her many hair beads. “It won’t be easy. The rift’s already got hooks in him. The magic’s older than me, older than this lake. Binding someone to the surface takes more than a chant and a friendship bracelet.”

“I’ll help. I’ll do whatever you need.”

She eyes me. “Even if it costs?”

I nod. “What’s the price?”

Her grin turns devious. “I want your shift tomorrow. Water games. I get to run it. With full glitter cannon access.”

My mouth falls open. “Hazel”

“ Full. Access. ” she repeats, smug as sin.

I hesitate.

Then sigh. “Fine.”

She squeals. “Yay! We’re making magic!”

She hops up and starts pulling supplies from her enchanted fanny pack like she’s about to host a sparkly séance.

“Meet me at the fire circle at midnight,” she says. “Bring something of his. Something important. Something real. ”

“What kind of real?”

She pauses, suddenly serious. “Something with his heart in it. Not blood. Just... meaning.”

I nod slowly.

“Thanks, Hazel.”

She winks. “Anything for true love. Now get outta here. I’ve got prep to do and boys to impress.”

As I walk away, I don’t even bother to hide my smile.

Because yeah, this might be wild and reckless.

But Ryder’s not going under.

Not if I can help it.

Not without me.

Hazel runs water games the next day.

Runs is a generous term.

Reigns might be more accurate.

I try not to wince as she steps out onto the pool deck wearing a sequined cape, swim goggles bedazzled with rhinestones, and holding what I can only describe as a modified leaf blower that's spewing purple glitter.

"Loyal subjects!" she announces. "Today, you compete for glory, hydration, and tiny plastic trophies shaped like narwhals!"

Jason cheers like she's Moses parting the lake.

Ryder stands next to me with his arms crossed and the kind of look on his face that says I want to intervene but I'm afraid of that small child's wrath.

"What... is happening?" he mutters as a foam noodle is launched thirty feet into the air by some kind of enchanted geyser.

"Hazel's running the show," I say, trying not to sound smug.

"I can see that."

A group of six-year-olds rides an inflatable banana across the shallow end like it's a battle chariot. A flying water balloon zooms past Ryder's head and explodes on a counselor's clipboard.

"It's fine," I assure him quickly. "No one's gotten hurt."

"Yet," he mutters.

I glance over to see Hazel levitate herself three feet off the lifeguard chair while shouting, "ALLIANCE brEAKERS WILL BE BANNED TO THE SHALLOW ZONE!"

Ryder looks at me sideways. “ Why exactly did you agree to this?”

I shrug, the picture of innocence. “She earned it.”

“Callie.”

“She wanted to prove herself.”

He squints. “You’re hiding something.”

“Nope.”

He stares a beat longer.

I give him my most radiant, lying-through-my-teeth smile.

He doesn’t press.

And I’m grateful.

Because tonight?

Tonight I meet Hazel at the fire circle with a piece of Ryder’s world in my pocket and a prayer in my chest.

That night, just before I head to the fire circle, I sit alone by the edge of the dock.

The lake’s still.

But I know better.

I know what it's waiting for.

The float lights flicker soft around the boundary line, casting reflections like stars that sank too low.

I pull the item from my pocket, Ryder's compass.

The one clipped to his belt that he dropped on the cabin floor two nights ago without realizing. I almost gave it back.

But something told me not to.

The metal's worn smooth from years of use. Still ticks. Still points true. Like him.

Stubborn. Solid. Relentlessly good even when he doesn't believe it.

And gods, I love him for it.

I'm not a hero.

I'm barely a functioning adult.

But I know this, if the rift rises, if it tries to take him, if it threatens these kids or this place.

It'll have to get through me first.

So yeah.

I'm making a deal with a precocious thirteen-year-old witch with flair for the dramatic and a probably-illegal stash of enchanted glitter.

And yeah, maybe that's reckless.

Maybe it won't work.

But if I don't try, if I just stand back and watch the lake eat the person I love?

That would break me more than any magic ever could.

So I close my fingers around the compass.

Take one last breath.

And whisper to the lake, to the stars, to whatever's listening.

“Not without a fight.”

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RYDER

The night air is cool against my scales, but every part of me is on fire, thanks to the woman beside me.

We stole away from the cabins, drawn by the need to find a moment alone.

The solar lantern platform hovers above the water, casting a gentle, otherworldly glow around us.

Below, the lake is almost too still, holding its breath as we find our way to the center of the platform.

Callie walks beside me, her hand in mine, fingers laced tightly.

She looks up at me, those green eyes reflecting the light of the lanterns like stars in their own right.

The freckles across her cheeks are constellations I want to trace with my lips, and the red of her hair reminds me of the sunrise over the ocean back home, a promise of something beautiful.

"You okay?" she asks, her voice soft, like she's worried about breaking the silence.

I nod. "Just... thinking."

She tugs me closer, her thumb brushing the back of my hand. "About what?"

I take a deep breath, the weight on my chest lifting slightly as the words find their way out. "You know that night on the lake? When the rift almost took me?"

Her grip tightens. "I do."

"I think... I think that's when I realized I couldn't lose you."

Callie smiles, but there's sadness behind it. "You think that's when you realized it?"

I tilt my head. "What do you mean?"

"I realized I couldn't lose you the night we met."

I raise an eyebrow. "When you nearly impaled yourself on those inflatable mermaids?"

She laughs. "Such a romantic, Ryder. I'll have you know, the mermaids were retaliating."

"Ah. Of course." My smile fades, but my voice stays light. "You realize it would make a terrible love story."

"Two idiots saving each other from rogue pool floats? Bestseller material, I tell you."

We both chuckle, but the heaviness returns too soon.

She steps closer, her free hand coming up to brush my hair back. "But really, though. There's something about you, you know?"

"Aside from the tail and scales?"

"Aside from that, yes." She grins. "I think it's the fact that you take everything so seriously, but you crumble when a bunch of kids tug you into a glitter fight."

I wince at the memory of Hazel's latest victory. "I'm beginning to think she spends her nights studying strategies to ensure I'm perpetually covered in sparkles."

"Smart girl. Keeps you humble."

"Keeps me annoyed ."

Callie shakes her head, her expression softening. "But that's the thing. You're here . In the mess. In the chaos. You're not just some aloof merman who saved a bunch of kids. You're Ryder . My Ryder."

I swallow hard. "I don't belong here."

She goes still. "What?"

"In the human world. I don't belong here. But... I belong with you."

Her eyes water, but she keeps them on mine. "You know, they say home is where the heart is."

"You think I'm cheesy enough to believe that?"

She laughs. "I think you're sentimental enough, yes."

I pull her to me, wrapping my arms around her waist, and she feels small and strong and perfect in every way.

Her lips find mine, and suddenly the world is just us her scent, the warmth of her

skin, the sparks that always ignite between us, no matter how much we argue or clash or pretend we don't care.

