



Perfect Shot (Pine Ridge Universe #21)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Bryce Frobisher loves his life.

“He’s the beloved yet feared enforcer for the Pine Ridge Lumberjacks.

“The team idolizes him, and so do the fans.

“He gets buy-three-get-one-free steaks at the best restaurant in town anytime he wants.

“Best of all, safe in paranormal-friendly Pine Ridge, no one looks twice at his massive yeti form... although he kinda wishes someone special would look his way.

Fia Carvahlo loves her life.

“It was worth every skimpy bikini photoshoot she ever had to get to this point—traveling the country as a freelance photographer.

“Oh sure, she’s not in the big leagues yet, but destination weddings, birthday parties, and newborn photography pay the insurance on her RV, let her make her own schedule, and allow her to travel home to Fortaleza, Brazil, whenever she wants.

“Her newest job, taking promo photos and team headshots of several hockey teams at a big hockey expo, is definitely going to mean she makes it home in time for Carnival!

Bryce can’t believe his eyes when Miss Valentine, the bikini-clad model who captured his heart and his hormones in his college days, is the official photographer at Puck Con.

“Her legendary February photoshoot is engraved in his mind and still pinned to his bedroom wall.

“It’s going to be hard to keep things professional when a monster-sized crush takes hold—at the same time as his mating instincts!

Fia isn’t sure what to make of Bryce, the ridiculously tall hockey player with gorgeous white locks, when he appoints himself her

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 9:19 am

“Would you take a job in Hershey this weekend? It’s going to be hectic, but it pays well. And you’ll be near chocolate.”

I strained to hear my best friend over the sounds of whining and crying.

“This weekend? In Hershey? I’m nowhere near Pennsylvania.

” I finished uploading the wedding photos from that weekend to my website and looked at my calendar.

I’m usually booked, but February is a slow time for weddings, and there was a gap for the next five days marked “Editing/Wildlife/Freelance/Enter comps.”

So... I was technically free—but driving my RV/motorhome across a half-dozen states in the middle of winter sounded unpleasant, to put it mildly.

“It’s Puck Con. I know you secretly love sports photography.”

Midwest winters be damned. My legs immediately did their telltale crisscross as I squirmed on my black ergonomic chair.

“What do you mean, secretly? That’s no secret.

I’m probably the only woman you know who gets turned on watching baseball players spit in the dugout.

Tennis will do it for me! Anything but football—I mean, soccer. ”

“Your Brazilian is showing. Ooh, sorry, that sounded wrong. I can’t help it.

My brain is mush. The twins both have strep throat and double ear infections.

Nora has her second molars coming in. My husband might actually divorce me for leaving him alone with infectious two-year-old twins.

This is like the terrible twos on steroids. Oh, Noah—not Mommy’s laptop!”

I winced. “You’re putting my biological clock back by five years with one phone call.”

“It’ll start ticking again the next time you do a newborn shoot. Pleeeeease? Lots of shirtless hockey players,” Lynn wheedled.

“I... I’m in Grand Rapids! The governor’s niece just got married.”

“I not only have a contract for the fan photos and some meet and greets, but I have an exclusive contract to do headshots for several teams like the Devil Birds and the Pine Ridge Lumberjacks.”

I’m already bringing up the map site I always use to plot my drives. “Any chance to do some freelancing while I’m there, or does Puck Con own the rights to anything I shoot?”

“Only during set hours. You can shoot on location during free time at the expo or set your RV up as your traveling studio and get extras all weekend.”

I switch tabs. The RV life (a big step up from van life, if you ask me) means that I make my own schedules, my own rules, my own money—and that I can choose when to go home.

I always make it home to Fortaleza, Brazil, in time for Carnival.

The tab with flights and dates sits open, mocking me, reminding me that I need to book soon—something that I’ve been putting off, needing to choose between my insurance (which is crazy high) or my ticket.

This gig will let me pay for both. “I’ll take it.”

“Thank God! Hold on. Let me hit send.”

“Huh?”

“I already had an email written up to the organizer. Don’t worry, they told me I could subcontract as long as I provided references, and yours are pristine. To die for.”

“You really thought I’d come through, didn’t you?”

“You never let me down.”

“But one of these days...”

“Never, ever,” she says, and I can hear the smile in her voice, even though my godkids sound like they’re sticking each other with pins.

Lynn and I met when I came to the States for school years ago. Her family was my host family, and she got me into the photography club at her high school. Twelve years later, we still share that passion, our friendship, and now a career.

And she’s the only one in the States (at least that I know of) who knows about my other life—the one I had on the other side of the camera. “You didn’t tell them I modeled, right? Strictly sent them my photography credentials?”

My best friend laughs. “No one will ever worm that out of me. Not even Dave knows.”

“I’ll get driving. Tell the kiddos Tia Fia hopes they feel better. I’ll buy them some little hockey mascot stuffies.”

“Please, for the love of my condo, don’t. We can barely see the floor as it is.”

With a sigh, I close my laptop and switch from my computer chair to the driver’s seat. “I’m on my way. Thanks, Linnie.”

“You’re welcome, Fifi.”

“AND TONIGHT, WE WELCOME the one and only... Pine Ridge Luuuuumberjaaaaaacks!”

It’s just a silly exhibition match for charity, part of Puck Con’s kick-off event.

Even so, half of the hardcore fans from Pine Ridge drove all the way down to Hershey, PA, to watch our little minor league team kick butt.

At least, I hope that’s what’s going to happen.

The Devil Birds look like they’re ready for blood.

It doesn’t help that their team is full of shifters.

Pine Ridge’s team is 90% human—although most of the world thinks it’s 100% human.

Very few people can see supernatural creatures.

“Fro-Fro-Frobisher!!”

That’s me. I skate out and love that I see a wall of plaid and inflatable axes waving wildly. The Pine Ridge Lumberjacks have the best fans. A cry of “Timber!” rings in the icy arena.

“Yeeeesss, it’s Frozen Frobisher, everyone! Bryce Frobisher, number eleven, the enforcer who stands just over seven feet tall and weighs just under 300 pounds, has miraculously maintained his spot on the team for eight seasons!”

“And those Devil Birds better look out, because the Lumberjacks have won eighty percent of their games this season, and they’re hot favorites for the Calder Cup this year!”

“Well, not if the Hershey Bears or the Devil Birds have anything to say about it, Bob.”

I smile as the announcers prattle on while the teams do their introductory lap, waving and smiling at the thousands of hockey fans jammed in for Puck Con.

As I swerve on the fresh ice, my thick, silvery-white fur and yeti metabolism making the chilly air seem like a spring breeze, I’m almost blinded by a camera flash.

“What the—” I swallow my irritation. The world sees me as a big, hairy dude with white, shaggy hair and a beard that would make the entire population of Valhalla jealous, and that’s what the camera captures.

It’s not that I mind having my photo snapped.

I’m slated for some fan photos and headshots later.

No, the camera flash blinded me, but that's not the real issue, either. It's the woman behind the lens.

I think I just saw Fia Carvalho—also known as Miss Valentine or Miss February.

My taut limbs unravel like boiled spaghetti. She can't be here. She went from a sexy bikini model and pin-up to a serious photographer. I follow all of her social media accounts. I'm a huge fan of her work—and her.

I have to be mistaken. There's no way that beautiful Brazilian bombshell would be at something like Puck Con.

“Frobisher! Get in the game, dude!”

King Silverbow, my arrogant young Orc teammate, skates past me and bangs his stick angrily on the ice.

I snap to it with a growl, my lower jaw protruding as I let the primal side of my nature come out. Something that rips through walls of ice, scales snow mountains, hunts with bare hands, and knows the feel of blood in my fur.

Oh, yes. I'm a civilized monster—except when I'm on the ice. Then, my ancient lineage comes out to play, and I make it my job to stomp on anyone who hurts my pack like a snow leopard seizing a wild goat.

Normally, everything around me fades out when I'm on the ice, like when I'm home, hunting in the mountains.

I normally hear cheers as white noise. I zero in on the other players' pulses; the sounds of thudding hearts and heavy breathing guide me towards my “prey.” When plays are done and goals are scored, I tune back into the world, and the white noise

becomes distinct once more.

This time, my senses narrow further. I am aware of one voice, one heartbeat, one lightning flash, a single moment playing over and over.

I've never found a mate in Pine Ridge, even though I moved there a long time ago—a long time for humans, not for my kind, who can live for centuries. I think I suddenly know why.

Her scent. Her voice, cheering. Her heartbeat racing, speeding up every time I go past...

The one I want as my mate isn't in Pine Ridge.

She's here. It's Miss Valentine.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 9:19 am

After the goodwill exhibition game (which ended in a tie because of time constraints), I need to go back to my RV to quickly load my shots into my laptop so I have the maximum space allowed for the next events, which will be some of the players' headshots, and then a fan meet and greet.

I know every other shot is of Bryce Frobisher, a ruthless giant on the ice. My heart flutters at the memory of snagging a close-up of his pale, sweating face under his shaggy mop of white hair as he pulled off his helmet.

He was like a frozen Viking, all beard and massive jaw, an adorably crooked smile when he saw me capturing yet another shot of him.

He handed me his towel with such a timid little gesture, as if uncertain that I would want it.

He doesn't know that this hockey groupie will do unthinkable things while spread naked across his towel, one of my battery-operated-boyfriends on high, my pussy straining around the biggest toy I own.

I'm practically light-headed when I shiver my way into my RV, which is parked next to numerous tour buses and team buses in the expo center's back lot.

Bryce Frobisher reminds me of the things I used to love about Felipe.

Felipe and Fia—a perfect match, they said.

I was beautiful and shapely, charming and witty.

I was a jewel for a handsome athlete with a big future in futbol .

Felipe was charming and attentive, apparently supportive of his outspoken lover who had gone to America for school and wanted to pursue her passion for photography.

What a crock for the cameras. Felipe was possessive, jealous, and controlling. He didn't want me to travel. When he found out about my year working as a model in the States...

Let's just say that I love it when a guy acts like a beast on the field or the court (and in the sheets), but I hate when he becomes a monster at home.

I haven't thought about Felipe in three years, not since we broke up for good.

Why am I comparing him to Bryce Frobisher?

Same animal-like ferocity. Fierce competitor. Muscular build. The stamina...

I find myself racing inside the chilly darkness of my RV to avoid thinking those thoughts of Felipe.

I can't wait until I'm alone tonight after my workday is done.

Then I can "distract myself" with thoughts of a certain husky hockey player while I soothe my overheated nerves and finally fall asleep.

But I'm so looking forward to his headshots tonight. Maybe he'll give me that shy little smile again.

