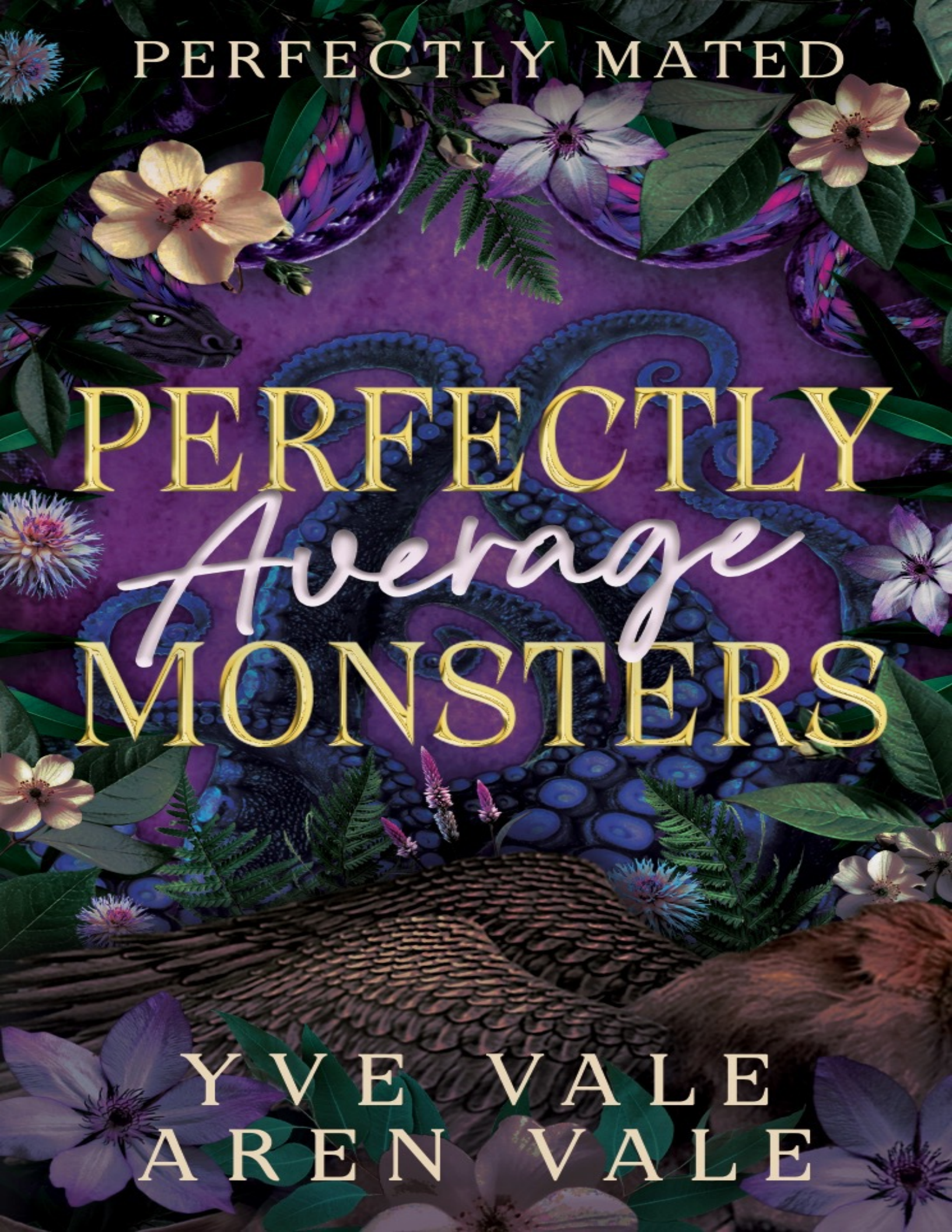

PERFECTLY MATED
PERFECTLY
Average
MONSTERS
YVE VALE
AREN VALE

PERFECTLY AVERAGE MONSTERS

A PARANORMAL WHY CHOOSE ROMANCE

PERFECTLY MATED

YVE VALE
AREN VALE

OCEANOFPDF.COM

Published by Entraverse Publishing

Sedona, AZ 86339, USA

valeromances.com

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, actual events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Copyright © 2026 Yve Vale and Aren Vale.

Cover Art © 2026 Yve Vale.

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

No part of this book may be used to create, feed, or refine artificial intelligence models, for any purpose.

No part of this book was created with generative-AI.

Authors are against use of gen-AI and do not willing use in any form for their books, covers, or promotion.

OceanofPDF.com

CONTENTS

Dedication
Authors' Note
1. Next to Perfect
2. Won't You Be My Neighbor?
3. Weekend at Bernie's… Market
4. Hot Hottie Yoga
5. A Spin and Wack
6. Sausagefest
7. Forty Pounds of Meat
8. Monster Cookies
9. Food, Friends & Frolicking
10. Illegal Lawn Darts
11. Just a Flesh Wound
12. A Hermit's Nightlife
13. Party Fauxpaws
14. Into the Weeds
15. Just Two Friends on a Date
16. Sushi with Krakens
17. Lick My Cone
18. Tending Her Garden
19. Finding the Clematis
20. Shadowcraft Shade
21. Err On the Side of Cheese
22. Fixer-Upper Guys!
23. Jokes On You
24. Swimmin' with Krakens
25. Tentacle Water Sports
26. Game Boys
27. Cookie Shenanigans
28. The Choad
29. A Farmers' Market Basilisk
30. Nature Boy
31. Campfire and Chill
32. Marshmallows and Makeout Points
33. Perfectly Sized
34. Choad Stalkers
35. The Neverending Sleepover
36. Snake In The Garden
37. Working Man Hands
38. Tripping Point
39. Spelunking For Trouble

40. Spilt Tea Time
41. Octopus, Lion, & Snake, Oh Null
42. Forked (Tongues) in the Road
43. Suped Up Day Off
44. Obligatory Untruths
45. Pumpkin Tossing
46. Mythically Screwed
47. The Ex Factor
48. Iron-Willed Women Warriors
49. The Choad Incident
50. Dazed and Confessed
51. Duh Moment
52. A Kraken's Release
53. Sea Salt Sick Day
54. Toe Beans
55. Sacrificial V-cards
56. Perma-Monster?
57. Double D*cking in a Nest
58. A Dream Life
59. Fangs and Claims

Epilogue
Bonus Epilogue
Thank you for reading!

Also by Yve Vale
Also Writing As
Acknowledgements
About the Author
About the Author

OceanofPDF.com

DEDICATION

Fellow monster lovers,

when you need a
‘perfect fit’
AND
a ‘will it fit’?

Have fun,
we did writing it.

OceanofPDF.com

AUTHORS' NOTE

The Perfectly Mated Series is a spicy, often humorous paranormal monster why choose romance interconnected standalone series.

The vibes are *mostly* cozy, but there will be a few darkish moments or memories mixed in. Think bad guys who get their due.

Love interests are all about consent in this series.

The female main characters end up with more than one of their love interests. Group scenes are on the agenda.

Perfectly Average Monsters does not have male/male romance.

If you enjoy having some laughs, and of course, some spice, then please charge forward!

This series does contain elements that some readers may be sensitive to. For more information, visit: ValeRomances.com.

OceanofPDF.com

1

NEXT TO PERFECT

DARLENE

"Humans are freakin' weird." I chuckle as I pass a billboard advertisement at the side of the interstate highway on the way to my new home.

"Come see *Cowhenge*! The world's only living monument!" I glance at Frida, my houseplant who's buckled safely next to me in the passenger seat. "What does that mean exactly? What sort of area are we moving to?"

In response, Frida's leaves only shake from the vibrations of the road. Still not *sapient*, but she's my closest friend at the moment.

A half hour later, my nerves kick in with the usual jitters in my stomach. I hope I'll like my new job. One thing is for certain, *anyplace* is better than my last few zip codes and the asshole I left behind.

A brightly painted sign reads: *Welcome to Midville! Next to Perfect (Valley) and only a leap to Heaven (Hills)*. I chuckle to myself. I'm going to enjoy Midville. At least it has a sense of humor about being between two upscale towns.

I pull onto a quaint street in what seems like a well-maintained neighborhood. After a couple of blocks, I turn right onto another small street and search for my new address, 59 Wild Forest Way. My place is next

to the last house on the street, 69. I shake my head and wonder who lives there.

My driveway is already occupied by the huge movers' truck, waiting for me, forcing me to park in front of the neighbor's house.

"Sorry!" I run past the gaggle of burly mover dudes. "The drive took longer than I expected."

Once I unlock the door, they charge past me like they're on a mission from the goddess herself. I note my unkempt front yard, but try not to get distracted by it as I have an entire house to unpack, set up, and eventually renovate.

I take a step back to admire the view of my new home. *Home.*… I sure hope this place will feel like what people talk about. The only place that even felt close to a warm, safe haven in my life is my aunt's house.

Just like the pictures online, it's a cute two-story craftsman, set back from the road, giving it a large front lawn. I stroll to the backyard and see just how sizable the empty area actually is. I'll have to do something cool with the land eventually. A large gate leads to the best part of this property: the adjacent forest. I'm not overly excited about the hiking opportunity, but I appreciate not having neighbors behind me.

Speaking of which, the wooden fence in between my place and the neighbor to the right is only six feet tall, while the other neighbor—at the 69 address—has an eight foot tall fence. They're obsessed with privacy, and I can understand. Unfortunately, it gives prison vibes on this side. I'll have to plant some shrubs and trees to break up that eyesore. I can see they had the same thought by the foliage stretching over the top.

The concept of the prison reminds me to check the house alarm and make sure it's working. I don't expect my ex to find me here since my aunt bought the place under a shell corporation years ago, but better safe than sorry.