I brush a strand of hair from her face and see her smile again before claiming her lips once more.

I kiss her again, and again, until both of us are breathless, our hands exploring, our bodies drawn to each other like sirens to the shore. The lanterns sway above us, flickering like the beating of our hearts, as we lie against the platform and let the night cover us like a promise.

The lake remains still, but our world explodes in color. It's not the same as the others, but it's ours. And for now, we keep it that way slow, sweet, and tangled in each other until we're not sure where one of us ends and the other begins.

Even thinking about doing this feels precarious. Callie and I are alone, but not that alone. Anyone could walk by, curfew or no.

Still, she has a way of making the unimaginable inevitable.

"Ryder?" she whispers, her fingers tracing the line of my scales down to where they fade into human skin, "are you nervous?"

"I'm always nervous when I'm with you," I say, voice low, and she half rolls her eyes.

"Really? Have you been scared of me this whole time?"

"No," I say, kissing her softly, "but you make me want to break every rule I ever set for myself."

"Well." Her lips curl into a dangerous grin. "I can live with that."

She tugs at the hem of my shirt, and I let her pull it off me, her hands immediately finding my chest.

She traces the line of my scales with her fingers again, tactile and curious, and presses kisses to them, making me shiver.

“God, I want to do terrible things to you.”

“How terrible?”

Her grin is wicked now, and when she pulls my shorts down, it feels like an eternity of anticipation is finally over.

My skin is bare to her now, and the moonlight seems to stick to us like dust, marking the places where we touch. She’s watching me with something like wonder.

I didn’t think it was possible to want her more than I already do, but her breath on my skin is making it difficult to think straight.

I growl, and then she’s kissing me, hard and deep, and all I can think about is her, her mouth, her hands, the way her body moves against mine.

She’s making sounds of encouragement, little gasps and moans that are so fucking hot, and it’s all I can do not to lose my mind.

“Callie,” I say between kisses, “Callie, I need”

“I know,” she says, and she’s between my legs, her hands moving with purpose, and when she takes my cock in her mouth, my groan reverberates through the dock, loud enough to drown out any thought of propriety.

Her mouth is perfect and warm and wet, and she's looking up at me with those green eyes, and that's when I know, I'm so gone, it's beyond salvation.

"Callie," I breathe, my hands hard in her hair, but gentle, trying to be careful, "Callie!"

And I'm coming, spilling into her mouth, and she drinks me down greedily, her eyes never leaving mine.

She crawls back up to me and kisses me, tasting myself on her lips, and I can't remember the last time I felt so completely at someone else's mercy or liked it so damn much.

I reach for her bikini bottoms, slow, giving her time to tell me no, but she's already helping me slide them down.

When she's naked under me, I can barely breathe, can barely think for how much I want her. I'm already hard again just looking as her tits bounce as I move her to my liking.

I slide my cock into her slowly, and we both groan with relief.

"You feel incredible," I tell her, still moving. "Your pussy is so tight."

She digs her nails into my shoulders, her eyes fluttering shut. "I know," she says, and I laugh breathlessly against her throat.

I start off slow, letting her walls adjust to my length. Every inch I pull out and push in, I feel her getting wetter.

"Fuck, please," she groans under me. Her fingers grip at my back, desperate. "Please

fuck me faster!"

"If that's what you want," I whisper in her ear.

And then we're really moving together, her hips meeting my pace, slowly at first, then faster, and I'm losing myself in her, and she's gasping beneath me, her hips rolling to meet every thrust, our bodies wet with sweat and slick with need.

"Ryder, I'm, I'm close," she says, and it pulls me back to the world just enough to realize we're both there already, both on the brink of oblivion.

I reach between us, finding her clit, and she makes a sound that almost undoes me completely. The waves sound like thunder, and the solar lanterns sway pleasantly overhead.

When she finally comes, she digs her nails into my back, and her face is gorgeous, all twisted up in pleasure, and I am completely, wholly in love with her.

"I love you," I say, and she's looking up at me with so much adoration I can hardly stand it.

"I love you too," she whispers.

We don't say anything else. We don't need to.

We're in love, and we're safe, and right now, that's all that matters.

We lay on the dock under the stars in silence, her head resting on my chest, my arm wrapped around her shoulders. The night is cool, but we're both warm from the heat of each other.

Her fingers trace patterns on my scales, occasionally dipping below the water.

"Your tail is actually pretty smooth," she says, her voice quiet and filled with wonder.

I chuckle. "I'm glad it meets your approval."

She grins and looks up at me. "Can you feel when I touch them?"

"Every touch."

Her eyebrows lift. "Really?"

She pokes me in the side, and I flinch.

"Keep it up," I warn her, "and I'll tickle you until you fall off the dock."

"You wouldn't," she challenges, eyes glinting mischievously.

"Try me."

She makes a face and starts tickling me, hitting all the spots she knows will send me into a fit of laughter. I try to squirm away, but there's no escaping her.

"Callie," I gasp between laughs, "Callie, stop!"

"No way, fishboy," she teases. "You started this."

"Okay, okay, truce!" I manage to get out before dissolving into laughter again.

She finally relents, collapsing on top of me, her face pressed into my neck as she tries to catch her breath. I wrap my arms around her, holding her close.

“You’re lucky you’re cute,” I grumble playfully.

She laughs and kisses me.

I smile against her lips, savoring the moment.

We snuggle in closer, content to simply be together under the stars. The night is still and peaceful, and for a moment, all the worries of the world slip away.

But as always, duty calls.

“We should get back soon,” I say reluctantly. “The campers will be up early, and someone has to keep all the aquatic chaos in check.”

Callie sighs. “Fine, but only because I know you’ll worry otherwise.”

I stand and offer her my hand, helping her up. We dress slowly, both of us reluctant to leave the serenity of the night.

“I’ll walk you back,” I say, leading the way toward the cabins.

“Thanks,” she says, taking my hand again. “For everything.”

I smile, squeezing her hand gently. “Anytime.”

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CALLIE

When I wake, the light's already soft and golden across the cabin floor.

Ryder's not in bed.

But I hear him moving.

Not in a rush, not loud. Just... moving.

And gods, my heart stutters because I know what last night was.

Not just comfort. Not just heat. Not even just love.

It was a choice.

And I chose him. All of him.

And I felt him choose me.

I pull on his shirt because it's there, because it smells like him, because it's oversized and comfortable and makes me feel like maybe the world isn't ending and pad barefoot out the door.

He's standing just outside, on the edge of the overlook behind his cabin.

The sun lights him up like something mythic. Bare shoulders. Back tense. Jaw set.

He doesn't hear me come up behind him.

"You always brooding this early," I tease, wrapping my arms around his waist from behind, "or is this a special occasion?"

He tenses for half a second.

Then relaxes into me.