Felipe didn't have a shy bone in his body.

I never knew how sexy a bashful grin could be...

“WHO THE HELL IS MISS Valentine? It sounds like the host of a kids’ television show,” King parts his raven black hair and flashes his tusks at the mirror over the sink.

I smooth my fur back away from my face as best as I can, inspecting the areas I’ve shaved to help me appear more human.

“Miss Valentine’s not her real name. I just call her that. She’s an amazing photographer.” I show King Fia’s social media page. “Harp seals in Canada. Weddings in the Florida Keys. Look, look at this. A jaguar in Central America. She’s so good.”

“You have a boner over her skills with a camera?”

“I do not! I mean, I don’t have that. Or for that reason. If I did.” I stumble over my words. “Look, I really admire her skills as a photographer, but when I first saw her,” I swallow down a wave of rolling lust that engulfs me, buries me, “she was posing in Modern Sportsman and Driver magazine.”

“That upscale skin mag?”

“It is not! They just happen to have a swimsuit section each month.” Okay, so it’s sort of similar.

The articles are about sports, but every accompanying photograph is devoted to sexy models.

Fia was in every issue for a year (I think that’s unheard of), but she was best known for her spread in the February issue, which is always “Devoted to the sport of love

and the passion that drives us.” I’ve been a big fan of hers since her first appearance in the magazine—but then she was Miss Valentine in the Holiday Calendar they put out and. ..

I can’t think of the things that I did while looking at her in that little white bikini and ice skates, straddling a rink-side seat with a hockey stick leaning against one bare, bronzed thigh.

On the little inset, she was getting a big heart-shaped box of candy, and I could practically hear her squeal and feel her tight brown ringlets under my fingertips as I reached up to cup her smiling face. ..

“Bryce? Are you there, big guy?”

“Huh? Oh, yes. Yes, I’m here.”

“So, she used to work on the other side of the camera?”

“My room was plastered with her pictures in college.” And after college. I don’t need to tell King that part. Sometimes he talks too much.

“Who was on the other side of the camera?” Sam Grendel, a recent trade into our league, slides in and tosses his sweaty towel down on the bench.

“The cute photographer who was taking action shots out there. I wonder if she’s doing the headshots and the fan meet and greet.” King elbows me. “Might turn the tables on her to find out she has a massive fan of her own here this weekend.”

“Massive hairball,” Sam frowns at me, his mostly hairless human body elbowing past me as he heads to the showers. “You ever consider getting a wax, man?”

I growl, deep in my chest. Most humans don't notice anything out of place. Sam doesn't know I'm a yeti, but he's noticed the copious amount of "body hair," and of course, the jerkwad has to say something about it.

"You'd better hope she likes 'em hairy," Sam laughs mockingly.

"Ignore him," King whispers with a rare show of empathy. "He thinks he'll take your place soon because you've been here so many seasons. He's just ego walking."

"Takes one to know one," I tease—although I'm not exactly joking.

It's King's turn to growl, but then our manager whistles, three short blasts. "Ugh. I guess it's time to go put on a show for the fans."

"Headshots first," I say, consulting the paper schedules we were handed upon arrival. My heart races. It would be too much to hope that Fia is going to be our photographer again.

A PHOTOGRAPHER HAS to get the best of her subjects.

This can mean joking with them to provoke a smile, laughing at their bad jokes to put them at ease, laying on the compliments, or, in the case of small children, making a million sound effects and keeping a squeaky rubber pig in my pocket to make them look towards the camera.

With hockey players... I'm the one who needs to be put at ease.

I can barely contain my excitement as I chat about stats, injuries, and careers with the steady stream of players who come to my booth.

I guess the managers wanted them to get their headshots tonight, before they have a

chance to get banged up during any other exhibition games.

“What’s your name?” I ask a short, compact warrior in a jersey.

“Sam Grendel. I used to play for the Wilmington Wolverines and just traded up to this league. It’s a short stop from here to the Maple Leafs, gorgeous. Shirt on or off?”

I’m instantly turned off and disgusted. I can feel my lips curling away from my teeth like I just ate something sour and my nose wrinkling like I got a whiff of rotten eggs.

“Jersey on. We’ll do a profile shot, a forward-facing shot with a serious face, and then give me your biggest smile!

” I force some encouraging cheer into my voice.

“Okay... Not like you haven’t gone topless at a photoshoot before,” he mutters in my ear as I step forward, adjusting my lights to his shorter height.

I jump back like I’ve been burned. I never did topless or nude photos—but I admit that my centerfold spreads in tiny bikinis pushed the line and left almost nothing to the imagination.

“Oh, my modeling days are long gone,” I laugh.

Scumballs won’t bother me tonight—especially since I see that Frobisher, that silver-white Viking god, is my next customer.

“Doesn’t look like anything is sagging yet. Tell you what, when you get done here, how about I take you back to my suite and show you all the complimentary chocolate the players get? I’ll even share.” He waggles his eyebrow.

“No thank you. I’m more into vanilla,” I give a quick answer—only too late realizing that it gives fodder to Grendel’s imagination.

“Ooh, honey. That’s okay. We can keep the chocolate away. I can be vanilla—at first.”

Snap, snap, snap. I take three pictures, sharp and focused. They don’t do Grendel any favors, but I don’t care. “Next,” I say crisply, pointing behind me.

“From bikini body to prude, huh? I guess mom jeans and baggy sweaters hide a multitude of sins, huh?” he mocks, scowling his way past me.

I swallow hard and look down. I’m not ashamed of my body at all, and I’m not in mom jeans! But if I was, there isn’t anything wrong with that! “The exit, Mr. Grendel.”

“You know, you might want to watch your tone. The players are the bosses at Puck Con. The stars. Without us, you’d be taking pictures of a bunch of people stuffing their faces and buying souvenirs. Maybe you’d better think about how you treat me before I—”

“Sam. I think Miss Carvahlo wants you to leave. Now . In silence.”

Now, I’m a big girl, and even though I come from a culture where women often hang back so the men can play the hero, I know I could have handled Grendel and his not-so-subtle intimidation myself.

But my insides twist and wring an instant puddle into my panties when Bryce Frobisher strides in, lifts Grendel by his collar, and smiles.

Wait a second... Are those fangs?

Doesn't matter. Glistening canines, a growl that feels like the lowest setting on my favorite vibrator, and Grendel is chunked out of the booth with a satisfying yelp and whimper.

"I'm so sorry. He doesn't represent Pine Ridge. After tonight, I don't even know if he'll play for Pine Ridge. I'm going to go talk to our manager."

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 9:19 am

“Okay... Um. Thank you. So much.” I lose my words when he looks at me. They slip out in little bits and snips as I try not to drool. “Let me get your photos done first. No reason a creep like that should upset my schedule, right?” I try to laugh.

“Again, I’m so, so sorry.” The giant sits hesitantly on the folding black stool, his entire posture and body language apologetic. His shoulders and spine curve into a question mark, and his head ducks guiltily.

Normally, I ask before touching a subject, but this time, my hands outrun my brain.

I push his massive shoulders back and then angle his chin.

The hair on his face is like nothing I’ve ever felt before, dense and thick, but like a cross between mink and silk.

Something like a cross between fur and hair.

I’m staring. Touching too long. To my horror, I realize my hand is just resting on his beard, kneading his facial hair like I’m a sensory psycho.

I’m totally not imagining how it would feel to press his face between my slick, naked thighs or my sweating breasts as he fills me.

Fuck, totally thinking it.

“Uh— ha ha. Sorry, drifted off,” I babble to cover my dirty thoughts and the actions that started innocent but rapidly turned to pure smut in my needy brain. “Where were

we?”

“I was apologizing for my teammate’s loathsome behavior,” he growls.

It’s all I can do to keep from hopping on his lap and humping him. Something is seriously wrong with me—but not him. “Oh, no! Please don’t apologize for him. You can’t control other people’s actions. It wasn’t your fault.”

“Actually, it was,” he admits, starting to curl up again, only stopping when I push back on his shoulder to straighten his spine.

“I was telling another player, King Silverbow, about how I follow your photography career on social media. I loved the harp seal photoshoot, by the way. You totally should have come first in Wildlife Wonders’ annual contest. I mean, the honorable mention was good, but there wasn’t a cash prize. You deserved to win. When you showed that baby seal lying on its mother’s side, its little eyes so full of wonder, I just—”

“You know my work?” I gasp, cutting him off—and pulling myself back. The expression on his face when he talks about baby seals has my pants trying to unbutton themselves.

“Right! Big fan! But, erm... That’s how Grendel found out that you used to model, too. I was telling King that I had your Miss Valentine calendar. That’s all.”

I wonder if I should be getting creepy stalker vibes? Probably, but I don’t. “That was a long, long time ago,” I mutter with a crooked smile. The camera is heavy in my hands until I raise it to my face, hand twirling the lens to focus on him.

“I still remember it. I always had the idea that you were somehow a hockey fan after that February photoshoot. I was so excited when you showed up.”

He does have fangs. I look up at him, then back through the lens, confused for a minute. Something isn't quite right about his appearance, but I remember that a lot of hockey players have had facial and dental injuries. I start clicking away, way more than I need to.

Some of these pictures are going into my private collection, I decide, as I bite my lip and focus on the way his shoulders stretch out his jersey.

"It's sweet that you remember those little things and that you follow my photography career. Do you ever comment on my posts?" I ask.

"Sure do! Never miss one. I'm PRColdhands_warmheart. With the underscore," he says in a muffled voice, trying not to move his lips as I take photos, his smile frozen in place.

"Oh my God! You are like my die-hard fan!" I put the camera down and sit back on my haunches, staring up at him. "You didn't become a hockey player just to bump into me this weekend, did you?" I tease.

"No!" Bryce takes my accusation seriously. His eyes go wide, and he waves his hands in a panic. "No, no, I've been on the team for eight seasons! Also, I thought you were in the Midwest for a while, according to your last post."

"I was. This was a spur-of-the-moment assignment I took to help out an old friend." I tilt my head quizzically and stand up, fighting down butterflies. "This is just one of those lucky meetings, I guess."

"Fate." He smiles, swallows, and then backs up, nervously rubbing the hair at the back of his neck. "You wouldn't want to get dinner later, would you?"

"Oh... Oh, that would be nice, but I have to work," I say.

Inside, I'm cursing myself out in Portuguese and English, both languages unleashing idioms that would make my grandmother come after me with her chinelo ready for battle.

Every carnal instinct is telling me that I should say yes.

It's not just physical, either. He really seems to be interested in my career.