I'm a magicless null, therefore I can't ward the place myself. And I won't rely on some pre-packaged magical wards from fae because I'm trying to leave that world behind me. So I resort to mortal forms of protection. It's ironic that my first steady human boyfriend, Chad, only wanted me for my fae origins.

“Auntie!” My smile stretches from ear to ear and I’m sure she can hear it in my voice.

“Hello, sweetie. Are you at your new place?”

“Yep. The movers just left.” I pause for a breath, taking in all the boxes I have to unpack before I start my new job in two days. “This place is great, but it’s too nice. It’s way more space than I need, and it’s not even close to being a fixer-upper like you said. I’m going to have to pay you rent. I insist.”

“Nonsense. A deal’s a deal. I’m sure you’ll find plenty to fix up.”

“But—”

“Are you struggling with your *stress*?”

She’s trying to be gentle about how my brain works a little differently. The closest way to describe it is what humans call neurodivergent, mixed with a bit of OCD and anxiety.

I can normally manage the obsessive thoughts or the behavior fades when life isn't being a dick, but it’s more prevalent when I'm stressed. She knows I need things settled that could become potential issues.

“It’s just the move,” I say. “And the new job.”

“Of course, it’s a lot. We’ll talk about the rent situation after you settle into your new home. Have you checked out the neighborhood yet?”

“Um, no? I just arrived and had to wrangle the movers, but from what I’ve seen so far, it seems pretty quiet and safe.”

Thankfully, I’m on Earth and unlikely to run into any supes, since this isn’t one of the towns covertly populated by fae.

“Well, after all you’ve had to deal with, I believe it will be a nice change of pace for you.”

“The state forest behind the property makes me feel like I’m in the wild.”

“Lovely.” After a moment of paper shuffling on her end, Auntie sighs wearily.

“What’s wrong?”

“Oh, your mother sent me another reminder to RSVP to your sister’s wedding.” Her tone shifts with a note of apprehension. “I’m guessing you still haven’t heard from them?”

“Nope.” I try to swallow down the sting in my throat. “All I’ve heard about it was from you.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I wish—” She stops herself short.

“Have you changed your mind about going?” I ask to redirect from the pain of my family’s rejection.

“Don’t plan on attending. They only want me to go because they hope I’ll leave them all my money. No chance in that.”

My family wants nothing to do with me. I have no magic, which means I have nothing of significance to offer fae realm society. In their eyes, I’m worthless. It sucks being basically human in a powerful fae family.

My energy plummets. The last few days have been hard, and the current topic isn’t helping.

“I’m going to let you go. Get some rest, sweetie. I love you,” she says, sensing my sudden exhaustion.

“I love you too. And thank you again for everything.”

I wake at sunrise to get a jump on unpacking and setting up my place. But first things first, I won’t be able to function without my morning caffeine fix. I’m grateful that I’d clearly labeled the box with my coffee paraphernalia and kept it safe in my car. After I brew a quick cup of coffee, I choke down some stale bread and peanut butter since it’s the only food left after my long drive here. Now I’m ready to tackle the day.

I round the corner from the kitchen, and I’m immediately intimidated by the daunting and ominous wall of boxes towering in the living room.

Rather than succumbing to the overwhelming sight, I roll up my sleeves and mutter, “I ain’t gonna be boxed in.”

Okay, just start with one box, Darlene, then move on to the next.

Narrowing it down, I focus on an unassuming box without a label. I don’t remember packing it. I wonder what’s in it.

I carefully slice the tape that’s sealing in the contents, and unfold the lid flaps in anticipation, like a kid opening a birthday present.

My smile drops into a grimace when I see my old uniform with the familiar crimson, black, and gold colors from Shadowcraft Prep, a boarding school in the fae realm that prepares supe-born teenagers in their magical education.

My damaged uniform shirt triggers the ugly memory of my bullies there, and my bear shifter childhood *so-called* sweetheart who discarded me

like trash. I'm reminded of the most important lesson I learned at school—that I have no value in the magic world.

Ugh. Out of all these boxes, I can't believe I picked this one first. I should've thrown this crap out years ago.

I close the box and put it aside to deal with later.

Then I rub the faint scar on my wrist from Chad. The fae realm isn't the only hostile place for me.

Will I finally be safe here?

A strange tingle races up my spine when a shadow passes over the window.

Am I being watched?

I peek outside, but don't see anything. Weird.

Instead of dealing with the boxes, I methodically check each room. With pen and notepad in hand, I note all the repairs needed. So far everything inside is minor fixes, like scuffs on the walls or a creaky door hinge. There's nothing major to deal with.

That aunt of mine hoodwinked me into such a nice place. I never want her to think I'm taking advantage of her kindness and generosity. I want to make my own way in the mortal world too, just like she did. It feels like cheating when she helps me out.

I reach the primary bedroom on the second floor and rush to open the window. It's hot as hell up here, and from the dusty smell, I don't think the house has been aired out in years. The early morning breeze quickly blows in and fills the room.

Thankfully, I slept on an air mattress downstairs last night where it was significantly cooler. *Note to self:* Call an HVAC company first thing Monday morning to fix the air conditioning.

Once the window is open, I can hear an intriguing male voice wafting up from my neighbor's backyard. No, it's two males. They seem to be in an argument. I lean against the screen to hear what they're saying and try to spot who the sexy voices belong to. But there's a giant willow tree blocking my view next to our shared, eight-foot tall fence. Through the swaying leaves of the tree, I catch only glimpses of an arm, a torso, maybe a foot? Or is that a calf?

What is *that*?

I give up on trying to see these alluring men and focus on their voices instead. They're muttering and the rustling leaves drown out most of the conversation so I can only make out a few keywords.

"What the hell happened?"

"It only poked out a little…"

"You exposed your… a lot more…"

"But I couldn't help it…," one grumbles.

Now, I'm invested. I lean so far into the screen to hear more that I fear I'm going to bust right through and fall to my death because of my nosiness. I can't help it. It's who I am, and I've come to accept that about myself.

"I don't know what's going on, but you need to… or you can't go…" the other threatens.

"I couldn't control myself… and it felt… good."

What the actual fuck is going on here… a lover's spat? And exactly what *was exposed?*

I want to sneak into my backyard to hear them better, but I don't dare move for fear of missing another word.

"What's *that*?" I hear a long dramatic inhale. "*Fuuuck*." Then there's a pained groan, hurried scuffling, and a door slams shut.

Damn it! Don't leave me on a cliffy! I *need* to know what happens next.

Oh well, I suppose the show's over. I decide to see if I have any mail in my mailbox at the curb. Once outside, I take my sweet ass time on my way, hoping to glean more details about this delightful live-action soap opera next door.

Halfway to the mailbox, I feel someone watching me. I side-eye my neighbors' house, where the argument just happened. There's a tall, leanly muscular man raking his lawn, except there aren't any leaves. His attention is focused on me.

His dark, smoldering eyes pierce right through me, sending a shiver down my spine, even though it must be approaching a hundred degrees now.

I don't know if this tall, dark, and mysterious neighbor elicits fear or excitement within me. Should I run away or toward him?

OceanofPDF.com

2

WON'T YOU BE MY NEIGHBOR?

DARLENE

I look in my neighbor's direction, then smile and wave. His eyes go wide, he drops his rake, and with his head down, quickly scurries away into his garage.

Geez, I know I haven't showered yet, and I'm wearing a worn, oversized T-shirt, but I can't look *that* bad. I shrug it off. At least now I can openly check out their place.

There's an old beat up van parked in the driveway with a sign on the side. "Fixer-Upper Guys!" And yes, there's an exclamation mark, but strangely, there's no phone number, contact info, or details. I guess they're handymen.

Their yard is well-maintained. That's an understatement. It's immaculate.

Vining rose bushes stretch across a low-profile white picket fence that frames a flawless lawn. Potted ferns hang from the posts of the cozy front porch that's complete with wicker outdoor furniture and a porch swing. Cottagecore, how cute! It looks like something out of a Norman Rockwell painting.

With what I’ve observed so far and the three sets of men’s work boots on the porch next to the simple welcome mat, it appears there’s only three guys living here, no women. *Hmm*. Are they all together? Or maybe they’re *really* in touch with their creative, decorative side.

I re-enter my place and see that my *imaginary* house faerie hasn’t unpacked any of the moving boxes. I’m going to need to have a talk with that guy. Damn it, enough screwing around. I need to jump in.

Finding the boxes with my work clothes for Monday morning takes precedence.

An hour later, I finally find the boxes of clothes in the pantry. *Frickin' movers.* I was getting worried I’d have to show up to my new job in sweatpants and an old concert T-shirt.

Several hours later, I’m lost in the repetition of steaming every garment I own. I’m startled out of my meditation by a loud grumble and notice the glow of the setting sun. No wonder my stomach’s protesting, I haven’t eaten all day.

Tacos. *I. Need. Tacos.*

I run downstairs to put my shoes on to find a taco shop, and hear a soft knock on my front door.

Who could that be?

I peek through the peephole to see who’s gently *rap rapping, rapping* on my front door.

Two men smile and wave. Shit, they figured out I’m looking at them through the peephole. The front-yard lurker from earlier hangs back, standing by the curb. It’s my neighbors. I open the door to greet them.

“Hi! Welcome to the neighborhood!” their apparent ringleader says, with a wide, friendly grin. He has long, sun-bleached blond hair, a golden tan on his trim swimmer’s body and stands just over six feet tall. He’s good-looking, exactly my type of handsome, but not in that ethereal fae way that I grew up around.

Thank goddess, I’m so tired of the pretty boy assholes.

“We know it’s customary to bring sweet treats to welcome new neighbors. So here you go.” The second man hands me a cookie sheet with freshly baked cookies on it. The pan is still warm. Our fingers touch, and I jolt at the spark between us. He doesn’t appear to be a supernatural being. It's probably just good old fashioned chemistry… Or static electricity?