"Couldn't sleep."

"Nightmares?" I ask.

"No," he says, voice rough. "Dreams."

That makes me pause. "Good or bad?"

"Both."

I lean into him. "Well, if I'm not in them, they're inaccurate."

That earns me the faintest smirk.

Then he turns, cups my cheek, and just looks at me.

Like he's memorizing the way my freckles land or something equally poetic and unnecessary and totally him when no one's watching.

"I love you," he says.

I grin. "I mean, duh."

“I’m serious.”

“So am I.”

His thumb brushes my cheekbone, and it’s so gentle I forget the lake exists for a minute.

“I don’t want to lose you,” he says.

“You won’t,” I promise. “We’ve got each other. And Hazel’s amulet will hold. We’ve got a plan. Sort of. And if it doesn’t work well, I’m very good at improvising with glitter and nerve.”

But he doesn’t smile.

Not really.

He just leans down, kisses my forehead, and whispers, “Go back inside. I’ll bring breakfast.”

My stomach flutters for all the wrong reasons.

“Ryder…”

“Go.”

So I do.

But I don’t stop worrying.

Because I’ve seen him like this before.

And every time, it means he's about to do something very noble and very dumb.

Back at the cabin, I dig through my bag for the notes I made on the ward symbols Hazel etched into the amulet.

My gut's been squirming all morning.

I want to believe we're ahead of this thing. That the rift hasn't already slithered past our last line of defense. That we have time.

But I know better.

The lake's been quiet for almost twelve hours now.

And quiet means it's building something.

Coiling tighter.

Pulling back.

Getting ready to strike.

I'm mid-scroll through my notebook when Ryder comes back with two paper-wrapped breakfast sandwiches and a camp thermos of questionable coffee.

He sets everything down and slides onto the bunk beside me.

I kiss his shoulder in thanks and hand him a pen.

"Write down everything you felt yesterday. When it pulsed. The timing. The pull. The direction."

He arches a brow. “We’re doing this now?”

“Uh, yeah. The apocalypse doesn’t get weekends off.”

He smirks faintly, but does what I ask. Good man.

Still, his shoulders are tense.

His jaw keeps ticking.

And I know he’s thinking something he hasn’t said out loud yet.

So I say it for him.

“You’re planning something.”

He freezes.

“Ryder.”

He doesn’t look at me. “Just trying to stay ahead.”

I grab his hand. “No secrets. Not anymore.”

He stills. Then, very quietly, “Whatever happens... I’m not letting it take you. I won’t.”

“Okay,” I say, voice soft.

But what I want to say is:

Whatever you're thinking, don't do it alone.

Whatever line you're ready to cross bring me with you.

Because if this is the final pull...

We face it together.

Even if it drags us both under.

The rupture opens just before sunset.

One second, the lake's still.

The next, it's screaming.

A pulse slams through the camp like thunder underwater. The float lights explode outward. The air shimmers with pressure and power and something old , so old it makes my skin crawl and my teeth ache.

Campers cry out.

Sirens, real ones, flare from the boundary alarms.

But I already know where he is.

I run to the lake.

Ryder's there.

Standing on the dock, stripped down to his boots and swim shorts, glowing faintly

with the shimmer of current craft wrapping tightly around his arms.

“No,” I shout, skidding to a stop. “Ryder, don’t you dare. ”

He doesn’t turn.

“Callie” he starts.

“You go in there alone, and I swear I will hex you myself!” I scream.

He finally looks at me.

And I see it, resolve. The kind that doesn’t bend.

“I can collapse it,” he says. “But I have to get inside. I have to anchor it from the center. ”

“Then I’m coming with you.” I step towards him, ready for anything. Ready to protect him, these kids, this camp that means everything to me.

“No,” he says, stepping back. “If I fail, if I get caught, you can still lead them. Protect them.”

I shake my head. “I didn’t fall in love with you just to watch you die heroic. I’m coming.”

“I love you,” he says, breaking.

And gods, that wrecks me.

“I know, ” I sob. “That’s why you don’t get to do this alone.”

But his jaw's set.

He turns to the water.

Takes one breath.

And dives in.

The lake swallows him whole.

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RYDER

The water closes over me like a fist.

Cold and ancient.

I kick down hard, arms tight at my sides. The current grabs me immediately, coiling around my legs, yanking like it knows I don't belong here anymore.

But I do.

This is where I'm supposed to be.

I open myself to it.

Feel it.

Not just the temperature or the pull. The will .

Because the rift is awake now.

And it knows me.

It knows my bloodline, my tribe, the weight of my failure. It curls around my magic like it's tasting it. Testing me.

"Not today," I murmur through my teeth, and the sound bubbles uselessly into the

black.

I go deeper.

The lake turns colder. The light above me shrinks until it's no more than a fading thought.

And then, I reach it.

The trench.

The place where it broke the first time.

The water is wrong here. Not just thick, heavy. Like swimming through grief.

The rift pulses, jagged and wide, glowing faint green with heat and magic and rot. It moves like it's breathing.

Like a wound trying to scream.

My chest burns.

I've got seconds, maybe less.

So I stop.

Open my arms.

And call the current.

It answers.

Hard.

The power rushes through me, sharp, hot, wild. It shreds the edges of my thoughts, tries to rip my form apart, but I hold steady. I pull it close. Shape it. Push it into the wound.

I push everything.

My strength.

My guilt.

My love.

Callie's face flickers behind my eyes. Her voice. Her laugh. Her ridiculous glitter cannon and impossible hope.

She believed in me.

More than anyone ever has.

More than I believed in myself.

I press my magic into the rift's core.

The pressure screams.

Something cracks in my chest, real or magical, I don't know. But it hurts.

And still, I push.

I think of my father.

On the night he drowned trying to seal the first breach.

Of the stories he never told, the lessons he never finished.

I never got to say goodbye.

Never got to tell him I was proud to carry his name, even when it felt like a weight.

“I’m not afraid,” I whisper, voice swallowed by the deep. “I understand now.”

I feel the lake tremble.

Not in anger.

But acknowledgement.

I give one last push.

Then let go.

And in the space between breaths, between worlds, between me .

I make peace.

With the past.

With the pain.

With everything I never said.

And I let the water take me.

The rift roars, louder now.

The currents slam around me like fists of old gods.

But just before everything breaks.

A memory bubbles up.

I'm eight. Too small for my age, too skinny.

Sitting on the rocky edge of the southern inlet, legs dangling in the cold surf, watching my father twist saltweed into a braid around a small stone charm.

"What's that for?" I'd asked, voice high and curious.

"A tether," he said, eyes serious. "For the ones we want to keep. For the ones who drift."

I'd cocked my head, inspecting his craftsmanship closely. Taking in everything I could. "Is it magic?"

"Yes," he'd replied simply. "Some of the strongest there is."