He's not being a creep about my former modeling days (unlike my ex and so many other random guys I've met who seem to think my bikini is their business).

I love the way he defended me without making the situation worse and how shy and sweet he seems.

But I'm only here for a couple of days. I travel all the time. It's bad to mix business with pleasure, especially if you intend to leave that pleasure behind.

"I understand. It's probably frowned upon to ask the convention staff out, too.

I mean—out to a meal. Not as in a date. Unless you wanted it to be a— Um.

" Bryce talks himself right off his comically small stool, knocking it over and bumping my lighting umbrella when he rises from his crouch to retrieve it.

"Oh, no! It's not that," I soothe, but it's too late. The gentle giant who turns into a terror on the ice is slinking away—as much as any huge, hairy guy can slink.

Everything in me instantly drops.

I think I made a mistake.

Should I go after him?

Too late. My next customer, a real pretty boy built along Bryce's lines, is already coming in and plopping himself in front of me with a charming smile. "Well, hello there, Miss Valentine," he says in a mildly teasing voice.

This is going to be a long night.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 9:19 am

My mate doesn't want me. The same thought has been circling in my head since she turned me down for dinner. Now, it's nearly midnight, and the last stragglers from the early admission meet-and-greet are leaving.

Fia doesn't want me. My mate doesn't want me.

If that's the case, she isn't your mate. That's the sage advice my father always gave me about women. Right now, that doesn't seem to matter to me.

Try to focus on something else. This was a fluke meeting. No one gets their celebrity crushes. That's perfect world, living fantasy stuff.

As the night wraps up, I do my round of fan events, spirits lifting slightly at the genuine enthusiasm I see from many people. So many hockey lovers are here!

That's it, idiot.

She doesn't like you. She likes hockey.

How could you think she'd want a monster like you? What's worse, I don't know what she sees when she looks at you, but it's probably something ugly. You're a shaggy, hunching, oversized furball. She's literally a model, a sex symbol. What the puck-to-the-head were you thinking?!

"You're in deep shit."

I finish signing an autograph for a family of Pine Ridge season ticket holders that I

recognize from their frequent attendance at our games.

I glare at the Orc for using profanity in front of the three boys and the little girl standing beside their mom and dad with too-excited-to-sleep faces.

“Thanks for coming all the way out here, folks,” I smile.

“We’re staying for the whole con! Camping out in a buddy’s RV,” the dad says, smiles, and takes off, herding his kids in front of him.

“What is it? And remember, no potty mouth in front of little guys.”

“You’re as lily white as your fur, aren’t ya?” King snorts.

I think of standing behind a bent-over Fia, watching her pussy strain and stretch wide to take my thick ice-gray cock, sliding home over her panting screams of pleasure, of feeling her arousal coat my fur until I’m soaked in her scent, of pressing into her deep while reaching around and pressing my knuckles into the place that’ll force her to squirt her cum like a firehose.

If only you could see inside my head, King. Out loud, I say, “Lily white. Sure. Why am I in trouble?”

“Sam went to Coach and said you cut his time with the photographer short because he’s a recent transfer and you’re not showing team spirit.”

I groan. Coach Torrey is way too nice to be a hockey coach, honestly. He treats the team like family, and doing crappy stuff to someone on the team is one of two ways to get on his bad side. The other is usually reserved for refs.

“He has to know I wouldn’t do that!”

“He has to at least look into it, and Torrey told Grendel he’d make sure he got a picture retake first thing tomorrow morning. I know, because Grendel is strutting around bragging that he’s going to get alone time with the camera cutie.”

I see red. Literal red. The world narrows down to a red haze and the sound of heartbeats and blood rushing through veins. Mine. King’s. Random people walking past.

“Bry?”

The noise that I make isn’t one I choose. It’s part of the primitive “hunt, kill, mate, survive” package that comes with great cold weather endurance and a need for extra strength detangler. “No.”

“Um... Maybe you should go see Coach? Or Fia?”

I stomp away. If I find Grendel first, he’s going to get his dick ripped off. If I find Fia first...

The red haze cools. Well. I don’t know what will happen.

I know what I want to happen.

The images in my head stop me in my tracks because they seem so real.

Her much smaller body crushed against mine.

Her naked smoothness against my fur. Tight little slit, all deliciously brown and pink, parted on my tongue—and then wrapped around my cock until I feel her belly bulge against mine as I rut against her.

Oh, hell, no. That can't happen. But I can warn her that Grendel is trying something shady and tell her to insist on Coach sticking around. Or she can refuse and tell the coach that Grendel was being a total slimy prick.

Yes. That's all that'll happen. Just some friendly, helpful information.

I curl my fists. That's all I can let happen. Fia doesn't want me, even if I want her so badly I can't see straight.

I'M SURPRISED TO SEE that there are a bunch of RVs and campers now parked in the spots next to mine. A lot of them are surrounded by people grilling and drinking.

Ughhh. I just want to go to bed. It's after midnight.

I know there's no way I'm going to sleep, though, not without satisfying myself first.

I hurry into my RV, shivering and slinging my camera bags and equipment down with far less care than usual.

People don't realize how hard it is to heat an RV when the key isn't in the ignition.

I flip on the generator and turn on my small space heater, nerves unduly irritated by the loud, grating sound.

Usually, I can tune it out. Tonight, I just want to hear the sound of my soaking slit as my thickest dildo slips in and out of me, paired with the sensual purr of its vibrating sensation.

I'll get up early tomorrow and edit the pictures. I'll shower when I'm done getting thoroughly messy...

Bryce's face dances before my eyes—and in the small side windows as I secure my heavy thermal curtains.

I shriek and throw something—the keys I still have in my hand. Good job, Fia. Glad you took those self-defense classes during college...

“I'm sorry, Miss Carvahlo. I have something to tell you. Would you mind opening the window?” Bryce steps back, hands in his pocket, a tense look on his face. His voice is muffled through the glass and he looks kind of fuzzy. Furry.

I hurry to the door and keep most of my body on the inside, ready to slam it if he tries to muscle his way in—but I don't think he will. “Hi, Mr. Frobisher. What's up?”

“Call me, Bryce, please. If you want. Uh, do you remember Sam Grendel?”

“The douchebag?” I say, pushing the door wider, guard dropping.

“Yeah, that's an accurate description, I guess. So, he was mad that I kicked him out of your booth.”

“He was done. There was no ‘kicking out.’ Most people know to leave when the photographer stops using her camera.”

Bryce nods. “He might have had a few concussions in his time.”

I shake my head. “Don't try to excuse him. I'm not judging you or your team based on that creep.”

“Thank you so much for that,” Bryce looks relieved, his dark, intense eyes sparkling at me, his semi-stooped posture relaxing, straightening.

Sweet Mother of Heaven... He fills the entire doorway of the RV—and he's on the ground, not even on the fold-down step... I swallow, mouth dry and pussy so wet that I bless the darkness and my choice of black denim jeans that will probably hide my guilt if desire starts dripping down my thighs.

“You really didn't have to come here and apologize again.” I tuck a curl behind my ear.

Are you flirting? Like a giggly teenager? You already said no when he asked you out to dinner!

That was three hours and four thousand impure thoughts ago. If he asked me to dinner right now, I'd spread myself open like a clamshell and tell him I hope he likes to eat out.

“Oh, I didn't come here to apologize! I mean, of course, I do apologize, and I apologize for disturbing you, too,” his deep voice breaks out in a stammer.

“But I came to let you know that Grendel told the coach of our team that I ruined his photoshoot, and he intends to ask for another one tomorrow morning. I don't think Sam would physically harm anyone—I hope—but I think he crossed a line with how he spoke to you.

I think you should refuse the shoot and show the coach the pictures you already have.

There was nothing wrong with them. Sam just wants to throw his weight around and spend more time with a beautiful, talented woman,” Bryce concludes, his breath making a soft fog between us in the freezing cold air.

A sudden gust of cold air makes me shiver and rub my arms. It's not just the air that makes me shudder. It's also the disgust.

Bryce whips off his quilted satin Lumberjacks' jacket and flings it over my shoulders with a frown. "Miss Carvahlo, it's frigid in here! You can't sleep out here like this! Didn't the convention pay for a room?"

"It's not that bad—or it won't be once the space heater starts and I shut the door. I'm used to it."

"I wish you'd come to my room," Bryce murmurs in a wistful, almost mournful tone. Bryce's eyes go comically wide as he realizes what he's said. "Because it's warm!"

I can't help it. This ice giant, with his lethal grace on the ice, is like a big teddy bear off of it. Whatever little guard I had up drops completely at his mortified look. "I'm starving," I say with a sigh. "You look like you always have an appetite."

For a moment, there's a flash of glistening, sharp teeth, and the stars catch dark depths in his eyes. "I'm incredibly hungry right now," he replies, his voice thicker, with throbbing bass that reminds me of an animal's purr, and suddenly smooth.

This time, my shiver has nothing to do with the cold. "There's probably nothing open this late at night..." I lead.

"The hotel has room service around the clock. Will you be my guest?" Bryce holds out his hand in a gallant gesture, then snatches it back with a bashful chuckle. "Sorry. That sounded so formal. As if a beauty like you would ever want a beast like me."

"What?" I exclaim, patting my jeans with one hand and snatching his with the other. "Phone, wallet. I need to grab my keys." I don't let go of his hand. It's huge. It folds over mine and completely hides it. "What do you mean, a beast like you?"

"Well..." He shrugs, reluctantly letting me go retrieve my keys.

When I come back, I put my hands on my hips.

“I’m a total hockey groupie, you know. Beasts like you are essential to the sport.

As for beauty? Well, my modeling days are over for a reason.

” I flutter my fingers against the tiny wrinkles forming around my eyes and the fine lines just beginning on my brow.

Bryce grunts and practically carries me down the step. I keep a hold of his hand as we begin to walk, noticing that even the back of his hand is covered with that thick, silky hair.

Odd.

But I like it.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 9:19 am

She thinks I meant a beast on the ice. What would she think if she knew I meant a literal beast? Not a human.

A beast who thinks in terms of mates first and human marriages second, a wild, feral thing who would stretch her to her limits and pound her like a wild animal.

I swallow repeatedly as we walk into the hotel and ride up to my room. My attempts at small talk die in my throat.

Stop being the Uncomfortable Snowman! “What are your plans after Puck Con?” I croak.

“Oh, here and there. I’m going to go home to Brazil in time for Carnival.” Fia’s face lifts to mine, joyous, then dark.

“Going home isn’t good?” I venture.

“Going home is great. My relatives are just a little upset each time I return without a ring on my finger. I was going to be married to a local celebrity, a sports figure, like you.”