To be sure, I use my limited senses but don't pick up any magic radiating off them. Their ears are rounded, not pointed to mark them as fae. Though that isn't necessarily an indicator either way.

Guy number two has chestnut-brown, shaggy curls framing a pleasant and inviting face. He's at least an inch taller than the ringleader, and bigger all around. I can tell he's strong, but there's a soft, huggable look to him. I wouldn't mind eventually testing out my thought that he'd give the best hugs.

"Uh, thanks. Very kind of you."

"Fresh out of the oven," the cookie tray guy adds and pushes his dark brown horn-rimmed glasses up on his nose. Oh no, I do have a weakness for nerdy guys.

"I can tell. Still warm." I try to hide my amusement at their antics. "Thank you."

"You're welcome!" Ringleader says with pride, his chest puffed out.

Are mortal guys really like this? They didn't even put them on a paper plate with plastic wrap.

I glance down at the cookies and have to suppress a shocked look to not insult their sweet gesture. These cookies are some of the most hideous and scary monster cookies I've ever seen. At least, I think they're monsters?

I didn't think it was possible for cookies to look this horrendous. Yet, I sort of love every single one of them for their uniqueness alone. They're something I actually would make for myself or my friends. I'm not sure I would give them to strangers, but hell, I've got to admire their effort. They're definitely making an impression.

"Monsters?"

"*Monsters?*" The nerd looks downright startled, then his eyes snag back onto the tray. "Uh no, they're not monster cookies. Why would you think that?"

"Um, sorry." I grimace, embarrassed for having insulted them. *Way to make an impression, Darlene.* "I, uh—thought maybe…"

My social anxiety perks its ear, ready to level up the awkwardness.

"That one is clearly a bunny rabbit. See its ears?" The ringleader points to a particularly grotesque creature.

Oh, is that what those appendages are supposed to be?

Ironically, there's a fae fable that says rabbit shifters are one of the most dangerous Mythics ever, *allegedly*. *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* has a

vicious killer white rabbit which they based off this ancient lore.

“And that one is an elephant,” the nerdy, big guy chimes in.

“Oh, I see it now. They’re cute!” At least they’re trying, more than most people do anymore.

“My name’s Conrad, and this is Zeke. We’re your next-door neighbors,” Conrad, the blond ringleader, says with another charming smile.

I almost chuckle that it’s taken them this long to actually give me their names. “Who’s that on the sidewalk, pacing back and forth?” I lean around their broad shoulders and spy the strange guy who was raking before.

“Oh, don’t mind Silas, he's shy.” Conrad gestures toward their friend.

Silas quickly throws his hand up and lets it fall to his side just as fast. I guess that’s a wave? His glossy black hair falls over his eyes as he looks down, avoiding further engagement.

I focus back on the two on my porch. “I’m Darlene.”

“*Darling?*” Zeke asks.

I chuckle at his boy-like sweetness. “*Darlene*.”

“Darling Darlene!” Conrad winks.

Is he flirting? It’s possibly the worst flirting ever, and I shouldn’t find it as endearing as I do. I suppose I don’t normally find polished guys very appealing, since it’s often an act.

But it’s unwise to flirt with new neighbors, especially since I find them intriguing. Things could get messy fast. It’s another reason I don’t date guys from work. I’ve had enough drama in my short life already, thank you very much. The whole point of moving here was to get away from a messy situation.

Feeling self-conscious, I shift back a step, gripping the tray of cookies, wondering how I can smoothly exit this conversation without making a fool of myself.

“By the way, it seems like your doorbell doesn’t work. We can fix that for you,” Conrad offers.

“Because we’re the Fixer-Upper Guys!” Zeke adds enthusiastically as he thumbs to their van over his shoulder.

“Yeah, I saw that earlier.” I smirk, thinking they might not realize the double meaning behind their business name.

Conrad must pick up on my growing awkwardness because he rubs the back of his neck and glances at his friends. “Well, let us know if you need anything. At least one of us is always home.”

“Okay, thanks. Goodnight.”

“Have a good night,” Conrad says as Zeke smiles and nods.

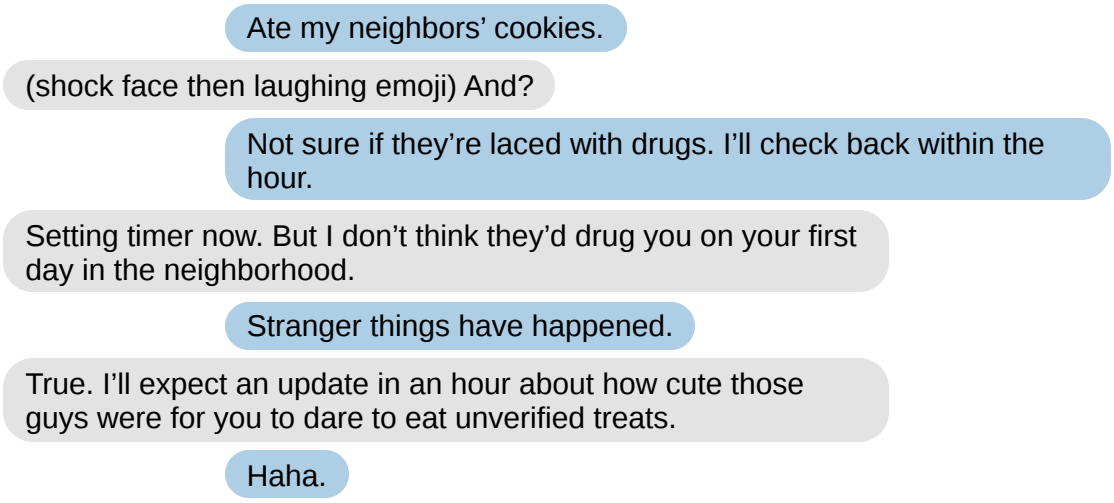
I slip inside, shut the door, and watch them leave through the peephole. What an odd interaction. Who are these guys? They’re a bit… *off*. Like they’re from another planet. I don’t care as long as they aren’t from the fae realm. I want to leave that whole life behind me.

I take the sheet of cookies to the kitchen and study them in more detail. I eye the strange treats, debating if I should actually ingest cookies from strangers. We aren’t supposed to accept candy, but do baked goods count? Besides, they’re technically my neighbors, not strangers.

I slide the tray of cookies into a plastic container I located earlier in my puzzle of boxes.

Before I seal them away, I take one tentative bite out of the ear of the rabbit. *Huh*. “Not bad,” I say to Frida the houseplant, “Looks wonky, tastes great.”

I text Auntie.



Goddess, I love that woman.

Wait, how did she know they were guys and that they were cute? I guess she is a seer. If her *Sight* is activated, then she should know exactly how they looked.

My stomach rumbles again. Shit, I still haven’t eaten anything substantial, but I don’t feel like going out now. Fortunately, I remember seeing a box labeled “Canned Goods” with my books in the den. I grab a can then head for the bathroom where my “Pots” box is located. Once I procure a pot, I’m off to the kitchen.

I heat up some alphabet soup and toast a couple slices of stale bread. This will have to do for now. First thing tomorrow, I'm going grocery shopping.

It's driving me insane to have this level of chaos in my house, but I'm exhausted and overwhelmed at the idea of straightening it out. I'm not usually this disorganized, but my emergency packing was necessary when I had to escape my stalker ex in a hurry. *Again*.

On top of all that, I'm nervous about my new job and whether this move to chase my dreams was a mistake.

And I'm worried that my ex could come along and mess up this once in a lifetime chance.

My skin crawls as if I'm being watched. He couldn't have found me this fast, could he?

OceanofPDF.com

3
WEEKEND AT BERNIE'S... MARKET

DARLENE

After my pathetic dinner, I make a valiant, yet futile attempt at tackling the boxes.

Moving is stressful for me, just like it is for everyone else, but the problem with my offbeat process is that it takes twice as long.

After moving several boxes into the rooms where they belong, I hit a wall, not literally, but it damn well feels like it.

I still haven't set up the upstairs bedroom yet, so I collapse onto the air mattress in the middle of the living room. I've left the windows open to let in the cooler night air.

I'm about to drift off when I hear singing coming from next door.

Aw, how lovely, my neighbor guys are having a singalong. The song is vaguely familiar, but I can't place where I've heard it before. As I wonder about what it could be, my breathing slows, and I fall fast asleep with a wide smile stretched across my face, listening to my quirky neighbors.

I fantasize they're singing just for me.

The next morning, I'm awoken by a wave of hot air blasting in through the window. Ugh, I get up to close it, and my sweaty thigh is stuck to the air

mattress as the fitted sheet is in a chaotic ball at my feet. In my fast ascent to get to the window, my thigh peels away from the plastic with a ripping sound. Fuck, that hurts. That settles it, I'm determined to set up my bed in my bedroom, stat. I can't sleep another night like this no matter how hot it is upstairs.

I slam the window closed and quickly turn for the bathroom, and stub my toe on a leaning tower of boxes stacked in the living room. Double fuck. Okay, I need to get a handle on this disaster.

I take a much-needed "everything" shower, because I need to wash my hair and primp before I face the public. Afterward, I stuff down a couple of slices of toast with peanut butter and jelly that I find in a box labeled "Cleaning Supplies". Hmm. Things are far more jumbled than I thought. My movers must have accidentally removed labels and just slapped them on random boxes. And I might have messed things up in my rushed packing job to escape my ex.

Now I'm ready to venture *to the outside* and tackle my grocery shopping, which is not my favorite thing in the world.

There seems to be three grocery options for me to check out. But first, I want to plot and test out my twelve-mile commute to my new job in Perfect Valley that I start tomorrow morning. I don't want anything to go wrong, especially on my first day. Better to plan now than make excuses when things go wrong.