I'd frowned in confusion, trying hard to understand. "But there's no glowing or sparks? I thought magical stuff was supposed to be...I don't know, pretty?" I'd grimaced, thinking of my aunt's glowing amulets or the school teacher's hair beads that glittered like the stars on a cloudless night.

He'd smiled. "Some of the strongest magic doesn't flash, son. It holds. Quiet.

Steady.”

I remember watching him toss that stone into the lake with a strange reverence. I didn’t have the knowledge or understanding to appreciate what he was doing back then.

I have too much of it now.

“What if it doesn’t work?”

He’d looked at me, hand on my shoulder.

“Then we try again. That’s what we do. We hold the line. Even when it hurts.”

Now, years later, in the heart of the lake, with the rift trying to tear me apart.

I feel that hand on my shoulder again.

I feel him.

And suddenly, I know this isn’t where my story ends.

Because I am not alone.

Because someone made a tether for me.

And she’s still up there.

Still holding.

Still fighting.

The rift groans, vibrating through my bones.

The current coils tight around my ribs.

And then, light.

A glow, faint at first.

Not from above.

Below.

It pierces the black water in threads of silver and violet, winding like veins through the silt.

I blink.

It's not rift magic. Not twisted. Not old.

This is warm.

Steady.

Alive.

The light pulses once, brighter.

I shield my eyes, heart hammering in my throat.

Then it splits the water completely, a column of soft, fierce brilliance rushing toward me like it was summoned by a promise.

And in the center.

I see her.

Hair floating around her like flame.

Eyes locked on mine.

Callie.

Coming for me.

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CALLIE

The second I hit the water, I know I've done something stupid.

Like, legendary levels of stupid.

The cold hits like knives. Pressure punches the breath out of me before I even kick once. My ears ring, the water shrieks, and somewhere beneath me, the lake groans like it's being split in two.

But I don't stop.

Can't.

Not while I know he's down here, somewhere in the dark, trying to die a hero without me.

Not on my watch.

I dive harder.

The spell pendant Hazel crafted burns against my chest. It's strung on the same leather cord I used to tie my first camp whistle. A little poetic. A little desperate.

The moment I pass the trench's edge, the pressure triples.

My ribs scream.

My ears pop.

My vision tunnels.

But then, light.

Faint, at first.

Then stronger.

Silver-violet, like a heartbeat made visible.

It wraps around me, pulsing in rhythm with the charm, with him.

Because Ryder's down there, pulling magic into the rift with both hands, bracing himself against forces no mortal should touch.

I see him.

His body hovers mid-current, arms outstretched, tendrils of power leaking from his skin like light from cracked stone.

He doesn't see me.

Not yet.

He's almost gone.

The magic's eating him.

I scream his name, underwater, useless but I do it anyway.

And then I grab him.

My hand closes over his wrist just as the spell fires to life.

The pendant lights up like a flare. A shockwave of warmth slams into my spine and surges out like a tidal wave.

It reaches for him.

And he jerks.

His eyes snap open.

They lock on mine.

And gods, he sees me.

He tries to speak.

Can't.

But I don't need words.

I feel it through the spell.

The tether's working.

We're bound now, threaded together by a spell born of glitter, guts, and a girl too stubborn to let the world end without her boyfriend.

And just like that, the magic fights back.

The old rift magic hates what we are.

It coils around us like a storm made of teeth. Screams in my head. Shoves against the bond like it can tear me away.

But it can't.

Because Hazel knew what she was doing.

And I did, too.

I reach for Ryder's other hand.

He takes it.

Shaking. Bleeding magic.

But alive.

And suddenly, I'm not scared.

Not of this.

Not of what's coming.

Because whatever happens, we're tethered.

And I'm not letting go.

The moment his hand tightens around mine, the spell shifts.

It's not just light now, it's open.

And I fall into it.

Not the lake.

Not the pressure.

Something else.

Something deeper.

My eyes flutter shut without meaning to, and suddenly...

I'm not in the water.

I'm in him.

The first thing I see is cold.

Not this cold.

Childhood cold.

Snow through broken windowpanes. Ryder, small and furious, his fists balled in the corner of a cabin too big for how empty it feels.

His mother's gone.

His father silent.

Just him and the roar of the wind outside and the weight of silence inside.

I feel his loneliness like it's been sewn into my bones.

Then the scene shifts.

He's older.

Teenager. Barefoot on the dock. Arms bleeding from runes burned too deep. His mentor yelling. Power flaring wild and wrong. A friend screaming from the shallows, bones shattered by an accident Ryder never meant to cause.

Guilt swallows me whole.

He didn't run from his gift because he was weak.

He ran because he was good.

Because hurting someone, even by accident, shattered something sacred inside him.

And he never forgave himself for surviving it.

I see him as a child, training at night, alone, in secret. Failing again. Hating himself for it.

I see the moment he first saw Camp Lightring, not as a soldier, not as a protector, but as a home.

His first real home.

And then I see me.

The way he saw me the day I stumbled off that stolen paddleboard, glitter trailing behind me like sea foam. The burst of irritation in him. The way it burned straight into curiosity.

I feel every time I made him laugh.

Every time I scared him with how easily I got under his skin.

Every time we made love, warm and soft and passionate.

Our first kiss.

The way I glow in his eyes.

I feel the slow realization.

That I wasn't a distraction.

I was the reason he wanted to live.

It hits so hard I can't breathe.

My eyes snap open underwater, tears lost to the current.

He's still there.

Still gripping my hand like the only anchor he has to the world.

Maybe it is.

His eyes search mine.

I nod.

You're not alone, I mouth.

And then I press my forehead to his.

The rift screams.

But I don't care.

Because I know now.

This man, the one who tried to carry the world alone, who buried his power out of fear, who let the lake define his worth.

He deserves saving.

He deserves love.

The pressure builds again.

The rift shrieks louder now, desperate, angry, furious that I'm still here.

Still holding him.

Still winning.

But my lungs, Gods, they're burning.

I fight the panic rising up my throat.

I shake my head. My body jerks once, the involuntary, terrifying pull of reflex.

I need air.

Ryder sees it.

His eyes go wide.

Without a second of hesitation, he leans in and kisses me.

Not out of want.

Out of need.

His mouth meets mine and I feel it, a rush of warmth, of air , of him pressing breath into me like it's my only lifeline.

Because it is.

My whole body trembles, eyes wide, hands still clutching his, as the tether pulses between us brighter than ever.

I breathe him in.

All of him.

And I realize, we're still sinking.

But we're doing it together.

And I believe he's not going to let me drown.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 10:58 am

RYDER

She's still kissing me.

Or maybe I'm still kissing her.

I don't know anymore.

The only thing I know is she's alive.

Her fingers grip mine with iron strength, and the tether hums between us, still burning bright in the dark.

But the rift?