“Ah. But?” But she’s here, and she isn’t wearing a ring. Clearly not thinking about him if she’s having dinner with me—and giving off a scent that makes it hard to walk.

“I shouldn’t say he’s like you. Oh, he was talented on the field like you are on the ice.

” Her voice turns breathy and she clears her throat, a hand ruffling absently through her curls, sending new waves of her unique scent spiraling at me like a guided missile.

“Unlike you, he hated my job and my desire to travel, and he had a nasty, jealous streak.”

“Well,” I say, lifting my hand to give her a supportive pat on the back and then letting my hand fall without ever touching her, “he must never have seen your work, or he’d be a huge fan, like me.

I understand what you mean about the traveling, though.

You hear about women who break up with professional players all the time because they can’t stand the idea of their mate—I mean, their man—traveling.

During the season, I’m away for half the month, off and on.

” Which would make her an ideal mate. She could travel with me if she wanted.

I could travel with her in the off-season.

Even if we were separated a lot of the time, the homecomings would be so sweet.

So satisfying.

I float off the elevator and open my hotel room door in a fog. Fia follows me, nodding as she passes through the door I hold open for her with the little chivalry I’m able to hold onto.

“I pointed out that he would expect me to support him when he traveled for his

career, but no. He did see my work and called it a hobby. I mean, it's true that most of the money comes from weddings and newborn photoshoots, but I like those, too.

To a lot of my clients, that moment of promising eternal love or that moment of looking at a new life is their redwood forest or their sunset over Niagara Falls.

It marks the achievement of their greatest goal, bigger than any safari or trek along the Great Wall.

The little gigs pay the bills, but they aren't truly little. They make life worth living. ”

I nod so hard my fur flops over my eyes.

“Yes! You know, it's the same with being in a minor league team.

Some people can't understand why a player would be content to stay in the minors, and not push for the majors.

They don't understand that for some of us, the joy of the game is enough, or the love of being part of one big thing in a little town, for really knowing the people who cheer for you, for being someone's local hero just by doing your favorite thing. .. you get it.”

“I get it.”

Fia could not be any more perfect.

She seems to sense that our level of connection is beyond superficial, too. Her hand finds mine, even though we're now safely in the room. Her fingers knead my hand, then climb up my arm, under my jersey. Her hand is in my fur, slowly threading her fingers through it.

I should jump back. Run. Stop her from touching me.

“What is so different about you?” she whispers, her accent becoming more pronounced and, to me, all the more enticing and charming. Her scent seems to thicken, too, a cloying blend of spice and heat, honey, cinnamon, and a hint of something like cayenne and chocolate.

“A bunch of things,” I whisper. “Are you hungry?” I make a last-ditch effort to save myself from doing something stupid.

“Tell me one. Tell me about why you look like a Viking who just crawled out from under the snow,” she steps in front of me, hands boldly landing on either side of my neck as she stands on tiptoe.

I could push her hands off. Stop her.

Instead, I bend, almost purring as her hands massage the fur that coats my skin and move up to the shaggy mane that no amount of styling gel ever fully transforms into a “human” haircut.

“The camera doesn’t lie,” she mutters, roving eyes studying my mouth, my hair, the tint of my skin under her deep tan fingertips.

I can’t help but smile. My mate is caressing me. Smiling up at me in wonder. I wait for the look of curiosity to turn to horror as I remember too late that my teeth look quite predatory up close, with long, fangy canines.

“You’re a very unusual man, aren’t you?” Fia lets her hands fall.

I smother a moan of loss with an effort. “That’s one way to put it.”

“What’s another way? Werewolf? Mutant? Something like that?” she asks, one finger returning to trace my lower lip.

“No one will believe you. Most people can’t see it.”

“I’m not sure what I see. That’s upsetting for a woman known for her good eye, for getting the perfect shot,” she teases.

“As for no one believing me... You walk around in the open, Mr. Frobisher,” her tongue twirls and rolls the name, and my insides are caught in the whirlpool, wishing that tongue was tangled with mine.

“Whatever is so unbelievable about you can’t be seen by most people—is that right?”

“You’re so beautiful. So talented. So smart,” I grunt, grinding my knuckles against my hip to keep from grabbing her.

“So I’m right?”

“Yes,” I hiss, the confession pulled from me without any torture save the sweet mischief in her eyes.

“Shall we play a little truth or dare?” Fia’s eyes sparkle with excitement in the dim light of my spacious room with its king-size bed. “If you tell me the truth, I’ll accept a dare.”

My hands uncurl and splay, fingers rigid as the fire in me floods to one spot.

Yetis have superheated blood meant to keep us warm and ready for our mates when we’re using up a lot of energy just to survive in the frozen mountains.

I can be a gentleman. I'll ask for a truth instead.

"Can't I pick truth?" I challenge, surprised to hear how low and gritty my voice has become.

Fia doesn't seem to mind. She nods, then licks her lips. (Is everything she does meant to tempt me?) "What are you, really?"

"You call us yetis," I whisper.

There's no screaming. No running. She just looks at me expectantly.

"Well? Aren't you going to ask me?" she asks.

"Oh! Yes. Um. Why... Why did you come back to my room tonight? Was it just for a meal?" That's half-gentlemanly, at least. I'm still waiting for her to come out of her shock, throw the hotel's complimentary chocolate sampler at me, and run.

"Because I felt... something. Almost a physical pull." She pulls empty air with her fist, bringing her hand back to thump squarely between her breasts as her hips push forward.

"I felt it, too. I felt it the second I saw your picture all those years ago."

She beams at me, showing she still has one deep dimple, a little perfectly imperfect dot on her flawless body. "That's funny. Even just a photograph, hm?"

"I guess. I've never heard of someone falling in love with a photograph before, but then again... My kind is ancient. Photographs are recent in comparison."

"Falling in love?" Her eyebrows shoot into two surprised curves, and I feel the shock

in her voice like a physical blow.

“Oh, just an expression, I guess.” I start to lie, then remember we’re supposed to be telling the truth.

I guess that’s how I look at it,” I mumble. “My people don’t usually date. They match. Hard and fast.” Match sounds a little better than mate.

Fia nods. “It’s my turn, isn’t it?”

“If we’re still playing?”

“Maybe a few more rounds.” She crosses her arms in front of her chest. “Do you believe in fate? Or destiny?”

“Not in all things, just the big ones. Sometimes fate can make you lazy. I believe in hard work.” I want to show Fia exactly how hard I can work—starting with pleasing her.

“Your go,” she whispers, swallowing hard enough that I can hear the soft click of her throat muscles.

“Why aren’t you freaking out and running away? Or calling me a hairy ugly monster?” I steel myself for her answer. Curiosity. Wanting to get photographs of a new “specimen.” I can’t believe she’d act like that, but I can’t believe what my heart is hinting at, either.

That she could be my mate.

“I have been all over the world. I’ve seen things that I cannot explain, especially in the deserts and the mountains, the woods and caves.

One thing that I have always thought was interesting is how there are myths about certain creatures all over the world.

Nearly every culture has something like a yeti, or a werewolf, or a vampire.

My grandmother is very religious, very superstitious.

She taught me to believe in angels and demons.

Why not other beings that aren't human?" Fia steps closer to me, bringing the dainty little toes of her sneakers up to my massive gunboats.

"And what do you mean, ugly?" She wrinkles her nose and jabs her fingers into my chest, four of them pointed out over her thumb as if an irate duck is poking me.

"Why do you think I took pictures of you all night? Ay? I could show you my shots of the exhibition game. Every other picture is of you. With that handsome smile, one minute so deadly, one minute so cute and sweet! And the way you slice through the opposing players.... Those shoulders." Her voice fades.

The scent coming from her is stronger than ever, and there is no mistaking it now.

"I could never hope to have a mate as beautiful as you," I whisper, clasping her hand as it rests on my torso. "I know that—and you don't realize it, but yetis don't hook up for one night. If I have you once—I'm going to want you forever, over and over. So..." I allow myself to grip her shoulders.

She's so soft. So soft, but she doesn't squish in my hands like my worst nightmares tease. She stays there, warm and wide-eyed, looking up at me, waiting for me to finish my sentence. "So, I dare you to leave unless you want to wind up with a huge, non-human hockey player madly in love with you."

My world stops spinning for a minute as she stays there, silent and still in my grasp.

Then the world crashes and burns, pulling my heart into the flames as she nods and walks away, heading to the door of my hotel room.

Bryce, you idiot. Why? Why did you say something so big, so permanent sounding? I hope I can hold back the tears until she's out of the room.

Click. Beep.

My head jerks up, and I turn to see what's happening.

Fia pats the deadbolt that she's just slid into place. The small electronic card reader is still flashing red from its one tiny bulb, showing the door is locked.

"You stayed!" I cry, forgetting that I should take it slow. I rush to her, picking her up in my arms as she squeals, burying my face against her ribcage as she flails and giggles, arms wrapping around my head.

"I did! Sounds as if I might be here for a while." She plants a soft kiss on top of my head. "Shall we get comfortable?"

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 9:19 am

I 'm crazy.

Well, we know that. Everyone said you were crazy to leave handsome, successful, athletic Felipe.

Said you were crazy to live alone in an RV, taking photos and hoping and praying to pay the bills.

They said you were crazy for spending hundreds every year to go home for Carnival when there are months that you live on scrambled eggs, rice, and soup.

I'm crazy about him. I was from the moment I laid eyes on him. I wonder if this "mates" thing works both ways.

Bryce is gently lowering me to the ground, looking at me with shining eyes as if I'm an angel and a gift all in one. "You stayed," he repeats.

I love the feel of my body against his, and now that I have permission to hug him, I do. I plaster myself to him like he's a fluffy pillow—only I can feel the hard muscles under the layers of thick fur. I can feel something else hard, too. "Did you say mate?"

"Like partner," he rasps.

I wriggle against him, feeling his bulge with my wiggling lower abdomen. "Has a human ever mated with a yeti?"

"Huh? Oh, yes. There's a couple who lives near Pine Ridge—Onyx and Kyra. They

have twin boys.”

“So mates can actually mate ?” I’ve lost all subtlety as I realize he’s packing something that would only be seen in the extreme section of an adult catalog. All the pent-up horniness that I’ve carried since setting eyes on him is making me careless.

“Absolutely. Um. It might not always be completely compatible at first...”

“I like a challenge.” I let him lift me up so I can reach his mouth, making sure that our first kiss is one he won’t forget.

My teeth clamp down on his lower lip before my tongue slides against his fangs.