My map app suggests two routes. I try both ways and time them.

I plan to add twenty-five percent more time to account for the slower morning commuter traffic, plus I'll add an extra half hour for good measure.

Phew. That's a nagging weight off my shoulders. I feel better that I've already accomplished something this morning. Now I can go shopping for food and not be one hundred percent stressed out, just a chill ninety.

The first grocery store is only a couple of miles from my house. I have a good feeling about this place. It's a little local farmers' co-op store, Bernie's Market, which features a lovely farm-to-table cafe. My stomach gurgles hungrily at the delicious freshly baked aromas, beautifully colorful arranged dishes, and the heavenly sounds of an espresso machine extracting the juice of the goddess from organic beans. I can't say no to these temptations bombarding my senses.

I deserve a good meal and a decent cup of coffee. Don't I? Yes, I do.

After an amazing salad, I sip my americano and people watch. Then I see my hot, nerdy neighbor, Zeke, ordering a tea at the counter. My first thought, probably brought on by my past trauma, is that he's stalking me. But no, it has to be a coincidence. It's not like I'm shopping several towns over, this *is* the local market.

He turns around and his eyes instantly find me in the sea of occupied tables, and my heart trips over itself with his attention on me. Walking over, he gives me a little wave. "Hi. Great place, huh?"

I straighten up and nervously tuck my hair behind my ear. "Uh, yeah. From what I've seen so far, it seems like a gem."

He glances at the open chair, but I don't offer him a seat, and he doesn't ask.

"See you around," he says softly and wanders off with his drink.

Shoot. I should have been friendly and had him join me. Right? No. He didn't want that. Did he? Dammit, I'm so awkward.

When I'm done with my coffee, I cruise over to admire the flowers and houseplants the store has for sale. I find a hanging jasmine plant I adore and a small potted ficus tree catches my eye for my new place and to keep Frida company.

"I'm going to call you Jazzy." I softly touch the jasmine's leaves. Then I run my finger along the smooth bark of the ficus tree. "And you shall be known henceforth as Fifi." I gently pat Fifi's top sprig of leaves.

I smile, and I think (or would like to think) they're smiling back at me. Perhaps they are.

Just then, my other handsome neighbor, shy Silas, pokes his head up from the plants.

Goddess, I hope he didn't overhear me.

He gives me a quizzical look, but doesn't say a word.

"Yeah, I'm weird. I've named my plants since I was a kid." I explain with a fountain of word vomit, "But in my defense, I just read an article about talking to your plants adds years to your life. So the *stick-in-the-muds* can bite me. And if I'm going to have conversations with my leafy friends, they need proper names."

He nods abruptly and rushes away.

Oh, well, I scared him off.

I'm sure he'll report back to the other two that I'm a freak. I should accept that I'll only have houseplant friends in my future.

I’m a bit sad that I don’t have someone to share simple moments with. I don’t need much. Just a sweet, perfectly average guy, someone I could share a yummy dessert and a laugh with. I don’t need a supernaturally gorgeous, mega-biceps, washboard abs, fae fuckboi. Just a guy who will treat me right.

I’ve dated a few jerks in my time, both supes and humans, who love-bombed me at first, but after they wooed me, they showed their true colors, only caring about themselves and their image.

No, it’s okay that I’m a hermit. I’d rather have a quiet life than deal with someone who doesn't bring me joy and peace.

Wishing to check out what else Bernie’s has to offer, I head to the customer service desk to have them hold my plants for me while I shop.

“It’s okay, I’ll be back for you soon,” I whisper to my plants. When the clerk turns away to help another customer, he does so with raised eyebrows and a smile.

I explore the rest of the store to see if they carry the things I need and want.

There’s a small book section that appears to have a mix of fiction and non-fiction titles. I truly shouldn’t be surprised when someone clears their throat next to me, and I find it’s the third cute neighbor, Conrad.

He combs a hand through his long locks and gives me a flirty grin. “Looking for anything particular?”

“No, just getting the lay of the land in this small town. I suppose that’s why you three are here, not that many local options?”

“It’s a favorite stop of ours. Good to see you found it too.” He turns his attention back to the bookshelves, and I shake off the self-absorbed idea that I’m the center of their lives, and they’re obsessed with me. *As if*…

With my shopping cart full of a week’s worth of groceries, I wrangle up my new plant friends, Jazzy and Fifi, and head for the cashier. I’ll check out the other two grocery stores another time, but I think I already found my new favorite spot.

Singing along to the radio with the windows down, I take the long way home to check out more of my new town. It’s not a bad place, even if it’s not *Perfect* or *Heaven*. It’s actually better, same beautiful locale but without a pretentious name. And because of that, none of the uppity transplants want to move here to gentrify it. I think I could be happy here. Especially

since my ex, Chad, or as my aunt likes to call him, *Choad,* is a thousand miles away. He was a major reason for moving here, other than the amazing job I landed.

Thank the goddess for my aunt. I love her dearly. She's always taken care of me the best she could. She knew I had a difficult home and school life, and often had me stay with her as much as my parents would allow. Ever since I was little, when it was suspected I was a magicless null, she was there, protecting me from the supe world and from my family. And now, she's helped me escape Chad… a few times.

Although she doesn't have magic like most faeborn, unlike me, she has one supe power. She's a seer.

Auntie made her fortune in the mortal world, using her seer gift to make a killing in the stock market. But she only invests in ethical corporations and start-up companies whose goal is to make the world a better place.

Now she spends her time gambling against the big casinos around the world, not to add to her riches, but instead, she donates her winnings anonymously to programs that help people with gambling addictions.

Without her, I don't know what I would've done. My aunt is the only person who ever truly loved me.

As I pull into my driveway, I realize a big chunk of the day has passed. My goddess, how did several hours go by so fast? I unload my car and stock my refrigerator and pantry. With that done, I can check two things off my list. My stress level is now only running at a temperate eighty percent.

It's late afternoon and the boxes spread across my house look at me like neglected puppies.

"What?" I snark at the inanimate objects. "I've been busy."

I don't want to tackle this, and I do need to do some more research on the new company I work for so that I'm thoroughly prepared for my first day tomorrow. You only get one first impression. The boxes will have to wait.

I pull up a stool to the kitchen bar and crack open my laptop to find my nine hundred open tabs begging for my attention. I better do something about this someday, or my whole computer is going to crash, and I'll lose everything.

But today is not that day.

I count myself blessed that Auntie and I can use technology to communicate with each other since we both live in the Earth realm now.

Our other family members can’t handle computers or smartphones due to the intensity of their magic. Besides, they live in the fae realm where it’s non-existent. I’ve adapted pretty well to the human world since I moved here when I was twenty after my magicless null status confirmation. I quickly picked up most of the lingo and the culture by diving into television shows and books. Attending college helped too. I could always pass off any lapse in my knowledge on what I called my *“strict and religious”* parents. My classmates didn’t ask many questions after that.

Most of what I learned about tech was in college, when I earned my certification in web design and development. Yes, I hoard degrees and certificates, much like how mortal myths say a dragon hoards gold.

The most recent tab on the top of the pile is the archived clients’ advertising portfolios page of my company, Tenth Muse Agency, where I was hired as an IT specialist.

But what I was trained for and what I really want to do is to work in the art department, developing branding and graphic art for clients. To be ready if an opportunity presents itself to transfer to the art department, I’m researching years of ad campaigns to internalize the company’s aesthetic sensibilities.

Before I know it, it’s 11 pm. My goddess, it’s late. I get that way, hyper-focused to the point I lose all sense of time and awareness of my surroundings and even my physical body. I wanted to be in bed by now so I could get plenty of rest for my big first day.

After finishing my bedtime ritual, I set three alarms five minutes apart to make sure I get up in time. Overkill? Maybe, but I won’t let my tendency for sleeping in become my downfall.

Normally, I like to read an actual paperback for a while until I’m sleepy, but not tonight. My mind is working overtime, playing out the various scenarios of what my first day will be like. One would think that would keep me up all night, but for me it's like counting sheep. I’ve learned a coping technique to give these thoughts attention by recognizing and cataloging them, then I can let them go.

My cell phone sounds off as planned at 6 am, but this morning I actually get up instead of waiting for the other two alarms. I must be anxious, excited,

or both.

After a cup of coffee and staring out of the kitchen window for a few minutes, my brain kicks into awake mode, and I'm *mostly* conscious.

Fortunately, I washed my hair yesterday, so I'll save time this morning. And, of course, there's nothing like second-day hair, anyway.

I finish up in the bathroom. Dressed in nothing but my robe, I enter the primary bedroom to inspect the outfit I laid out for my first day at my new job. Something, or *someone* I should say, catches my eye through the window facing my neighbors' house. I move to get a closer look.

What in all of fae is he doing?

OceanofPDF.com

4
HOT HOTTIE YOGA

DARLENE

Looking out my window, I see the golden boy, Conrad, with his back toward me, bare-ass naked, on a small terrace halfway up the hill in their backyard that butts up against the state forest. Facing away from me, he's doing some sort of yoga, greeting the rising sun with a full-frontal display. *Lucky sun*.

But of course, being how these guys are, it's slightly off. I've taken a yoga class or two, and know the basic positions—downward facing dog, the warrior, the cobra, and the like. But Conrad's poses aren't quite like anything I've seen. It must be some tradition I'm not familiar with. Whatever it is, I'm enjoying this organic form of *hot* yoga, *au naturale* in the burning sun.

I gawk at his tanned body. He must do this often because there are absolutely no tan lines as far as I can tell. And with the way he's bending and positioning, I can pretty much see every angle, nook, *and* cranny of the backside of his body.