The rift is gone.

Collapsed in on itself the moment she touched me. The moment her magic, no, her love wrapped around mine and held.

I felt it.

Not just seal.

Accept.

Like the lake finally understood.

I'm not its weapon.

I'm its guardian.

I pull her close, one arm around her waist, kick hard with my legs, and push for the surface.

She clings to me.

We rise slow but steady.

I can feel the magic dissipating. Sinking back into the water like mist.

The pressure lessens.

The cold fades.

Light begins to filter in, silver and pale.

Callie shifts against me and blinks.

"You good?" I mouth, just above the waterline.

She nods, breathless. Beautiful. Fierce.

We break the surface together.

Gasps tear from both of us. I clutch her to my chest, treading water like the lake might still try something.

But it doesn't.

The water's still.

Not just calm, quiet.

Like it's exhaled.

Like it's at peace.

Callie leans her head against my shoulder and whispers, "Well, that sucked."

I laugh. Real. Deep. Surprised myself.

"Yeah," I rasp. "It did."

She tilts her face up to me, eyes wide, lips parted. "Did we... win?"

I look out across the lake.

No pulse.

No shimmer.

No pull.

Just soft ripples and starlight.

I nod. "Yeah. We did."

She lets out a breath like she's been holding it all summer.

Then she smiles.

Gods, that smile.

I kiss her forehead. “Next time you follow me into near-death, maybe leave a note.”

“Next time you try to sacrifice yourself,” she shoots back, “I’m punching you first.”

“Deal.”

We float there a moment longer.

Weightless.

Together.

Finally, I don’t feel like I’m drowning.

The others are on the dock when we swim back.

Torack’s eyes are wide. Julie’s got a hand over her mouth. Hazel’s holding up a glowing charm like she’s directing airport traffic.

But all I see is Callie.

Still in my arms. Still breathing.

Still mine.

We climb up onto the dock soaked, scraped, shaking but whole.

Torack crouches beside me, eyes flicking over my chest. “You did it.”

I shake my head slowly.

“No,” I say. “ We did.”

His brow furrows.

I look over at her.

At Callie.

The girl who glitter-bombed her way into my guarded heart and refused to let me fall without her.

“The rupture didn’t close because I was strong enough,” I say.

Callie’s eyes meet mine, surprised.

“It closed because of the tether. Because she found me. Held me. Chose me.”

Torack exhales.

Julie smiles, small and full of something that might be awe.

And me?

I take Callie’s hand.

Press it to my heart.

And finally let myself believe.

I'm alive.

Because she didn't let go.

That night, after the dock's quiet and the kids are asleep, we lay together in the field just behind the cabins.

The grass is damp, the stars are fierce, and for once, the lake doesn't feel like it's watching.

I've got her in my arms.

No pressure. No storm.

Just Callie.

She's tracing circles on my chest with one finger, her cheek pressed to my shoulder.

"Do you feel different?" she whispers.

I nod. "Like something's... shifted. Like I finally stopped holding my breath."

"Yeah," she says softly. "Me too."

Silence stretches between us but the good kind.

The kind that says everything without needing words.

Still, I turn to look at her.

She's watching the stars, her brow furrowed just slightly.

“What?” I ask.

“I was just thinking,” she murmurs, “I didn’t save you with magic, not really.”

I kiss her temple. “You did. ”

“No,” she says. “I saved you with love. And duct tape. And maybe a little reckless faith.”

I grin. “That sounds about right.”

She looks at me then, serious.

“You would’ve gone, wouldn’t you? Let the lake take you.”

“I was ready,” I admit. “But not to die. Just... to end it.”

Her fingers slide up to cup my jaw. “You don’t have to carry this alone anymore.”

“I know that now,” I say. “Because you taught me.”

She leans up, kisses me slow.

And in the still of the night, under a sky full of stories, I finally let myself believe.

This one’s ours.

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CALLIE

The sky's blue.

The birds are singing.

No one's screaming.

It's almost suspicious.

I walk out of the mess hall with a plate of slightly over-toasted pancakes and a heart that still hasn't settled back into a normal rhythm since, you know, fighting off the magic of a sentient, underwater rift with love and stubbornness.

Hazel catches me just outside the archery range, sparkly fanny pack bouncing.

"Did you know they're throwing a party?" she chirps.

I blink. "What?"

"Celebration. For defeating ancient evil and saving Camp Lightring. You know, Tuesday stuff. "

I glance down at my syrup-stained shirt. "This is what I get for sleeping past seven."

Hazel beams. "They're making s'mores. And there's gonna be a banner. With glitter."

Of course there is.

By the time I make it to the central lawn, there's streamers, a suspicious number of glow sticks, and Jason is attempting to climb onto a picnic table with a bullhorn.

Ryder's not here yet.

Probably hiding.

Probably brooding behind a tree like a moody statue carved out of responsibility and unresolved feelings.

Julie finds me first, wearing her "I survived a magical emergency and all I got was this glitter shirt" smile.

"You seen your boy?" she asks.

"Not since last night."

"He better show. The kids are hyped."

As if on cue, a counselor lets out a dramatic gasp and points toward the woods.

And there he is.

Ryder.

In an actual button-down shirt.

Still damp at the collar. Still walking like the world might fall apart under his boots.

And still the most beautiful damn thing I've ever seen.

The moment the kids spot him, everything erupts.

A standing ovation, cheers, hoots, literal jumping.

Jason fires off a confetti cannon that was absolutely not cleared by safety.

Ryder freezes, eyes wide like someone just cast a spotlight on a deer.

I stride up beside him and grab his hand.

"Smile, lake boy," I whisper. "You earned it."

He glances down at me. "This is humiliating. "

"No," I say, tugging him forward. "This is love. "

He lets me pull him onto the makeshift stage, and the campers swarm, chanting his name like he's a celebrity lifeguard.

He blushes.

Like blushes blushes.

And suddenly I'm the one melting.

When the noise finally dies down, Ryder clears his throat.

And says "Thanks."

Just that.

Just one word.

But somehow, it's enough.

Because this man, who nearly gave up everything to save us, who never wanted recognition or parades or streamers...

He's here.

With me.

With them.

And for once, he's letting himself be seen.

I lean in, kiss his cheek, and whisper, "You're a big softy."

He mutters, "Don't tell anyone."

Too late.

Hazel already has it written in sparkler cursive.

After the cheering dies down and the kids get distracted by the promise of s'mores and suspiciously aggressive dodgeball, I slip away for a breather.

Julie finds me behind the supply shed, halfway through stealing a soda from the emergency stash.

“Hey,” she says, leaning against the wall like we’re in some teen drama from 2003.

I raise the can in salute. “Don’t worry, I’m looting in moderation.”

She smiles, soft and sure. “You ever think about staying?”

I freeze.

“Like, staying here ?”