His tongue spars with mine instantly, a groan rattling from his chest into mine when I start to rock my pussy against his erection.

Even though we’re divided by layers of clothes, the width of his shaft presses every spot I crave as I rub.

“I would help, of course,” Bryce pants between kisses.

“Help? How?”

He looks suddenly surprised. “Don’t human men make their lovers come before entering? How can they make sure you’re slippery enough to take their length?”

Good Lord. Could there be a better combination of sexy as hell and sweet as sugar? “I’m sure some men do. Not so much in my experience. Also, the ‘length’ of most human men isn’t enough to worry about preparing for.”

“Oh.” Bryce looks down at the tent (I think it’s more like a settlement, actually) in his

pants. “I think maybe it would be a good idea if you let me show you what yetis do?”

The way he licks his lips while looking pointedly below my waist has me convinced that I will combust if he doesn’t show me in the next five minutes. “Yes, please.”

Bryce nods and stands still, lips pressed together, eyes closed for a few seconds, an expression close to pain on his face.

“What’s the matter?” He might be worrying about what I’ll think of him, but I suddenly have a slice of panic pie myself.

What if human-yeti relationships are frowned on by his family, even if they’re cool in Pine Ridge?

What about this body he fell for? It’s been a long time since I was obsessed with flat abs and toned thighs.

“I don’t want to rush you. You might think I only wanted one thing.” His shaggy, silky locks fly around his face as he shakes his head in denial. “I promise I don’t.”

Maybe it’s the mating thing that makes me feel so connected to him, so attracted to him, but I already feel like I know him. I know there’s more in store than just a quick tumble—but that’s what I want to start with.

“I believe you, baby,” I whisper, pulling on his waistband.

“And I love how sweet and gentle you can be. But I also liked that lethal weapon I saw on the ice. I don’t mind if we start off in a rush tonight.

The second time can be nice and slow,” I purr, running my hand boldly, lingeringly down the thick bulge between us.

That's the last time I want to be slow for a while.

brYCE'S ENTIRE BODY is covered in thick white and gray fur except for his face, his palms, and his grayish cock that sticks out straight and tall like a spear, ready to impale me. I lick my lips at the size of it, mentally stretching my jaw around that monster. Impaled is right.

He shed his clothes with obvious relief and none of the bashfulness I expected from the stammering gentle giant I met earlier. I fumble with my top, but I don't get far before Bryce scoops me up, kissing me, strong hands soft as they peel layers off my jeans, jacket, and tee-shirt.

"You're even more gorgeous up close," he says, breathing out shakily. He buries his nose in my neck and inhales as his fingers unclasp my bra. "That's not it," he grunts.

"What's not—oh, fuck," I gasp as his mouth moves from my collarbone and down to my breasts, heavy, full breasts that made me an instant hit in any skimpy swimsuit.

Bryce's mouth engulfs half of one breast easily, sucking to the rhythm of my pounding heart, lips kneading my hard nipple to the pulsing I can feel in my clit as his hand begins to stroke down my spine.

"Mmm, closer." He says when he releases my breast—then drops to his knees.

I make a choked sound when he buries his face against my still smooth (but softer) middle and plants a longing kiss on the fabric of my soaked panties. "I'm—"

"You've been getting ready for me," Bryce nods. "But I should help. May I?"

If he means what I think he means, hell yes, he may. "Completely yes."

“I think it would be best if you laid down. You’d be more comfortable. I want to be inside of you so much—but I don’t intend to rush this part.”

I sink down onto the bed, but Bryce doesn’t join me, remaining on his knees.

The second I sit, he whips my panties down my legs and plants his hands possessively on my calves.

Electricity jumps through me at his touch, racing down my spine as he strokes my legs, first with two hands, then with one.

My mouth waters as I see him give his cock some attention.

His fist closes around it easily, pumping in long, fast strokes that push beads of shiny white pre-cum from his tip.

“You’re so big,” I say, not caring if it’s obvious. He is—as big as a prize-winning cucumber, just a little smaller than my favorite 35 mm lens.

“It’s okay if I don’t fit. We can work up to it,” Bryce reassures, slowly stroking up to the apex of my thighs. “You’re stunning. Just like I imagined.”

“You imagined?” I tease. I know hundreds of guys probably jerked off to my pictures. That’s what happens when you pose for sexy pictures.

Bryce ducks his head. “I—I did today. When I met you in person, I imagined what would happen if you were my real mate, that you would look just like this—all beautiful shades of brown and pink.”

Any shyness I had has been wiped out by want and the way he looks at me like I’m his goddess.

He kisses his way from knee to thigh, and my stomach flip-flops when he holds my legs apart, pinning them down.

He lets out a deep, satisfied chuckle that has my face flaming as he takes in my short black curls, matted down with slick arousal.

I can't imagine how gooey wet I must be from thinking about him for hours.

"There it is," he croons, leaning forward. "That sweet, sensual smell. Yetis have very strong senses of smell, you know."

I swallow. Is that good or bad right now?

"We smell things human noses miss, particularly the scent of our mate's arousal. You smell like sweet, wet sex—and cinnamon, cardamom, and nutmeg. And look at you..." His finger circles around my outer lips, making my hips jump, "so generous to me."

And that's the last word he says for a while, or at least the last time I understand speech for the next ten minutes. Bryce shoves his head between my legs and goes wild.

I don't know if it's because he's a yeti or because his mouth is so big, or because yeti-human mating needs to have the best hard, fast, sloppy foreplay ever, but whatever it is, I want to bottle it and sell it.

Bryce's head slots between my thighs, and his wide mouth parts over my sex, loosing his wide, flexible tongue.

One swipe completely covers my outer folds and drags juice from my core upward.

A hearty suck pulls my clit into his mouth with enough force that I think I'm going to cum on the spot.

“Meu Deus !” My spine arches forward, and my hands grip his hair.

A savage growl stops me. “Not yet,” he warns from his hot hollow before lapping me again, his tongue actually making splashing sounds as he parts me and invades every nook and cranny, seeking out my juice like it's ambrosia.

“Such a needy little pussy. A perfect river and no one to drink from it until now.” Strong thumbs pry apart my outer lips first, then my inner ones, leaving me exposed to his hungry gaze. I see the concern on his face as he looks at how tiny I am compared to his rod.

“I stretch,” I say, my clit throbbing, protesting the break from his onslaught.

“You'll have to,” he says.

SHE'S DIVINE. SWEET , rich, and complex, with spices, sex, and sweat tickling every taste bud of my tongue and making my cock twitch and leak, pre-cum sliding down to coat the thick padding of fur on my thighs.

Fia hasn't been touched in a long time. Neither have I, but I can tell her body is desperate to be pleased by the way she bares herself to me and lets me maul her pussy with my kisses and licks, finally splitting her open and pushing her calves over my shoulders so I can fuck her hard and fast with my rigid tongue.

Her little walls clamp down when I fill her, her sound of breathless surprise urging me on.

I'm going to fuck her until she comes, rubbing her clit with my thumb as my tongue

works inside of her, finding the stretchy, spongy secret spot I know must be lurking in this hot velvety paradise.

My plan is to learn her fast and perfectly so that she'll be the happiest mate in the world.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 9:19 am

I forget to be strategic about anything when her legs arch against my shoulders and her fingers yank my hair as her soft, slippery pussy humps my mouth. I growl and burrow forward, only to meet her hips as they bounce off the bed to fuck my tongue with her dripping slit.

I love it, but I need to do more. Serve my mate better.

I flip Fia over fast and without warning (oops), making her scream as I push her hips up high, her face down flat.

I kneel behind her with my face buried in her from behind, able to steal glances of her clawing at the sheet and burying her face in the comforter to smother her increasingly loud moans.

“Please, Bryce... Please,” she begs.

Fia, my Fia, is begging for me.

“Soon, my beautiful gift,” I say after I swipe my tongue between her folds again.

“I want your cock. I can take it,” she argues, voice almost a whine.

“Not yet!” I say, thwacking her sensitive nub with the flat of my tongue, probably harder than I should. To my surprise, my sweet, soft little mate moans and arches back.

“Again! Hard like that,” she pleads.

I replace my tongue with my hand, hard palm against her bead, rubbing in circles as I watch her walls spasm. “Come for me,” I beg. “Come while I watch your pretty pussy practice for my big cock.”

The mixture of words and the hard circles on her clit break the last dam, and her warm juice floods my palm, so wet that I see drops fly as I rub her hard, hoping to push her to the brink of a second orgasm.

Fia flops forward, shaking and sighing.

Was I too hard? You got carried away! “Fia? I’m sorry. Was that too hard?” I whisper, curling up beside her, cupping her face in my hand.

“Just hard enough,” she reassures, flushed, sweating face pressing close to mine.

She wraps her arms around me and pulls me in for a kiss, her tongue swirling with mine.

I hear her moan, and her delicious scent gets heavier.

My love likes tasting herself on my tongue.

My love is a little bit wild and savage—just like me.

“Do you have lube?” she whispers, snuggling to my chest.

I wince. “No. I... I never planned on needing it,” I confess.

“I always believed I would never find a mate.” I nuzzle the top of her head, kissing her dark curls, “Probably because I knew I’d already lost my heart to Miss Valentine.

” It’s a miracle she’s in my arms. I hope she knows I’m serious about not letting her go. ..

Fia hums softly under her breath and then begins to worm her way down my body, hands massaging.

I can’t get over the fact that she seems as enthralled with my giant, fur-covered form as I am with her small, nearly hairless one.

The silky skin of her bare thigh rubs pointedly against my erection—which is a mistake, seeing as the slightest pressure might make me explode.

Her hand follows the path, slowly wrapping around me, even though there’s a fraction of space left that prevents her fingers from touching.

“So big. And so slippery. I think this might work instead of lube. Even if it doesn’t, I’m willing to take a chance.” Fia lifts her fingers high, spreading them apart and showing strings of my thick, viscous arousal spiderwebbing between them.

I ROLL TO MY HANDS and knees for the second time, pussy still throbbing and tingling from the double whammy of an orgasm Bryce already delivered, body tense and excited as I feel him kneeling behind me. Him being on top is something we’re going to have to work up to.

When I spread my legs wider, notching myself backwards until I can feel his cock resting between my cheeks, I’m startled at the amount of wetness that suddenly coats me.

When Bryce strokes my pouting lips with his hand, I hear an audible plop of liquid into his palm.

“Was that you or me?” I ask, my inhibitions on hiatus with this lover.

“You—but only because my fur is absorbing the river you cause to flow from me,” he chuckles.