I don't remember needing to arch your back for a downward-facing dog, *especially* quite that much. Does he know I'm watching and is showing off?

I didn’t think I was a voyeur, but my core tingles from watching him without his knowledge. I’m mesmerized by his fluid movements, but my gaze keeps landing on his full, golden round butt. His build is of a fit, normal guy—strong but not overly muscular. He still looks soft enough to cuddle up on.

I let my robe fall open as it’s getting hot in here, and it’s not from the summer heat. Whether he knows it or not, he’s taunting me with all these flexible positions. Oh my, now he bends over and grabs his ankles, and I can just make out the bottom of his ball sack.

For the love of the goddess, man, turn around! I need a *frontal full monty*, because balls do not go in the *spank bank!* I brace myself against the window sill, hoping he hears my desperate thoughts. What has gotten into me? I shouldn't be this turned on by his display.

No other man has ever got my libido hopping like this. I’ve never even climaxed with anyone, and battery-operated devices don’t count. Right now my clit throbs like a needy thing, just by watching Conrad.

My hand lands on my lower stomach as heat and pressure build in my core. I’m so tempted to shove my hand down further to explore my folds and plunge a finger or two into my pussy to relieve this tension, but I think the wiser of it.

Ohfuckmefuckmefuckme. I want to take him for a ride around the block, or rather, I want the fantasy to play out while I take care of myself. Except I don’t have time for another shower afterward.

Weird, I know, but the compulsive need to wash my arousal away is a throwback to when I lived in the supe world in my teens. Whenever I would have even the slightest desire, the asshat supes at Shadowcraft Prep would smell it on me then bully and mock me, saying, *“The null has the mortal itch.”* I know the mortals here wouldn’t be able to smell or sense my arousal, but ever since then, I have been self-conscious.

Supes are typically hot as hell in looks with an ethereal level of beauty and humans are usually awestruck in their presence. I’ve learned to despise that flawless beauty, and I’m now drawn to regular human levels of attractiveness. For good or for bad, just like the guys next door.

Finally, Conrad completes his last stretch and saunters toward his back door. I dip down to hide in the off chance he might glance up in my direction. As I peek over the windowsill, I’m grateful for hiding, because he’s looking at the back of my house.

My eyes snag on my phone. How did that much time slip through my fingers?

Voyeurism is a time-sucker, apparently.

I rush around the bathroom to finish my hair and makeup. After I throw on my (thankfully) prepared outfit, I race down the stairs. I almost trip and meet my untimely demise, but catch myself with the shaky railing. Okay, another thing to add to my to-do list.

I make it outside, lock my front door, and hop into my car unscathed. I plot my course to work in my map app to see which route is the quickest. Unfortunately, traffic is heavier this morning, but it seems I'll have just enough time to get there. With my course laid, I'm off. I call in the 'parking angels' (spoiler alert, no one has seen angels of any kind in millennia) to secure a parking spot so I don't waste more time looking for one. Don't fail me now, guys.

After all is said and done, I walk into the lobby of the Tenth Muse Agency building at 8:59 am. Thank the goddess, I made it. There's nothing worse than being late on your first day at work.

My department's boss, Meg, is chatting with the receptionist.

"Darlene, so good to see you!" she says warmly as she comes around the counter and shakes my hand.

"You too." I smile.

Meg conducted my final online interview as my job is in her department, IT. She gives me the office tour and introduces me to everyone. After that, I settle into my cubicle in the far corner of the IT department.

I'm familiarizing myself with the backend of the company's website, and do a double take when Meg and another woman enter my department. It's Bev Doormeinhauser. They seem to be walking straight toward my desk.

It's actually her. I shouldn't be this surprised, it *is* her company, but I wasn't expecting to see her on my first day. Bev is mostly retired, but apparently still comes into the office. She's a legend in the business and the founder of this company. I absolutely love her groundbreaking and bold creations.

What I really admire is the fact that she created a business from nothing. Especially since it was the 1970s, and women couldn't even get a business loan without a man as a cosigner until the late 1980s. Hell, women could

barely get a checking account on their own back then. Bev truly is a revolutionary trailblazer.

"I want to introduce you to the big boss." Meg gestures to Bev, the spry and hiply dressed eighty-year old.

I eagerly jump up from my chair to shake her hand, my anxiety rattling me to my core. I beg my brain, *don't say anything stupid!*

"It's so nice to meet you, Ms. Doormeinhauser! I've been a fan of your work since my college days. You're such an inspiration. Thank you for the opportunity to work for your company, and I only hope that someday I will—"

Ms. Doormeinhauser cuts off my rambling. "Oh please, call me Bev. You will do just fine, especially if you attended the Royal Academy. Besides, Meg hired you. She has pretty high standards. I hear her interviews can be… let's say, *challenging*." She smiles wide as she pats my hand. "Welcome to Tenth Muse Agency. If you need anything, you can always call me directly." She hands me her business card.

"Thank you." I hold the card like it's a fragile egg.

Wow, what a classy lady. She's as amazing as I hoped she would be and twice as cool. They say never meet your heroes, but they've never met Bev.

I aspire to become a badass like her, forging my way, having a business of my own, and calling the shots.

The question has always been, *doing what?* Creating is my life's blood. I studied art, but chose the advertising path because I didn't want to be a starving artist. Except now, nothing feels quite right, or has the *'that's it'* factor.

I hope I'm inspired during my time with this innovative company.

For the rest of the morning, I'm left alone to analyze the company's website. A few hours go by, and I haven't moved other than my hands on the keyboard and trackpad. Damn it, I keep forgetting to stand up every twenty minutes to stretch my body. I read an article suggesting desk workers need to do that for optimum physical health and mental focus.

I stand and do my one minute stretching routine. Clover, the cute and perky blonde with a pixie cut in the cubicle next to mine, looks over at me with a smirk.

"I need to do that too!" She rushes to her feet and mimics my movements. When she stands, I can see she's only five-foot-two with

curves.

“I read an article that—”

“I read the same article, but I always forget to do it.” Clover interrupts me, not because she’s being rude, but because she’s excited.

“Are you new to the area?” Clover bends to the side.

“Yep. Just moved from Chicago this past weekend.”

“That’s a lot. New job and city.” Her lips pull down in a frown, then she lights up. “If you need someone to show you all the cool places, I’d be happy to play tour guide.”

Normally, I’d be pretty awkward with a new co-worker, but Clover’s open and fun vibe puts me at ease.

“I might take you up on that once I get my house settled.”

“Hey, you want to go to lunch? I know the best spot!” she asks once we’ve finished our stretches.

“Sure, I could eat. I raced out of the house without eating breakfast.”

We grab our things, and Clover leads the way out of the offices to the lobby. Instead of leaving through the main doors, she slips down a hallway by the reception desk. I guess she needs to do something first before we leave. I stop to linger in the lobby, but she gestures for me to follow her. We enter another area in the building that I didn’t know existed.

“This is our cafeteria.” Clover spins as if she’s a game show hostess, showing off a grand prize.

I have to admit, it looks more like a swanky restaurant than any workplace cafeteria I’ve seen, so I almost applaud in approval.

I scan the menu on a marquee at the counter. “My godd–” I stop abruptly, catching myself from saying goddess. I’m usually pretty good about hiding my supe upbringing, but from time to time I slip up, usually when I’m feeling comfortable or overstimulated, which ironically, I’m feeling a bit of both at the moment.

“Wow, the choices are amazing.” There are many healthy options. This job is going to be good for me in more ways than one, since I forget to eat half of the time. My diet is more like a feral teenager than a grown-ass adult.

“There’s a chef on the premises who rotates the menu weekly and always has seasonal specials.” Clover rubs her belly and licks her lips like a goof.

We order our meal and pay. The cost is more affordable than fast-food chains, which is such a huge perk. This company's pretty awesome.

After the best meal I've had in months and a jovial *'get to know you conversation'* with Clover, we head back to our cubicles with our bellies full and our mouths aching from laughter.

I really like Clover. We seem to get each other, and I can tell we're going to be buddies. I haven't laughed this much in a very long time. It's nice to have a friend to joke around with.

Chad didn't like me having anyone, man or woman, other than him in my life. By the end, he'd sabotaged my friendships until he was the only person left, besides the one person I would *never* give up, Auntie. He was so covert and cunning that I didn't even see what he was doing until it was too late. Once I finally got away from him after that dreadful night when his mask was ripped off, I saw him for what he really was—a giant asshole. My biggest regret was I didn't recognize his abusive behavior. It doesn't help that I didn't have a great example of a happy marriage growing up.

A couple of hours later, I'm deep into the code of the company's backend website when I'm startled back to the real world.

"Wow, diving in deep for your first day." I hear Clover over my shoulder on her way back to her desk.

"Uh, yeah," I blurt out when the vocal part of my brain kicks in. "I figured I should get familiar with the systems right away so I know what I'll be dealing with as problems arise."

"Well, the admin and accounting system has always been glitchy and doesn't have a user-friendly, intuitive interface. It's actually *too* logical, if that makes any sense." She returns to her desk and plops into her chair.

"It does, actually. It probably needs to flow more like how the right-brained artsy types that work here think."

At the end of the day, Meg comes over to my cubicle.

"How's everything going? Getting familiar with our website?" she asks.

"Yes, I think I have a handle on it," I reply.

"Any questions so far?"

"Yes, well, more like some ideas."

Meg nods for me to continue with one hundred percent of her attention on me.

“I know someone spent a lot of time and effort developing your back end website for admin and accounting, but…” I pause, rethinking if I should be so bold to critique their systems on my first day.

“It’s okay, you can speak your mind,” Meg assures me.

“Most of the people working here are creative types and the website looks and functions like outdated software for an accounting firm.”

Meg nods again, her blue eyes staring into mine as she’s laser-focused on what I’m saying. It’s unnerving, actually.