She nods. “Full-time. Year-round programs are expanding. We need someone who knows the kids, who knows how to make things happen. Someone who doesn’t blink when lake magic gets weird.”

I open my mouth.

Close it.

Then laugh, because it’s safer than saying anything real.

Julie watches me.

“I’m serious, Callie.”

“I know,” I whisper. “That’s the scary part.”

She squeezes my arm once and walks away, leaving me in the dusk, holding a lukewarm soda and a question that won’t stop echoing:

What if I didn’t leave?

I find Julie again just as she's chasing Jason away from the sound system with a glowstick like it's a holy relic.

"Hey," I say, stepping in before the kid's eyebrows get singed. "About what you said earlier..."

Julie raises a brow. "The job?"

"Yeah." I rub the back of my neck. "I was thinking. I mean, I've got the degree. Engineering. Design systems, structures, maintenance... all the logic stuff I usually bury under glitter."

She smiles. "You want to build things?"

"I want to make things that matter. Stuff the camp could use. Safe float systems, enchanted filtration, maybe even updating the ward lines without relying on century-old rune bandages."

Julie whistles low. "That sounds... like a hell of a contribution."

"And I don't know," I say slowly, "maybe I stopped running from being useful in that way."

Julie looks at me. Really looks.

"You could shape the future here, Callie."

I grin. "Then I better order more duct tape."

She laughs, and I swear I feel like I might actually be exactly where I'm supposed to be.

Later, I sit on the lifeguard tower.

Not because it's my shift.

Just... because.

The kids are swimming again.

Laughing. Splashing. Daring each other to do backflips off the float rings I rigged back on day two.

And this time?

They're safe.

We're safe.

I scan the lake calm, clear, no ripples deeper than a cannonball. No hidden pulse. No hum in my bones.

Just summer.

Just sunlight.

Just a boy with a monster's power and a girl with an engineer's brain who decided love might actually be stronger than anything the lake could throw at us.

Ryder's out there, too, kneeling at the shoreline, teaching Evan how to coil a rope.

He looks up at me, eyes catching mine.

And smiles.

The kind that says, We're okay now.

I believe it.

I lean back in the chair, close my eyes, and let the breeze run through my hair.

Because this camp?

This weird, magical, unpredictable place?

It's not just where the story happened.

It's where we happened.

And I'm not going anywhere.

RYDER

I t's been three days since the rift closed.

The lake's been still.

Too still, if you ask Torack. He says the water's holding its breath, like it doesn't quite trust us yet. Like it's waiting to see what we do next.

I get that.

I'm kind of waiting on myself too.

But this morning, I make a decision.

Not because I'm pushed.

Not because I'm cornered.

Because for the first time in my life... I want to stay.

Not guard.

Not patrol.

Just be here.

And build something.

With her.

Callie.

She's back at the main dock right now, trying to wrangle three campers and a boat that somehow got filled with glitter. Jason claims it was "an act of divine expression." I don't ask questions.

I find her after the kids run off for lunch, crouched beside the toolshed, elbow-deep in a busted solar light.

"You got a sec?" I ask.

She glances up, wiping sweat off her brow with the back of her hand.

"Depends. You offering lunch or sarcasm?"

I crouch next to her. "Neither. Something better."

She blinks. "Better than food? Who are you?"

I pull a folded piece of paper from my back pocket and hand it to her.

It's a sketch.

Crude, hand-drawn. I'm not an artist. But the idea's there.

A platform. Modular. Anchored just past the swim zone. Solar-rigged. Weatherproof. Fully charm-compatible.

Her brow furrows. “Is this... a floating workshop?”

I nod. “For you.”

Her mouth falls open slightly.

“I’ve got the materials,” I say. “Some of the old deck boards are still good. And I can enchant the stabilizers myself. I figured if you’re staying”

“I am,” she says fast. Then blushes. “I mean... yeah. I’ve been thinking about it.”

I let that sink in.

She looks at the sketch again, then at me.

“You want to build this for me?”

“No,” I say. “ With you.”

She stares a beat longer.

Then launches herself at me, arms around my neck, laughter in my ear.

“You’re ridiculous,” she says.

“You’re the one who keeps showing up in my plans,” I mutter.

She pulls back just enough to kiss me, hard and sweet.

Then grins. “So... we’re staying, huh?”

“Yeah,” I say, heart thudding.

“We’re building. ”

And somehow, that word feels more sacred than any vow I’ve ever made.

Later that night, we sit on the cabin steps, side by side.

The camp is quiet.

Kids tucked in.

Lake asleep.

Stars so thick it looks like the sky’s been dusted with powdered sugar.

Callie leans into my shoulder, barefoot, her hair damp from the lake.

She’s humming under her breath.

I clear my throat.

She stops humming.

“You okay?” she asks.

I nod once.

Then glance at her.

“I’ve been thinking...”

Her brow rises.

“Dangerous habit,” she teases.

I smirk. “Yeah, well. I’ve been thinking about... my place. This cabin.”

She eyes me. “You’re not leaving.”

“No,” I say quickly. “I’m not.”

She nods. “Good.”

“But it feels... different now. Big.”

She blinks. “Are you telling me you’re scared of your own furniture?”

“I’m saying,” I cut in, heart thudding like it’s trying to warn me, “I don’t want to sleep in it alone anymore.”

Her breath catches.

I hold her gaze.

“I want you here. With me. Not just sometimes. Not just for the magic storms and half-broken ward lanterns. Always. ”

She doesn’t speak.

So I keep going.

“I’m not proposing. Yet. Not tonight. But this” I gesture between us, the cabin, the

stars. “This is my home. And it’s yours too, if you want it.”

She stares at me for one long, gorgeous moment.

Then grins like the damn sun just rose behind her eyes.

“I thought you’d never ask,” she says.

And when she kisses me, it feels like the start of something we never thought we’d get.

Peace.

Together.

The next morning, I’m hauling a crate of old rope out to the docks when I hear footsteps behind me, heavy, deliberate.

Torack.

The man moves like a myth and talks like a riddle, so when he actually clears his throat and stops right next to me, I brace.

“You staying?” he asks, no preamble.

I nod. “Yeah.”

He studies the lake a long time. “Didn’t think you would.”

“I didn’t either,” I admit.

He grunts. Not disapproving. Just thoughtful.

“You’re not just muscle,” he says. “Never were. Took you long enough to see it.”

I wait.

He turns toward me, expression carved from stone but eyes sharp.

“This camp’s more than a refuge. It’s a future. And you” he jabs a finger gently against my chest “you’re part of that. I need you to help shape it.”

I nod again, slower this time.

“Thanks,” I say. “For trusting me with it.”

He nods back, once.

Then walks off without another word.

And somehow?

That says everything.

Torack walks off.

But he doesn’t head back toward the admin wing or the ward archives.

He veers toward the garden path behind the mess hall.