I sigh and jiggle my cheeks against him, listening to his growling moan of longing with temptress satisfaction. “I was thinking about you all day. I was planning to get my biggest toy and play with myself while wishing it was you.”

“How big are these toys?” Bryce asks, leaning down to kiss a trail across my spine.

“Not as big as you, that’s for damn sure—but one of them is a big hefty. I ordered the wrong size—or maybe I didn’t. Maybe I ordered the perfect size to work up to you,” I chuckle.

As we move together, his cock pressing against my folds without going in, just rocking together to spread our soaking wetness around, my lust-drenched brain starts to think about the path that brought us here.

It’s like an ultra-spiced-up video clip that plays in my head, but it makes me wonder—is he really my mate?

Not just a lover, but a lifelong partner like his culture makes him believe?

He plays hockey. I love sports photography.

He loves sports. He had the old magazines and calendar I was in.

Through that, he followed my career and started to support it.

I treasured the words of the stranger who would always praise me, even when the

people in my “real life” dismissed my dreams.

My best friend asking me to cover this random event because of her sick kids.

Sam Grendel joining the team only recently, and Bryce being next in line.

The confrontation, the knock at my door, the wrong toy...

He finally pushes into me, and I gasp and dig my fingers into the mattress at the stretch, a painful push that wedges him tight in my opening and makes tears spring to my eyes as I consider asking him to retreat.

Before I can, it’s like there is a chemical reaction between my arousal and his, relaxing my muscles and sending him sliding forward, filling me so hard and deep that my whole body shudders and settles.

Stuffed. Stretched. Spread to my limits. I let out a guttural noise of all the air rushing out of me.

The deep, “Can this be fate?” thoughts of a second ago vanish.

I don’t care if it’s fate or not, I’m keeping this cock and the man attached. “Oh, wow.” I finally can make an intelligible sound.

“Wow,” Bryce echoes in a hazy voice. “I... I didn’t think it would happen fast like that.”

I move experimentally, but I can’t move much.

I run a hand between my thighs, rubbing my clit to help combat the burning sensation of being stretched to the breaking point, only to find that I’m literally bulging, belly

pushed out.

“I didn’t expect that, either,” I say in a strained voice. “Move slow.”

“I will. I don’t have to move at all.” Bryce puts one palm on each of my cheeks and parts them. “I could come just from looking at you spread around me. Feeling your walls ripple against me.”

I twitch, muscles trying to relax against this sudden intruder. Bryce groans, and a new flood of wetness soaks me. When he moans, the deep bass rumble of his voice shoots through me, and now we’re connected. He vibrates inside of me, and my muscles start to go soft.

“You might be able to, but I can’t. I need friction,” I say, gently rocking forward, seeing what it feels like. It doesn’t hurt this time, but the deep, Oh-My-God-I-May-Never-Walk-Again stretch is still there.

“Oh, I’m sorry, my love. My mate. My treasure. I was caught up for a moment in how good you feel.” Bryce massages my lower back with one hand and snakes the other one around my hip. With his long arms, he easily reaches my pussy and rubs it too.

I’m in the center of a massage sandwich with a delicious, thick filling.

“I would never neglect my mate,” he whispers, beginning to rub more purposefully.

Tingles of pleasure work with the “hurts so good” stretch, and I feel us start to slip and slide together.

I cautiously let myself fall forward, head on a pillow, spine arching high with his huge cock parting me.

My hips rock and his rush to meet me, short, shallow thrusts at first, getting longer and harder as we build up our tempo.

“You feel amazing,” he whispers.

I look back over my shoulder to see the enraptured expression on his rugged face before pleasure forces my eyes closed. “More,” I beg, sure that’s a word I shouldn’t be using.

“You won’t take more yet,” Bryce cautions.

“Harder. Faster. Not deeper. Not yet.” I know bodies can stretch, but there’s no way I can have ten or twelve inches stuffed inside me on the first try. “I like a challenge,” I say.

He gets it. “Don’t worry. I’ve never missed a practice, never missed a game,” he chuckles. “We’ll go as far as you want. Just being with you is all I need.”

“So sweet,” I purr, marveling that this massive monster can be pounding me steadily while still romancing me.

He’s kind of perfect.

Perfect for me.

“Harder,” I remind him, hips working back insistently.

With a grunt that sends those delicious vibrations through me, he complies.

Slap, brush, slap, brush. The room is silent except for my thighs on his fur and the obscenely wet, splashing sounds that turn to a steady squelch as he fucks me harder.

In moments, we're both lost. His hands fasten to my waist, and his grunts are a deep, growling staccato, little bursts of spine-tingling noise on every thrust.

I'm not even aware of the sounds I'm making at first until I realize that the constant moan that rides up and down the octave like a singer warming up is me, riding cycles of pleasure.

The cycles get shorter and harder, more pointed.

Every space inside of me is filled. Every spot I've ever wanted a lover to find is touched and rubbed by default by the huge, heavy cock inside of me.

"Soon?" Bryce asks in a strangled voice.

I think he'd keep pounding me until he passed out. Or until I did. The pressure from inside radiates down to my clit. His hand connects with mine over the swollen bulge of my lower abdomen, circling on my clit as he slams in deep, making my eyes fly open as I let out a screech.

"Have you ever squirted?" he whispers, almost like he's afraid to ask.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 9:19 am

I can't make words. Just shake my head from side to side, eyes closed, wondering if that's something I can actually do.

I'm fucking a yeti's cock. I can probably do anything short of flight.

"I want to make you come hard, like I'm going to. I want to feel all that hot pussy juice making a puddle—and one day soon, I want to make sure you squirt in my mouth. I want to drink every drop of you, Fia."

"God," I whimper, walls rushing to clamp in the final burst of pleasure. "Please, Bryce."

His huge hand suddenly moves to where my pubic bone and mound meet. His hand crushes down while his cock crushes up, and there's a burning, boiling sensation of urgency, of heat without pain.

"Let it go for me, Fia. Come all over me. Soak me."

The orgasm that rocks me is like nothing I've felt before.

It doesn't stay in my erogenous zones, but it fuses them all together until my entire body feels like it's pulsing and throbbing as a torrent of liquid sprays out—three hard bursts in time with my high, panting gasps of pleasure.

It's scary for a second, feeling everything burst, everything slip from my control as I sob in pleasure and my muscles desert me, leaving me limp under Bryce.

But he has me in his strong arms, holding me tight as his own orgasm follows mine, a pumping floods of hot cum that somehow adds one more wave of mini-climaxes to the tsunami that just hit me.

“Fia!” he bellows, hips suddenly slamming into mine out of rhythm, jerking and dancing against my legs until I can feel sticky streams overflowing my spent pussy and coating my thighs.

Yep. We made that puddle he mentioned.

I’m such a mess. Such a happy, happy mess. “Bryce.” I reach back to caress his face when we crash down, his body huddled around mine, spooning me as we’re still joined.

“I love you,” he pants, spent. He clutches me close, post-orgasmic shudders rocking his giant frame.

He loves me?

I wait for the panic alarms. The red flags to wave inside my mind.

I waited for years to hear Felipe say he loved me—outside of one of his diatribes where “Look, I love you, so listen to me” was used as blackmail and control.

“Oh, God.” Bryce’s sleepy, relaxed voice turns fearful. “Oh, God, I said it out loud. Fia, I didn’t—”

“Shhh. It’s okay, my love,” I say soothingly. It’s not quite an “I love you,” but it feels right for right now. “Shh, my mate. That was wonderful.”

SHE SLEEPS. I DOZE . We’re a mess, and I think I’m just going to throw these

sheets out and reimburse the hotel for the damages.

Maybe I'll throw the mattress out, too, I think as I slowly withdraw from my sleeping beauty, blushing in awe as at least a cup of our combined essence flows from her in a creamy, glistening tide.

"Bryce?" She reaches for me in her sleep, my name on her lips.

I know she's mine. I know it.

But I can't force her to believe it. Truth-or-Dare games don't work in the light of day, which is just a few hours away.

"I'm right here, Fia. You can sleep."

"Don't wanna sleep," she pouts, shivering. "Get back here."

I laugh softly and cuddle back up to her, my cock sliding between her thighs instead of filling her. "I will never leave you—except to go to work. Or while you're at work."

Her sleepy nod and noise of agreement lull me into relaxing—for a second.

"I'm not going to stop traveling because I found someone," she says, a yawn breaking her sentence in half.

Found someone? My heart leaps. That sounds promising.

"I wouldn't ask you to! I'm your biggest fan. I love your work. What kind of idiot would I be to ask you to stop doing what you love, especially when I love it, too?"

“You’re smart.”

I have to laugh at the factual way she declares it. “So are you. You wouldn’t ask me to stop playing hockey, would you?” I hold my breath. I know she won’t—but I also know I would give it up this second if she said it meant she’d stay with me.

“No! I... I really like when you play and I watch.” Her voice is more alert—and more sensual.

My cock starts to harden. I guess he’s making up for years of voluntary celibacy.

“You like to watch me play?”

“So hot. The way you... It’s like you hunt the other players. Ruthless. Skillful. Graceful.” She turns to me with a sudden roll, dark eyes meeting mine as she licks her lips. “Would you ever make love right after you played?”

“I wouldn’t even take off my helmet if you like it on,” I tease—only I’m not really teasing.

Fia stares at me.

“What?”

“I’m trying to figure out the right word for you.”

“Yeti?” I suggest, brow wrinkling in confusion—and cock starting to throb as she mashes herself to my chest, apparently not caring about my soaked, matted fur from the waist down.

“You’re not a cinnamon roll. Or a golden retriever.”

Did I fuck her brains out? “Did you hit the headboard, love?” I ask, cupping her face with a frown.

“Some women call really amazing boyfriends who are so giving and loving cinnamon rolls and golden retrievers. But you’re all of those things and more. And you’re not golden.” She beams at me, kissing my startled mouth. “I don’t quite know what to call you, but I’m looking forward to finding out.”

I kiss her back, one palm coming up to massage her breast, loving the way she instantly leans into my touch with a happy moan.

“Just call me yours. Your mate,” I encourage, knowing I sound desperate and selfish.

I make a last-ditch effort to be strong.

“If you want. I know you’re so beautiful, and you’re a world traveler, and I’m a hometown hero monster.

..” I shrug helplessly. “In hockey terms, maybe it seems like we’re a missed shot, but—”

Fia cuts me off, finger to my lips and one leg sliding pointedly over mine to start fusing our bodies once again.

“Shh. We’re a perfect shot—in hockey or photography.

” She smiles, nodding seriously. “Sometimes the unexpected angle sinks it deep in the back of the net.” Her hips part, and my semi-erect cock easily slides into the soaking slickness of her pussy.