“I think it would be more effective if I re-designed it with creatives in mind, allowing it to flow more naturally. Plus, I would like to beautify it, since we’re in the biz of artsy and trendy designs. I feel even our logistics end of things should reflect that spirit and motto of the company, making all parts of the business more enjoyable.”

“Okay. Do you need a team?” she asks.

“No, I could handle it myself.”

“Alright, sounds good. How long will this take to complete?”

“A week or so. I already have it designed in my head. I would just need to code it. But I think…”

“No need to convince me further, I already approved it.” Meg smiles warmly. “Great job. I’ll see you tomorrow.” She turns and walks away.

Wow, I’m shocked. She actually listened to my ideas.

Clover nods and grins with approval. “Nice job!”

After a long but satisfying work week, I’m home relaxing with a glass of wine. My cell rings, and I know without looking it’s Auntie for our Friday night check-in. I turn my back on the wall of boxes in my living room and plop down in the one empty chair in front of the huge picture window facing the street. Gazing out over my small domain, I answer her call.

“Hi sweetie, how was your first week at work?” she asks enthusiastically before I can say hello.

“I think it went well. I made an impression on my boss. Meg said she liked my ideas.”

“Of course, you did well. I knew you would.”

“Thanks.” I pause and twirl my shoulder-length brown hair around my finger, an anxious fidget my mother always scolded me for. “I’m sorry I haven’t started any of the repairs yet, except the air conditioning is now fixed. But I’ve made a list of what needs to be done for the inside. I’ll start for sure next week,” I say in a higher than normal pitch, because I hate to let my aunt down.

“Oh, don’t fret about it. I wasn’t expecting you to start right away, silly. You’ve never backed out of a commitment you’ve made. I’m not worried. You need time to settle into your new home and job. Take some time to get to know your neighborhood and your *neighbors*.” She says the last bit with subtle emphasis and encouragement.

Hmm, what does she know about them? What is she insinuating? She does her best work behind the scenes. I wonder if she hopes I’ll hook up with one of them. It’s probably my over-active neurodivergent mind running away with all the possible scenarios again, so I take a deep breath to steady myself.

“Okay, thanks.” I exhale a sigh of relief about the repairs. I was beginning to feel overloaded, and I didn’t want to disappoint the one person who cares about me.

Just as I say goodbye and hang up, I see someone peek around the large tree by the street in my front yard and then quickly disappear behind the tree. WTF. They do it again, and I recognize them. It’s Silas.

What the heck is he doing?

The third time Silas makes his move, he sneaks over to my porch. He furtively looks over his shoulder, then bolts toward my front door. The sheer curtains must be concealing me from his view, as he doesn’t notice me watching him. I wait for a knock, but it doesn’t come.

I stand to peer out the window at a better angle.

Silas rushes past the front of my place toward his house, like he’s just ding-dong ditched me. But the ding-dong dork forgot to ding-dong.

I hurry to the door and peer through the peephole. Nothing. I swing open the door and see he’s left something on my mat. It’s a large envelope with my name written in beautiful, handwritten calligraphy.

I hear bickering from the bushes between the guys’ house and mine. I close my eyes and focus my attention on the sound of their deep, sultry, hushed tones. With my better-than-average, but not quite supe level hearing

it sounds like Conrad and Zeke. Enhanced hearing is one of the few gifts, along with superior vision, I inherited from my fae lineage, not that I let most people in on that tidbit.

Shaking my head with a smirk, I quietly close the door. I carefully break the fancy wax seal on the envelope, which is a nice detail. I open it to discover it's a handmade whimsical pop-up card, and glitter falls all over my floor. Welp, that's now a forever part of my house.

Above the bouncing and protruding three-dimensional miniature version of my neighbor's house, it reads: "You're invited to a neighborhood pool party!" In the backyard of the house, I see their pool with a drawing of each of the guys waving. Conrad and Zeke are front and center of the drawing by a smoking barbeque, wearing their normal clothes, while Silas is off to the side with his head sticking out from behind some pampas grass. On the bottom of the card it says: "Food! Friends! Frolicking!"

Frolicking? What in all of fae do they mean by *frolicking*? Do I want to know?

Each of their heads appear to be pull tabs. Do I dare pull the figure out from behind their rendered clothes to see what's underneath? Yes, of course I do.

Are they going to be naked drawings of each of them? I'm intrigued to find out.

I pull each of their heads to discover drawings of each of them in old-timey bathing suits from a hundred years ago, which are basically striped long shorts and a matching T-shirt.

Dammit. So modest. *Too* modest, especially as I know at least one of them likes to run around their backyard naked. The cuteness of the card makes me chuckle and tempts me into wanting to attend, but the anti-social leanings I've now adopted as my core personality since getting away from Chad are winning out. I carefully set the card on the bare mantel over the fireplace in the living room with a strained smile.

Why does it feel as if this innocent invite might flip my world upside down?

OceanofPDF.com

5
A SPIN AND WACK

CONRAD

"What in the hell are we doing?" I pace around the natural-looking saltwater pool we built, pulling on my long, golden hair. "We're watching the windows of her house just to catch a glimpse. Stalking her around town as she buys groceries. Inviting her to a party with an elaborate invitation. And baking her *cookies*?"

Then I just had to go extra bendy with my sun ritual this week, hoping she was watching everything I could do and what I had to offer.

"What's your point?" Zeke asks, sounding bored.

"Now it's already Monday, and she left for work without RSVP'ing all weekend." I'm frustrated that everything we're planning will be for nothing. I knew we shouldn't have pushed so hard out of the chute.

Zeke shrugs while Silas sulks behind the pampas grass, just like in our weird invitation.

"I shouldn't have let you ask her," I argue. She's obviously going to reject me before we're past the *welcome to the neighborhood* phase. "You shouldn't have let me…"

Zeke cuts me off. "What? *Let you* get your hopes up? She probably has a hundred friends. Don't all humans? She might not think anything of just

showing up without getting back to us."

"And it's only been two days," Silas adds, as he emerges from his safe place in the pampas grass.

"We all agreed to make *friends* with her." Zeke leans back in his chair.

Our behavior goes beyond '*making friends'* and he knows it.

"She's also been busy settling into her new home." Zeke makes too much sense for my liking.

"But…" I just want to get to know her. I need to do this right.

"Stop. You're making me spin out." Silas walks up close to me. *Too* close for my comfort. My life-long friend comes across as shy at first, but for him to be this assertive, he means business. When he believes in his convictions, he won't let go of his bite and back down. Both Zeke and I like to pretend that we're the alphas of the group, but who are we kidding? We know when push comes to shove, it's really Silas quietly at the helm.

"Life isn't worth living if we don't at least try to actually live it." He lets the easy advice slide off his tongue. "What's the point of leaving our island and risking our lives if we're not willing to see where this life takes us?"

Of course, he's right. This isn't like me. I'm usually the one with an easy smile and a joke ready, but I'm just too worked up. I'm really drawn to Darlene—like an unhealthy amount of obsession. We all seem to be obsessed.

Goddess, her buttercream and berries scent alone is enough to drive a male to his knees, begging. But it's more than that.

My sphinx has the ability to sense intelligence, and she has a big, wonderful, quick, and curious brain. I haven't stopped thinking about this smart and sexy woman since I first caught sight of her. And the way she handled those books at Bernie's, carefully and reverently? Pure catnip to me.

Problem is, I doubt I could handle her rejection. It's irrational. I've hardly interacted with her, but in this short time she's gotten under my skin. If she were a supe, I might even wonder if she was my fated match.

Weirdly enough, she seems to have the same strange effect on Zeke and Silas.

Silas said she communes with houseplants, so he's definitely intrigued by her. Zeke found her people-watching a turn on since he loves to do that himself.

I wonder what she's doing right now. My dick twitches in need—a need for *her*. Fuck! See, even in my own tormented arguments with myself, my thoughts are orbiting around her heavenly being. I'm so far gone, I'm like a young cub with a serious crush. She couldn't be more than a crush, could she?

I would call it *puppy* love, goddess forbid, but I'm a Sphinx for better or for worse.

"I'm going to take a shower," I growl.

Zeke glances at my crotch with raised eyebrows. "You need a cold one, by the looks of it."

I huff and storm into the house.

"Have fun!" Zeke trills in a mockingly high-pitched voice. *Fucker*.

What's Zeke insinuating anyway? He's probably right of course, but that's beside the point.

I shed my gray sweatpants and T-shirt as I enter my bedroom and slam the door. Grumbling, I turn on the faucet of my ensuite shower and set it to cold. Fuck that. I crank it as hot as it can go. That'll show him.

I let the piping hot water stream over my back. The sting makes my cock stand to attention and bob.

I glare down at it. "What are you looking at?"

It spits out a drop of precum in defiance. My balls tighten in anticipation. I look up at the ceiling and try to think of anything else but sweet Darlene to prove Zeke wrong. But just the thought of her causes the building tension to erupt from my groin up my spine and down my arms, possessing my body. My hands involuntarily move toward my package. My cock throbs with the idea of sinking into her wet heat.

Oh, well. So what if Zeke was right? What do I care?

I grab my shaft with one hand and cup my balls with the other. My thumb slides over the tip to spread the slick fluid over my dick.

Goddess. No, *Darlene*. Why does she stir up these feelings with such a fervor? I'm not usually driven by my primal urges. There's just something about her that reaches right through my heart down to my groin. This feels too good as I stroke my shaft and gently squeeze my balls, imagining it's her tiny hands on me. Dammit, I'm going to explode in seconds.

As I stroke faster, I imagine her beautiful and seductive stormy gray eyes admiring me, like I hope she does when I'm doing my naked yoga. Yet

it’s the intelligent sparkle behind her eyes that really does me in. Nothing is sexier than a smart woman.