Julie’s there, sleeves rolled, hair braided back, holding two mugs of something that’s probably bitter and old and strong as hell.

She hands one to him without a word.

He takes it.

They don't speak.

They just stand there , side by side, sipping and watching the early morning light rise over the lake.

It's small.

Still.

Unremarkable to anyone else.

But something about it hits me deep.

The ease of it.

The knowing.

A partnership that doesn't need constant fire to burn bright.

I breathe out slow.

Because I want that.

Not someday.

Soon.

With her.

With Callie.

The girl who flipped my schedule upside down, covered my clipboard in glitter, and tethered me back to life with a kiss.

I head toward the cabin.

And start drawing up new plans.

Not just for the workshop.

But for us.

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CALLIE

It's funny how things sneak up on you.

Like glitter in your underwear drawer.

Or love.

Or, in my case, the actual decision to grow up.

I'm sitting on the roof of the equipment shed, don't ask how I got up here, it involved a pulley system, an old towel, and what I now know is a permanent knee bruise watching the last of the campers pack up for the end of summer.

The sun's barely up, the sky's cotton-candy pink, and I've got coffee that's more grounds than liquid.

And still?

I've never felt more at peace.

Because I'm staying.

I'm staying.

Not as a summer temp, not as a last-minute lifeguard sub, not as the glittery chaos goblin that stumbled in on a paddleboard two months ago.

As staff.

Full-time.

Julie made it official yesterday. I signed the papers. Swore in blood. Or maybe grape juice. Hard to say with Hazel officiating.

And the weirdest part?

I didn't panic.

I didn't bolt.

I just... felt right.

Like maybe this version of me, the one who builds things, and loves fiercely, and talks back to ancient lake magic is the real one.

The one I've been swimming toward all along.

Ryder finds me an hour later.

He climbs up next to me without a word, hands me a sandwich, and steals a sip of my coffee like it's his divine right.

"You're gonna fall," I tell him, nudging his knee.

"Then you'll catch me."

"Damn right I will."

He looks out over the lake.

It's calm. Reflective. Like it's watching us with one eye open, finally content.

"So," he says after a minute. "You still staying?"

I grin. "Already signed the paperwork."

He smiles slow. "Good."

"You think you can handle full-time Callie?"

"I'm building you a floating workshop," he says. "I think I'm past the point of no return."

I lean against him, shoulder to shoulder, and sigh.

"Didn't expect this," I murmur. "Any of it."

He wraps his arm around me. "Me neither."

"But I'm glad we drowned a little first," I add. "Gives the love story more bite."

He chuckles. "You planning to dramatize it for the new campers next year?"

"Oh, absolutely. There will be reenactments. Possibly sock puppets."

He groans.

I kiss his cheek.

And so, the summer that started with glitter in the lake and ends with a girl signing a contract to stay?

Feels perfect.

Waterproof plans and all.

Later that afternoon, I march up to Torack's office with a folder clutched to my chest and about eighty percent more confidence than I actually feel.

He opens the door before I can knock.

"Callie," he says. "You're early."

"I'm enthusiastic," I say, stepping inside.

He grunts like that's suspicious.

I slap the folder onto his desk.

"My first official project," I announce. "Schematics, costs, resource lists, and three possible enchantment configurations."

Torack raises an eyebrow, flips open the folder, and starts reading.

Ten seconds pass.

Then twenty.

Then he looks at me, eyes sharp. "You want to build an underwater observation deck."

“Yes.”

“For students.”

“Yes.”

“That can adjust to magical tide flux and redirect energy through a shielding ring?”

“Exactly.”

He closes the folder slowly.

Then leans back in his chair.

“Why?”

I blink. “Because... it’s awesome?”

He gives me a look.

So I try again. “Because kids should see what’s under the surface. Not just the danger. The beauty. The magic. And maybe if they can see it, really see it, they’ll protect it better.”

Torack taps a finger against the folder.

Then nods.

“I’ll need a full magical structural analysis,” he says.

“Already included.”

He smirks.

And for the first time, I feel like not just a helper...

But a damn architect.

Of the future.

That night, Ryder tells me to meet him at the dock after dark.

“No questions,” he says, voice low but full of something... earnest. “Just wear something comfortable. And bring your curiosity.”

I squint at him. “This isn’t a trap, is it?”

“No glitter cannons involved,” he deadpans. “Promise.”

Which is suspicious, honestly.

But I go.

And what I find?

Stops me in my tracks.

The lake is glowing.

Not in a cursed, pulse-of-doom way.

In a soft, golden shimmer like someone bottled the moon and let it leak gently across the surface.

A floating platform is moored just past the main dock. About twelve feet square, anchored by enchanted weights. Wooden. Sturdy. Painted the same soft gray-blue as the cabins.

On it: a small round table, two chairs, and a low canopy made from what looks like old sailcloth stretched between four posts, strung with glowing beetle-lanterns Ryder must've rigged himself. The lights cast a halo over the whole setup warm, flickering, utterly magical.

Blankets are piled on one corner. A little metal cooler rests between the chairs.

And food.

Actual food.

Cheese. Fruit. Crackers. Chocolate. Campfire-warmed cider in real ceramic mugs that don't even have chips in them.

He's standing beside it all, barefoot, in his dark henley, sleeves pushed to his elbows.

Waiting.

Like I'm the center of the whole damn universe and he's just orbiting me now.

"Ryder," I breathe, stepping onto the dock. "What is all this? "

He shrugs, but it's shy. "A date."

"You built me a floating date?"

"I built us a floating date."

I step onto the platform.

It's solid underfoot, barely rocking. The magic woven into the corners hums faintly, tuned to the water's rhythm.

He pulls out my chair.

Waits until I sit.

Then opens the cooler and pulls out two chilled bottles of something sparkling and peach-colored.

Non-alcoholic, because camp rules.

Romantic, because him.

We sit and eat and drink and laugh.

He's quiet, but watching me the whole time. The way he always does, like he's memorizing my joy.

I ask him if he's cold. He hands me a blanket without answering.

I tease him about planning this and he just grins and says, "You deserve to feel chosen."

And that?

That hits me straight in the sternum.

Because he means it.

Every nail he hammered into this platform.

Every lantern he hung.

Every berry in this little cracked ceramic bowl.

It's him saying I love you without the need for a stage.

And I do something I rarely do.

I go quiet.

Just watch him.

The way he tilts his head when he listens. The scar on his forearm. The way his fingers twitch like he's still adjusting to calm.

"I didn't know you could be romantic," I murmur.

"I didn't know I wanted to be," he says. "Until you."

I take his hand.

It's warm, calloused, steady.

Like the lake finally learned how to hold instead of pull.

And right there, under the canopy he built, floating over the water we conquered

I fall in love with him all over again.