“Sometimes the picture that you never expected to take is the one that wins the prize

or becomes your favorite.”

“You’ve always been my favorite,” I whisper, head bowing so my forehead can rest against hers.

She smiles up at me, dimple deepening with the width of her grin. “You’re the prize I’ve been wanting.”

I sink into her.

She moans and flexes, sending ripples of pleasure through both of us. “Perfect,” she sighs.

“Agreed.”

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 9:19 am

Lennox

I'm having a very bad day. No, let's make that a very bad month.

It's not enough to be one of the only mothmen left in West Virginia, or that I have no hope of finding a mate or even being able to pop into the grocery store without attracting terrified screams—but now my home has been destroyed, too.

With my forest gone and my career as an amateur arborist kaput, I do the unthinkable.

I leave my family and head to paranormal-friendly Pine Ridge, knowing that I can find safety there.

..and maybe even get WiFi and the occasional convenience store veggie wrap.

If I really want to shoot for the moon, perhaps in a year or two I'll be doing well enough to convince my hothead brother to leave the ruins of our old life and join me.

Cindy

I'm getting old. Okay, no, not really, but I'm becoming more mature.

I just watched one of my best friends seize life with both hands and go from a struggling, single waitress to an engaged pastry chef and business owner.

I want that. Okay, maybe I don't want to own a business, but I'm tired of random

hookups and fun flings.

I want to find my person, that one special somebody and Pine Ridge seems like the place to do it.

I don't know what it is about this little town, but wedding bells always seem to be ringing!

There's just one problem. I'm not the good girl type. I don't know how to keep things serious. I don't even know where to find a guy who wants to settle down and start a new life. Even if I did, I don't know if he'd be into someone like me. (My friends say I'm kind of a lot.)

It's not like Mr. Sweet-And-Sensitive is going to fall out of the sky and land at my feet...

A sweet-and-steamy monster romance standalone from the author of *The Minotaur's Valentine*!

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 9:19 am

I look at what's left. An army surplus blanket, one of my speckle-covered notebooks with a pen tucked inside, and whatever is in my old canvas book bag. I haven't even used it in months. I don't know if there's anything valuable inside.

Marlow hasn't fared much better. He has his leather Harley-Davidson vest, a tarp, and whatever he has in a big blue gym bag. His is probably better stocked. He travels more—which might be a blessing right now.

"Damn." Marlow looks at where we used to live. The lightning strike struck the biggest elm in the strand, and the bare trees, dry and tough from a historically dry winter, went up like matchsticks.

"It's gone. The whole strand. The whole woods!

" My throat is full of tears. I don't care.

It wasn't just home. It was my work, my hobby, my passion.

It's not like anyone pays me to take care of the trees, but as a mothman, it isn't like I could go over to the West Virginia Department of Forestry and hand in my resume, either.

"Well. It's a big state. Spring is coming. Plenty of trees in the woods. Race you to see who can make a new nest!" My brother pounds me on the arm, his steely gray feathers at odds with my crow-black ones.

"Make a new nest? Here?" I shake my head, red eyes blinking back tears. "Marlow,

no. This place isn't for us anymore. It's... stagnated. The humans know it, too."

Marlow's face is tight. "Humans are all idiots, and you know it. Let 'em leave. Then we'll rule the woods like we used to."

My antennae droop. My brother is the stupid kind of fearless. As our mother used to say, he's missing the bone in his head that tells him to avoid danger.

"We mothmen won't reclaim the area. The mining companies will move in. If not them, the mega marts and mall complexes. The new developments. Whether it's progress or purgatory, we're going to lose."

Marlow gives me a long, cold look before laughing. "You read too much, smarty wings. 'Progress or purgatory.' Ha. So what are you going to do? Make yourself your final cocoon and wilt away?"

I take a deep, patient sigh. Being the brains of the family (what's left of it) has some benefits. I'm used to dealing with Marlow's childishness. I've always been the mature "older brother" even though we're the same age.

"I think I want to go to a community that welcomes our kind."

Strong fingers tighten on my wrist before I can even cry out in pain. "You will not go to a CrossRealms, you idjit."

Whoo. Idjit. When the country drawl pours out like that, I know Marlow is close to losing his tough facade—and his temper.

"I'm not looking to fight evil vamps and demons! I like to prune trees, not whittle stakes. I was thinking someplace peacefully paranormal friendly."

Marlow snorts. “Not too many places around here like that. Thinking of crossing the ocean and hiding out in the Hebrides? I’d love to see you scrounge up money for airfare. Or did you plan on those wimpy little wings carrying you over the Atlantic?”

Yes. He’s being a jerk. He’s being a jerk because he’s scared and upset. I try to remember that. I try to count to ten, but I can only make it to three before I snap out, “No! Like Moonlight Bay or Pine Ridge! Yeah. Pine Ridge. It’s a little closer and a little warmer.”

My brother’s wings flare open, gray and red and angry. The markings on his wings are like eyes, black and crimson scowls on gray. They’re subtle enough that in the darkness of a moonlit night or a dense forest, humans just see flashes of shadow.

“You’re going to leave our home? Coward! Deserter!”

Calm. Calm. Calm.

“There is nothing for us here. Come with me. Come with me and help me start a new home. We aren’t going to thrive here. What happens when there’s only one of us left? We just die out?”

“We’ll meet someone. Someday.”

“Out here, we’re monsters. Up there, we’d be citizens. You know. Eventually.” My antennae flatten down to my head, and my wings droop. Mothmen aren’t social creatures. The idea of making friends and interacting scares me so much I could molt.

Marlow says nothing.

He knows I’m right. There is no chance of us saving our kind out here.

No chance of mates. There are other mothmen and mothladies out there, scattered few and far between, but all of them have fled the cryptozoologists, crazy hunters, and curiosity seekers that have chased us to the edge of extinction and deeper into hiding.

Why have we stayed here in the wildest wilds of West Virginia?

I'm too scared to go.

He's too stubborn to leave.

What's more, Marlow isn't afraid to mix with people.

Of course, he can only do it a few times a year, late at night during the huge festivals where they come to "celebrate" the mothmen most attendees don't truly believe in.

People dress up like us (well, like bad imitations of us), watch grainy footage of turkey buzzards, and have parties.

Marlow waits until these conventions have turned into bacchanals of monster fans and girls wearing tight tank tops with catchy slogans like "I'm Mad for Mothman" and "Mothman's Monster-Fudging Mate" and stuff like that.

Then, he slips into the crowds. People love his "costume."

And if you believe his stories, those mothman chicks love it when he "keeps the suit on" while he satisfies them.

I would die. What if it was a trap? What if those girls find out it's not a suit and I end up dried and preserved on the world's biggest pushpin in the mother of all butterfly collections?

I'm dying right now, just thinking about making a move far from everything I've ever known, far from tradition, roots, and maybe...maybe someplace in this state, there's one of my kind that I haven't discovered yet. If I leave, I never will.

A shower of sparks and a loud crash startles both of us. Charred trees are crashing and falling like dominoes in the wind as drenching rain begins—too late to do any good.

“There is nothing left here,” I repeat firmly.

“You are a quitter and weakling.” Marlow glares.

“You aren't going to out macho me! If I don't 'quit' this place, our whole family will die out. Up there—there might be one of our kind.”

“Like she'd pick you.” He snorts, scoffing at my timid hopefulness.

“Yeah, I'm sure she'd rather have you, stud. Why don't you come with me? See what kind of mothman the ladies prefer?”

“Don't you try that dang smartass reverse psychology on me, Lenny.”

“Don't call me Lenny. I hate that. And it wasn't reverse psychology, you idiot!

That's what you do when you don't want the person to do what you said!

I do want you to come with me! That was bait .

” I turn away in exasperation, my dark, solid black wings fluffed up in anger.
“Hillbilly hick with wings.”

A hard tackle takes me down.

“Heard that!”

As our home and world crash down around us, my brother and I fight in the wet mud, beating the tar out of each other until we’re laugh-cry-cursing in the chilly late February air.

“Damn. Where was this rain hours ago when it would have saved us?” I shiver, wiping mud from my face.

Marlow lies next to me, panting. “I know, right.”

We both sit there, getting drenched. It’s the only way we’ll get clean.

Finally, Marlow yanks me up. “Aw. Go if you want. Yankee.”

“Don’t you do that. You know we’re not northern or southern. We’re mothmen. Come with me, Mar. Please? I really don’t want to leave you behind.”

“Lenny.” He heaves a deep sigh that ripples the feather-like hairs that make up our “fur.” “If I don’t stay, there won’t be anything to come back to when you can’t stick it up there in New York, with all those eight million people.”

I wince like he landed a blow. “Eight million? Are you sure?”

“Heard it on the television in the back of the bait shop.”

Another tree crashes, this one revealing an eerie orange glow. The fires are still burning, even in this wet, misty fog that’s covering the mountain. Another lightning bolt sizzles the air, and we have nowhere to hide, no nests, no nothing—not anymore.

Unless I'm brave enough to make something new.

"I'm going. If I don't come back home by Christmas, you gotta come up there and find me, okay?"

"Deal."

We stand, awkwardly gathering our stuff as the rain starts to come down harder and faster. "Do we hug?" I ask, arms dangling like limp windsocks.

"You big sap."

But Marlow hugs me anyway.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 9:19 am

“ U gh! Ugh! Ugh! Oh my God! Ohhhh. God!”

Will this loser please finish already?

Why do I keep doing this?

“Oh, yeah, baby! Who’s your daddy?”

I’m glad I’m facing away from Frat Boy. Rolling my eyes while he’s clearly giving his best pornstar-wannabe performance is probably rude. I don’t answer his question. It’s a turn-off. Hell, this whole night has become a turn-off.

It occurs to me that I’m doing a disservice to my fellow women.

This guy is probably nineteen or twenty (old enough to be at the Pine Ridge campus of NYU), and he still doesn’t know how to have good sex.

He’s rushed and clumsy, but he’s not giving off “this is my first time” vibes.

If I hadn’t been soaking through my black fishnets since the moment I walked into the party a couple of hours ago, his attempts at athletic fucking would be mildly uncomfortable.

And he thinks outdated phrases like “Who’s your daddy? ” sound hot?

I am doing nothing for my fellow women in terms of training this bozo. That is probably rude—on my part.

And yes, having time to have deep introspective thoughts during passionate sex is also a sign that it's not good. Passionate is a misnomer.

Faking does nothing for either of us.

I pull away.