But then, she’s gorgeous and kind on top of it? Fuck me, I want her.

Will her long brown wavy curls feel as soft as they look? Will her plump ruby red lips taste as delicious as she smells?

My inner gaze works its way down the memory of her delicate neck, and my cock launches its payload, painting the glass shower door with my hot, thick release before I can even imagine her luscious full breasts on display for me.

I watch my seed slide down the glass. I fall back onto the shower’s tile wall. Succumbing to gravity and mimicking my release, I slip down until my ass hits the bottom of the tub.

What am I doing? Even pursuing a friendship with her is ill-advised. I can’t tell her what I am. We couldn’t tell her what we are even if she were a fae supe. The threat out there is too real. If *anyone* discovers our true natures, we’re dead.

With my finger, I paint a frowny face into my sticky mess on the frosted glass.

OceanofPDF.com

6
SAUSAGEFEST

DARLENE

On Wednesday, I finally have a chance to unpack a few boxes from the teetering tower of chaos in my living room. The invitation on the mantel catches my wandering attention. Which one of them created the card? Who's the artist of the bunch? It might be fun to talk shop with them. I'll have to find out.

To reward myself for getting something accomplished and to clear some much-needed space, I take the broken-down boxes to the recycling bin at the curb. The heat outside is oppressive, and I'm rushing to get back inside when I see Zeke striding toward me with Conrad and Silas in tow.

"Howdy, neighbor!" Zeke says with a bit more volume than necessary while quickly raising his hand in greeting.

Howdy neighbor? Is he from an old western movie? What a dork. Granted, a cute dork, but a dork nonetheless.

In his slacks, loafers, a button-down dress shirt, his greeting is out of place. Yes, it's a *true* button-down with buttons on the collar. Glancing at their work van, I find it odd attire for someone who works as a handyman, but maybe he's off from work today. Come to think of it, I haven't seen them leave for work or even dress in work clothes, for that matter.

“Hi.” I eyeball them to see why they’re hunting me down. Ugh, it’s probably about the party.

“We were just wondering if we should expect you to attend our party?”

Yep. Cornered.

“Uh… I…” They don’t seem to pick up on my hesitation.

“We’re going to have spit-roast!” Conrad announces.

“It’s going to be a sausagefest!” Zeke adds helpfully.

The naughty images that stirs up in the darker parts of my mind turns my face bright red. Thank the goddess the sun is beating down on me. That should suffice as a cover explanation for my red face from the dirty movie playing in my head. These guys are too appealing, and I’d be lying if I said I’ve never read any sword crossing romance. I’m sure they aren’t really inviting me to a sex party my first week in the neighborhood. Right? If they are, that would be a wild story to tell.

Whatever their intention, I hate to admit how intrigued I am by their suggestive wording. Did they intend to drop so many sexual innuendos? Or are they actually innocently talking about a BBQ, and *I’m* the complete perv?

Their sausage talk is making me hear Jennifer Coolige’s voice in my head, “*Makes me want a* sausage *real bad.”*

While I look the guys up and down, contemplating my response, Silas glances at me then quickly looks away. He’s an odd one. I need to know more about him and his story. Is he the one who created the invitation? Is he a quiet, reclusive artist?

“Sure, I should be able to make it,” I blurt out before my introversion has the chance to overpower my curiosity.

Conrad looks as if he’s about to bounce on his heels with joy. I swear I hear a soft squeal from Zeke. That’s an over-exuberant reaction to me attending their party.

“Is there anything I can bring?” I offer politely.

“Just your swimming trunks! The rest we’ve got covered.”

Trunks? They aren’t expecting me to go topless, are they? It must be a joke.

“See you Saturday!” Zeke waves as we head back to our houses.

Once back in my living room, I peek out of my window to see the guys playfully tackling each other in their front yard. Testosterone much? Typical guys. *Goddess, what did I get myself into?*

I run my fingers through my hair in doubt.

At lunch the next day, I update Clover on the neighbors' saga.

"So the guys next door cornered me when I took my trash out and asked if I was attending their pool party." I bite my lip.

"Oh, wow. What did you say?" She's a bit too gleeful at my awkwardness.

"Wait, there's more." I grin like an idiot and palm my face. "They said they were having, quote, a 'spit-roast' and…," I pause for dramatic effect, "and that it was going to be a *sausagefest*."

"*Noooo*, they didn't."

I raise my eyebrows and nod, still in disbelief. "They did."

"So, are you supposed to partake of these *sausages*?" She air quotes about the meat products, making me blush.

"To be honest, I'm not really sure what they meant." I shake off the distracting vision of them in a sausage battle. "They could be completely innocent and are just excited about their party."

"Or they want to show off their *sword play* for you."

We both laugh.

"I'm not opposed to watching a… *match*, but from the safety of my bedroom window."

"Bit of a voyeur, are you?" Clover teases, waggling her eyebrows.

"*Wellllll*… a girl's gotta do what a girl's gotta do." I joke, but I don't confess to her how I ogle Conrad's naked yoga routine every morning.

"You still haven't said. Are you going?"

I think about the cute and thoughtful handmade invite. "I said I'll try to make it."

"Oh my god—" She cuts herself short like she was choking on her words. "Oh, you're going. I can tell. You're too intrigued."

I shrug and smirk.

"Well, you'll have to fill me in on all the *juicy* details."

After work, I pull into my driveway. When I check my mail, the old lady I frequently see walking her little Shih Tzu approaches me on the sidewalk. The little ball of white curls barks at me as though I'm a big threat.

"Hi, I'm Darlene," I greet her, trying to be neighborly and break out of my anti-social *modus operandi*. "How are you?"

"I'm still here," she almost barks like her dog. "I see you at least have a real job, unlike those three bumbling fools next door to you."

Wow, she's coming in hot. I don't know what I'm more offended by… that *at least* I have a job, or that she called my nice (albeit quirky) neighbors fools. But she has a point. I haven't seen the guys going off to work, and it doesn't appear their van has moved much since I've been here.

"What was your name?" I ask sweetly.

"Betty."

Her Shih Tzu snips as if it wants to be introduced.

Betty complies, "And this is Lil' Bit, but most of the time he's a little shit."

Wow, okay. She's *a lot*. But I suspect her dog is too.

"Well, it's nice to meet you, Betty." I smile. "See you at the party!"

Betty looks at me as if I have snakes coming out of my orifices. I guess she wasn't invited? I wouldn't blame the guys if they didn't.

As I walk to my front door, I hear Betty chastising Lil'Bit, "Stop that! Come on!"

Lil' Bit just barks back in defiance. He probably thinks she's the little shit, I'm sure.

OceanofPDF.com

7
FORTY POUNDS OF MEAT

ZEKE

Conrad and Silas are in the backyard prepping for the party when through our living room window, I see Darlene pull into her driveway. I don't dare tell them she's home from work for fear of them losing their focus.

If I did, Silas would probably shut down again, worried about making a mistake with the decorations. And Conrad would become his chaotic self, jumping from one task to another without finishing anything because he thinks there isn't enough time to get the "nine million" things completed by Saturday.

Who am I kidding? I'm stressed out too. We sense the urgency of making this party perfect. Silas, Conrad, and I came to this realm to find our place and live a normal, average, and safe life amongst the mortals. And this party seems like what humans would do to socialize with an attractive neighbor.

The weight we're feeling isn't just our need to fit in. It's something more. No, it's *someone* more. *Darlene*. We all feel the alluring and magnetic pull to her. For Fates' sake, my beast began to burst out of me when she showed up. If we didn't know better, we would say she must be a

supe or Mythic of some sort, but oddly, we don’t smell or sense any magic on her. And our beast should be able to even if she had magical detection blocking spells as we do. The fact that she’s human is something we actually like about her.

I take a deep breath and tentatively walk outside to the backyard to see what my two comrades are up to.

Silas is planting even more flowers on the hillside in the back. He already covered every square inch of soil around our natural lagoon and patio. He must have bought every flowering plant in town, it’s like a nursery in our own backyard. Cosmos, lilacs, dahlias, roses, asters, and zinnias adorn the backyard in every color imaginable. Silas has an exceptional eye and green thumb when it comes to plants. His design is flawless. It’s a flower garden worthy of a Monet painting. I have to admit, it looks stunning and will no doubt impress our cute neighbor.

All at the same time it seems, Conrad is gallantly attempting to string lights around the entire yard, refinish our teak patio furniture, clean out our barbeque, and wash the windows for a third time.

“Not now. I’m busy!” Conrad eyes me, trying to deter me from any unwelcome comment about his obsessive behavior.

“Looks great, guys!” I say, shifting my tactic to compliments rather than criticism.

Both of them stop what they’re doing and inquisitively narrow their eyes at me. I recently read a book about how positive reinforcement works wonders, but it doesn’t seem to alleviate their anxiety and stress right now.

There’s no point in stressing anyway. The place looks amazing, and we made about forty pounds of sausages the last couple of days as a test run. We’re ready. Well, at least externally. Internally, that's another matter. It’s all I can do to calm my nerves, let alone these two anxious buddies of mine.

“Anything I can do to help?” I ask sincerely. I love these guys, even if they drive me crazy sometimes. But they are my brothers, spiritually at least.

“Are you sure the pool pH is balanced?” Conrad is filled with unease.

“Yes, I’ve been checking twice a day for days now.” I walk closer to them. I send out a tentacle and dip the tip in again just to appease him. “Perfect.”

Conrad sighs like this detail has been weighing on him. Wow. He has it worse than I thought. He’s usually pretty easygoing, the carefree, fun one.

“Hey guys, it’ll be getting dark soon. How about we call it a day, get something to eat and relax this evening? We have all of tomorrow morning and afternoon for any last-minute things.” I smile to reassure them. “Sound good?”