RYDER

The wind howls outside, whipping snow against the windows of our tiny cabin. But here, curled up in front of the fire with Callie, it's the coziest place on earth.

I'm sprawled on the couch, tail preening from the warmth, and Callie's draped over me like a blanket of her own. She flicks a marshmallow at my mouth, and I catch it with my teeth.

"Observe, ladies and gentleman," she proclaims. "Ryder doesn't miss."

"Nope," I say, still chewing. "Except that time the ghost moss knocked you off your paddleboard."

She huffs. "Are we ever going to move on from that?"

I pull her closer, kiss her nose. "Not until you admit I was right about the creatures in the shallows."

"You were right, and I was swimming too fast to notice." She sticks her tongue out. "Satisfied?"

"Not even close."

She swats me, and I catch her wrist before she can inflict real damage. But then, because I'm me, I hold it steady, and tuck a stray piece of red hair behind her ear. She softens at that, leaning in like she can't help it.

“I missed you,” she murmurs, barely audible over the fire crackling. “Even when I saw you at lunch, I still missed you.”

I know exactly what she means because I feel it all day.

“Is it still weird?” She traces my jawline with a finger.

I shake my head. “Just weird everything else got quiet.”

We stay like that for a long while, tangled together, measuring time in contented sighs and marshmallow bribes. Even the wind’s died down outside, and the world feels softer as a result.

Callie shifts, rests her head against my chest, fingers tracing lazy circles on my shoulder.

“We’re good at this,” she says.

“What? Cuddling?” I grin into her hair.

“Quiet,” she clarifies, but grins back. “I mean, not a quiet, but... stillness.”

“Mmm.”

“Used to be I couldn’t sit two minutes in one spot without chasing something to do,” she muses.

“Still can’t,” I tell her. “You were taking apart the kitchen radio last week.”

“Yeah, but I put it back together.”

“With glitter glue.”

“Everything’s better with glitter.”

“That’s a lie and you know it.”

She laughs, low and bright, like it’s bubbling out of her, and I get this weird, unexplainable surge of happiness because I made her laugh.

It’s all so mundane and mundane has never been better. We drift into an easy silence, and I listen to her breathing, the fire popping, the comfortable readjusting of two souls who have found their home in each other.

And it’s not that the magic is gone, the lake is still out there, glimmering with its own power but here, with her, it’s like we’ve made our own brand of it. Simple, steady, ours.

The fire’s glow casts flickering shadows across Callie’s face as she leans in, her eyes reflecting the dancing flames. My hands find the curve of her waist, drawing her closer until there’s no space left between us. Her skin hums under my touch, alive with warmth and anticipation.

“Ryder,” she whispers, her breath hot against my lips, “you promised me we’d make love by the fire.”

I grin, my fingers trailing up her spine. “Did I now?”

“Yes, you did.” She nips at my lower lip, teasing. “Not that I need reminding, but I think your exact words were”

“I think,” I interrupt, claiming her mouth with a kiss so deep it makes my tail twitch, “we can skip the preamble, don’t you?”

But Callie’s always been one for banter. She pulls back, eyes sparking with mischief.

“Preamble? Who are you, the U.S. Constitution?”

“No,” I growl, biting at her neck. “I’m the guy who’s about to worship you by firelight.”

“Oh, are you?” She arches against me, that maddening smile still in place. “And here I thought you were just a lifeguard with a fish tail.”

My hand slips under her shirt, and the little gasp she gives is all the satisfaction I need. “Shut up, Callie.”

“Make me,” she dares, breathless.

Challenge accepted.

Our clothes don’t last long after that. The room is warm, but not as warm as the heat building between us.

I take my time, exploring every inch of her freckled skin, committing the feel of her to memory.

The way her breath hitches when I kiss a particular spot, the way she shivers when my fingers skim her ribs.

“Ryder,” she moans, writhing under my touch, “you’re mean.”

“Mean?” I raise an eyebrow, pausing to suck on the pulse point at her throat. “I thought you liked it when I was mean.”

“I do.” She tangles her fingers in my hair, pulling me back to her lips. “But I like it even more when you make good on your promises.”

“Always do,” I murmur against her mouth.

I take my time with her, working her up until she's quivering, just the way she likes. Callie's all breathy moans and little gasps, writhing under my touch like she can't get enough.

“Ryder,” she breathes, tugging at my shoulders, “now. Please.”

"As you wish."

I nudge her thighs apart and slide my cock into her slowly, enjoying the way her lips part around a moan so long and deep it makes my ears ring. She swears, raking her nails down my back.

“Took your time getting there,” she gasps, squeezing around me. Her walls grip me tight, like she never wants to let me go.

I groan, resisting the urge to thrust into that delicious tightness. “Quiet, you.”

“No,” she says, gripping my biceps. “It’s always you setting the pace. I want”

“the student becomes the master?” I tease, but she pulls me flush against her, heat radiating from every point of contact.

“Something like that,” she whispers, rolling her hips until I’m buried to the hilt. I can feel everything, every twitch, every flutter of her muscles, her heart beating against mine. I kiss her, and she moans into my mouth, grinding against me until my thoughts scatter.

“Slow,” I manage as she pushes me onto my back, straddling me. Her red hair spills like fire over her shoulders, framing her face, flushed and eager.

“Oh yeah?” She moves with an intensity that steals my breath. “Think you can handle that?”

“Nope,” I breathe, but she’s already rocking against me, head thrown back in pleasure.

Then it’s just her. The feel of her wrapped around me. The smell of sweat and smoke and skin. The firelight casting shadows across her body, making her look like some kind of wild goddess, and I’m her willing sacrifice.

She bears down on me, palms flat on my chest as she rides my cock with everything she's got. She switches pace between achingly slow and breathtakingly fast.

I grip her hips tighter, just enjoying the ride, and the view of her tits bouncing over me.

I sit up slightly and take one of them into my mouth, licking and teasing at the nipple.

"Ryder," she whines, her careful pace quickly undone by the sensation.

I’m close already, fighting it with everything I’ve got.

“Callie,” I warn, gripping her hips as she grinds down, moaning my name, shuddering as she unravels first.

She comes hard, mouth stretched open and eyes shut tight. In here, during the off season, there's nothing to hold her back. She screams my name as wave after wave of pleasure overtakes her.

And then she keeps going.

It’s almost enough to send me over with her, but I barely hang on, thrusting my cock

up to meet her rhythm until she comes again with a cry, fingernails digging into my chest. I follow her, spilling hot and deep, pulling her down to me in a kiss that's all teeth and tongue and promise.

The room falls still except for our ragged breaths, hearts pounding together. She collapses against me, boneless, sighing as I trace lazy patterns on her bare back.

"I used to think the off season was boring , too long," I admit quietly.

"And now?" Callie asks, a grin spreading across her freckled face.

I smile back. "It might just be my favorite part."