"H-hey!" Bozo is handsome enough, and yes, I know his name isn't Bozo. It's Brad or Bert or something. Right now, he looks like a stunned, breathless Adonis-in-training.

"This angle isn't working. You're not hitting my G-spot, you're totally neglecting my clit, and you didn't go down before moving right to home base. Also, 'Who's your daddy?' Ew, no. You don't know if I even have a daddy-kink. Which I don't."

Bozo blinks. "Well...You have a fat ass!"

"I know." I beam and pat my generously padded posterior. "And if you had been good, you probably would have gotten to fuck it on some future date. But this isn't a date. This is a party hook up, and I'm horny. Now, you'd better make me come, or I'm leaving. Want me to show you how?"

Bozo splutters. "I k-know how to have sex, skank!"

"Oh, God. Your poor, poor future wife. Learn to take directions." I pull my dress back down and leave whatever abysmal dorm room I'm in, walking past dozens of other couples who are spilling out of other rooms, making out in halls before they end for the night or take things inside and move to the next level.

As I get to the top of the stairs, a red plastic cup full of watermelon vodka splashes me in the back of the head.

I turn slowly. My lazy, psycho bitch smile spreads even slower. Bozo, holding up a pillow in front of his semi-adequate junk, gulps and slams the door shut.

Outside, I stand in the chilly mid-March air and let out a deep, guttural groan. It's more than sexual longing. It's sexual frustration. I slip into my car and roar away from the dorms.

Back at my apartment, I head into the shower with my favorite toy—but then stop as my phone buzzes.

Cathy: Are you up?

Cathy works at The River House restaurant.

My fellow waitress is also my primary bestie.

Claire, who used to be a waitress, is my secondary bestie.

She's now my part-time boss. She and her almost-hubby own a bakery and coffee shop, and I help out when they have catering.

When the bakery side of the business opens, they've offered me a full-time job.

Cindy: Yes. Just had the most unsatisfying sex I've had in months. Called it quits, and now I'm getting into the shower with something long, thick, and suction-y.

Cathy: TMI

Cindy: Why are you up?

Cathy: How do we throw Claire a bridal shower without her knowing when she

works at the place where we want to have it?

Cindy: This is what keeps you up at night?

Cathy: Also the plight of children in need, human suffering, and global warming. Oh, and the threat of nuclear war.

I put my head in my hand and nearly blind myself with my OctoPussy, my delightful teal tentacle toy.

Cindy: I'll ask Georgia to help. We'll say we're catering for some other person, but it'll be for her.

Cathy: But then she'll do all the work!

Cindy: It's late. I'm horny. I will have more plans tomorrow.

Cathy: Don't you ever want to find just one nice man to love and sleep with?

My heart hurts. Yes, I do. But I don't know if I can find that.

Cindy: Sure, but in the meantime, I'm keeping sex toy manufacturers gainfully employed.

Cathy: You're a mess and I love you.

Cindy: I love you, too.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 9:19 am

Pine Ridge, New York.

Marlow acts like New York is a world away, but I just fly diagonally up Pennsylvania, spend the day hiding out-slash-napping in the mountains surrounding Antonia, Pennsylvania, and then work my way toward Pine Ridge.

As the tractor-trailer drives, it's about seven hours.

As the crow flies, probably five. As I fly—around six.

(Crows don't worry if someone sees them. I do.)

In case you're wondering, no, mothmen do not have a fancy built-in GPS in our antennae. I just took one of those complimentary folding paper road atlases from the Wheeling Travel Plaza, and then I darted down low enough to read road signs every now and again.

Sorry if it's not as mysterious as you thought—and you can see why I won't be putting my flying skills on display any time soon.

Once I get to the Binghamton area, my senses start to tingle in a way I've never felt before. Oh, maybe a flash here and there, but this time, it's like my whole body is lighting up from the inside out. Magic. Supernatural power. Paranormal beacons.

Ley Lines, in other words. Pine Ridge is a paranormal-friendly place because there are three intersecting Ley Lines. A supernatural powerhouse.

“I’ve gotta be close.”

You would think that would spur me on, but it doesn’t. I find a dense area of trees and land to have a quick pep talk and work on my hyperventilating.

What if I can’t do this?

Marlow is right. I’m a coward. I’m timid. I’m shy. I’m...not good at things. I don’t have skills. I mean—unless you have a sick tree. I’m good at woodlore, and I know a lot about plants. I know how to survive in the wild, on my own.

So why the heck did I decide to fly to a place where I’ll need new skills I’ve never honed?

I wince as I see the sign in the glow of my red eyes, “Welcome to Pine Ridge, New York! The town with a heart as big as the great outdoors!”

Pine Ridge may be considered a small town to humans, but by loner in the West Virginia wilderness standards, it’s intimidating.

Flying over it, my cowardly self-preservation instinct kicks in.

Well, Marlow says it is cowardly, but if I don’t stay hidden, how will our species survive?

If I do stay hidden, how will our species survive?

“Six of one, half a dozen of the other,” as my grandpa used to say.

There are thick snags and strands of pines everywhere in this town. I need to be near water. I want to be near enough to observe people and the magical beings who

supposedly live among them.

Supposedly is a big, frightening word that makes me want to turn around and fly south, back home.

What if the rumors that trickled down over the past two centuries are just that? Rumors?

I decide to stay hidden until I have proof that Pine Ridge isn't just paranormal—it's paranormal- friendly .

I fly past the town, stomach churning as I see all the lights, and some are even scattered far into the hills. I'd like to fly further, but flying this many hours in two days, carrying all the stress of leaving home after watching it burn...

It doesn't surprise me when my body finally quits, wings fluttering limply until I touch down several miles from the last point of light, deep in a thicket of snow-covered boughs.

Cold, far from home, and alone.

Exhaustion and depression make a good sleeping pill.

Page 13

Source Creation Date: July 24, 2025, 9:19 am

“Y ou look... tired.”

Claire is polite and sweet and I love her. When I show up to help paint the bakery that will one day take the world by storm (Cakes by Claire, remember it), I don't look fabulous.

The only consolation is that I don't have work at The River House or classes today. Last night's failed frat party kicked off Spring Break.

“Why is Spring Break not even in spring?” I whine, grabbing a cup of the famous Cinnamon Streusel coffee that Claire and Georgia have gotten me addicted to.

It's the perfect thing for a late February pick me up—especially if you're an idiot who barely got any sleep as you tried to chase a certain erogenous high that you just couldn't catch.

“I can't afford to go to Florida, and I'm definitely not going home to Ithaca—they got thirteen inches of snow this morning!

Whatever zany madcap fun I have will have to be around here. ”

“Ohhh, that explains why you look so beat. Late night Spring Break bash?” Claire pulls her long brown waves up into a red bandana and pulls on one of her fiancé's old white t-shirts.

Claire's honey is perfect for her, being a chef with a heart of solid gold—and ridiculously drool-worthy.

Georgie is this gorgeous blonde Nordic-looking god with a chest like a whiskey barrel that worked out, and he's about seven feet tall.

Even on Claire's very pumpkin-shaped physique, his shirt hangs loose like an old smock, becoming the perfect painting outfit.

"Not so much a bash as a crash," I say, pulling my own sandy blonde hair up into a sloppy bun. "You look like Rosie the Riveter's much hotter twin."

"Thank you! You look cute, too. Um. Are you sure you're up to painting?"

"Hey, I want the job as your assistant. The sooner this place is up and running, the sooner I can transition out of waitressing and into... something else. This, I guess."

"You don't sound very excited." Claire pulls out rollers and painter's tape, giving me a sidelong glance.

"No! I am! It's just that in three months, I'll graduate—after forever-and-a-half. This is my last Spring Break. Ten days of freedom before 'freebie' vacations are a thing of the past. I guess at twenty-five, it's about time."

"Hey, my timeline was the same—but for different reasons. I guess Georgie and I won't see you for a few days, huh? You'll be living it up—or laying low." Claire laughs with a wink.

I know she's probably picturing me having an endless loop of swinging singles' fun in my apartment or living at Jax Alley, which is a sexy-skeevy roadhouse bar outside of town. "Haha. No. Probably not much."

I don't want to tell Claire about how pathetic my love life has gotten.

I'm supposed to be the sexy adventurous one, the one who is self-assured and

brimming with confidence.

Claire and Cathy don't look up to me, exactly, but they're the mild to my "wild." Claire wouldn't be happily engaged without Cathy and me.

We told her to go for it and make a move when she met the hunk of hot chef who hides out in the kitchen.

I want that. Not necessarily the tall, beefy drink of water Claire has, but—

Oh, who the hell am I kidding? Yes, I want that.

I want a big, strong provider and protector to wrap me in his arms and tell me that it's okay that I've putzed around with my life for so long and that I don't know what I'm doing.

That it's okay that I don't know what to do with a freaking liberal arts degree, and who understands how much I dread moving back home just to be shunted along into my parents' plumbing business.

"I really do love working with you. I love working in catering, and I would be crazy not to stay here and help out in this bakery. With your flavors and designs, it's going to be big."

"Maybe. It sure popped In December and January when you helped out at Jan and Diana's wedding.

We got lots of people lined up for tastings.

If only we can get them to commit. If only we can get Cakes By Claire trending again once I actually have a bakery open and I'm not just working in Georgie's kitchen where the coffee shop prep takes up most of the space!

And a website. And social media. Oh, God. ..” Claire puts her head in her hands.

“Hey! Hey, hey. You should worry about your wedding day, babe. Leave the social media and web stuff to Georgia and me.”

“Oh! The catering department, too...”

“You. Georgie. Happily ever after. Wedding bells a-ringing. White dress. Fancy shoes. Tux.”

“He’ll be in a kilt.” Claire looks glazed.

I go over and firmly take her hands. “Ooh. I like. I thought he had Viking blood.”

“Orc.”

“What?”

“No-rth! Northern Scotland. The Hebridean area,” Claire stammers and stumbles over the words.

“Cool. Focus on that, okay? That’s what really matters in life.” I give Claire a big hug, expression pained where she can’t see it.

Love and a lifetime partner. A passion to follow. That’s what really matters.

Yeah, that’s right. That’s what I said. That’s what I meant.

“You’re right, Cindy. You’re totally right. I’ve got the person I love most in this world, and we’re getting married—and we have the money to make this place shine. We have the friends to help us. Oh, gosh. I’m going to start crying!”

I swallow a sigh and laugh instead as Claire hugs me and cries a couple of happy tears on my shoulder. I pat her back and roll my eyes heavenward.

No, not because this is a Hallmark moment.

Because I'm mad at myself.

Dang, I can dish out advice, but I sure as hell never learned how to take it.