“But I have so much to finish. I’m running out of time. I’d rather keep working, and—”

“Listen. We’re ready.” I cut Conrad off, not to be rude or uncaring, but to stop him before he spins completely out of control. “The house looks amazing, the yard is as nice as any high-end resort, and our menu is perfected. There’s no point running ragged and stressing out before tomorrow. We need to rest and decompress so we’re at our best by party time. We need to be on our game. Right?”

“Zeke’s right,” Silas agrees. “We should unwind.”

I’m not sure why we’re so eager to please the new girl, but we are. We haven’t yet talked about what our intentions are, but I suppose after we get to know her during the party, we should talk. I fear it might get heated.

What if we all want to pursue her? Do we pick one of us to shoot his shot? Or do we see if she has a clear interest in one of us?

Great. Now I’m spinning out.

OceanofPDF.com

8
MONSTER COOKIES

DARLENE

I've been flip-flopping all week about this party as if it's going to make or break me—emotionally, spiritually, and reputationally. So, to clear my head, I'm in the kitchen doing something I haven't done in years… baking. Baking cookies, specifically. And yes, I was inspired by the guy's housewarming gift.

After digging up and unearthing the old recipes from my fond childhood days with Auntie, I chuckle at my attempt at making a fancy cookbook. Apparently, I was obsessed with design back then too.

A quick trip to the grocery store later, and I'm in the zone, measuring out all the necessary ingredients. Chilling the dough and improvising some cookie cutters. The sweet and homey aroma filling my house transports me to better times with my aunt. While they bake and cool, I mix up some icing and make some food-dyed icing 'paint' to decorate.

Sure, they'll be a bit elaborate, but I feel like if anyone would appreciate an over the top gesture, it'll be these three weirdos. I only have to glance at the extraordinary invitation to reassure myself I'm not going too far.

Their fancy baking sheet will be returned to its rightful owners with a homemade thank you treat.

I grin to myself with giddy pride as I put the finishing touches on the cookies. When I think about how they'll react, I squee with excitement. I do enjoy making people happy, I just don't have a lot of people in my life who appreciate the things I do.

What if these guys could be real friends who get my wacky personality?

After my baking purge, I luxuriate in a nice hot bubble bath with scented candles and a glass of red wine. I open the window over my 1900s clawfoot tub for some cool night air and listen to my neighbors nightly singalong around their firepit. I can't make out the words, per se, but the melodies seem vaguely familiar. I come to secretly love this time of day, hearing the guys—unbeknownst to them—serenade me. The best part is their laughter in between songs. I grin from ear to ear as the stress melts away and circles the drain of the tub as I pull the stopper before I get out to dry off.

I crawl into bed wearing an oversized T-shirt, and curl up to read a little of my new favorite romance author. I finish a chapter and yawn contentedly. I place my book on the nightstand, turn out the light, and tuck myself in for the night.

I slow my breathing, then my usual random thoughts, worries, and anxieties creep into my mind. So I do what I always do. I acknowledge them, then place them in a *worry-bubble* so they can drift away over my golden wheat field happy place. That normally does the trick, and I should be asleep in no time.

But after half an hour, more irrational concerns pop into my mind. So many that my serene wheat field looks like there's an industrial bubble machine foaming at full throttle.

Will the neighbors think I'm weird? Or rather, discover *that I'm actually weirder than they are?*

I roll over to my other side to try to get comfortable.

If it's a sexual sausagefest, how will I handle that?

I mean, I wouldn't mind watching my three hot neighbors get it on, but isn't that a bit too much too soon?

I flop onto my back and glare at my ceiling.

Will the guys like me? Why am I worried if they're going to *like* me? Of course they will. I'm cool, right? Or do I mean *like me like me*?

After several hours of this, I finally get out of bed in a huff. "*Oh My Fucking Goddess*, enough already!"

I stomp downstairs to the kitchen and open my refrigerator door and glare at the contents. After deciding nothing looks appetizing, I finally grab some milk and a pot to warm it. Auntie used to make this for me with a bit of honey and vanilla with a dash of cinnamon when I had an anxiety-filled night while visiting her.

As I stir the milk while it warms, I look at the clock. Crap, it's 2:30 am. This better work, I don't want to have bags under my eyes tomorrow, looking like some crazy person who can't sleep at night, even though that's actually the case.

I sit at the kitchen table sipping my warm milk while thumbing through a stack of unopened mail. Twenty minutes later, the effects of the milk haven't kicked in like it usually would, so I walk around the house and make a mental list of how I would like to decorate each room. In the living room, I note the stack of boxed up paintings I have painted over the years leaning against the stone fireplace.

I sigh. If I'm not going to paint anymore, the least I could do is to honor the paintings I have created by hanging them properly. After carefully unwrapping each piece, I place them against the wall they'll be hung on.

With that task accomplished, I'm still not sleepy. Even though I kept myself busy for several hours, my thoughts, or I should say worries, keep circling back to the neighbors. What are they really like? I've had some odd, albeit fun, interactions with them, but I want to know what makes them tick. Why do I care so much? That fact alone is the most worrisome.

I can see the faintest tinge of light radiating in the eastern sky. Crap, I was up all night. I need to get some rest before the party. I break out my worry journal to physically write down my concerns, putting them to bed, so I can get my sorry ass there myself.

With those thoughts officially logged, my head hits the pillow. I'm resigned to the fact that I'm probably going to make a fool of myself at tomorrow's party.

I fall asleep and dream of monsters chasing me. It's a flurry of tentacles, fangs, and claws coming at me. I suddenly realize they're my cookies, and that I can bite them just as easily as they can bite me.

So I gobble them up.

OceanofPDF.com

9
FOOD, FRIENDS & FROLICKING

DARLENE

Smoothing out my sundress and adjusting my floppy sunhat, I stop at the property line, worried about making a fool of myself in front of the entire neighborhood, but more specifically, the three cute guys next door. I check my phone to see that I'm an acceptable half hour late. It's enough time so I'm not awkwardly too early and the only person there.

Damn my social anxiety. I run through appropriate conversation starters and remind myself that most people don't like being asked nosey questions about their life's history. Ugh. Small talk, it is… just kill me now.

Stalling, I check the cookies again. They look great. I even have a bow over the plastic-wrapped tray. I hope they like them.

Music from their backyard funnels down the side of their house. I don't hear much chatter, but like my place, the house is set back from the street and they have a lot of lush trees and plants to muffle the sounds of the neighborhood.

There's a charming stepping stone path leading to the backyard with flowers lining the sides. It's so lovely, I'm half tempted to frolic through their front yard and forego the party altogether. *Welp, that's apparently where the frolicking from the invite comes in*.

No, I promised myself I'd put myself out there and be friendly with the neighbors.

A cute sign with an arrow points for the partygoers to follow along the stone path. I notice different fruits piled at the base, such as a mango and papaya, and most notably, an upside-down pineapple in the center.

Are they…? Nah. But if they are a throuple… and they have an open relationship… Maybe. They didn't seem like they'd actually host a sex party, but they did mention a sausagefest. I'll just have to see. And it isn't like I couldn't make an easy exit and scale the fence in an emergency.

"Follow the yellow *rock* road," I chant over and over to give myself courage. But I find I'm curious about the three guys and wonder if they might be like the Scarecrow, Lion, and Tinman. I suppose Toto is Lil' Bit. Does that make Betty the Wicked Witch of the West? With a chuckle to myself, I turn the corner and see the expanse of their beautiful yard and find it… empty.

Huh. Only the three guys are here, wearing T-shirts and swimming trunks. I turn back to the road, half expecting to see the rest of the neighborhood trailing behind me, but no.

Just me.

"Darling Darlene!" Zeke chirps happily. "Welcome to our pool party!" He glances at my sundress with raised eyebrows and then his gaze lands on the cookie tray. "Oh, we said you didn't need to bring anything," he admonishes sweetly. I notice he's not wearing his glasses, probably because it's a pool day.

"But we appreciate the thought!" Conrad races over, accepts the tray, and looks down at the cookies. "What the f…?"

Silas is there in a blink, checking out the cookies.

All three seem a bit overwhelmed by my offering.

"Are these… are these *monsters*?" Conrad chokes out.

"Uh, well." I hesitate, worrying that I've somehow offended them. "I just thought it would be funny since I thought your cookies were monsters," I say as a question.

Their eyes widen, and then their shoulders relax.

"Oh! That makes sense." Zeke laughs, sounding relieved.

I guess they thought I was making some sort of statement about them. Who knows? "This is a dragon, a griffon, a werewolf, a kraken…"

Zeke smiles widely.

“No sphinx?” Conrad pouts.

Silas frowns, I suppose because he’s not seeing his favorite monster either.

“I didn’t think of it. Sorry, maybe if I make them again,” I offer. Weird how humans are into monsters and the supernatural. I just hope it isn’t an obsession like Chad.

As Conrad sets the cookie tray down on the buffet table, I check out their yard. It’s even more stunning than the view from my upstairs bedroom window. Their eight foot tall wood fence lines the entire back three-quarter acre, with a double-wide back gate like I have that opens to the forest beyond. It must be nice that they also don’t have neighbors on their other side. Although I suspect they do have hikers using the unofficial trailhead that’s on that side of their property. Even with the high wall, their lush shrubs and trees make the entire area feel cozy and secluded. With the sloping hill at the back property line leading to the pinion forest, I feel like this place is just an extension of the wilderness. The natural pool and extensive landscaping add to the wild, untamed vibe.

Yet what concerns me right now is that the charming paved patio with a decked-out BBQ and smoker is eerily quiet. No neighbors, at all.

Am I really *that* early? Or are the guys not well-liked around the block? Are we the weirdos? Probably.

“Uh, where is everyone?” I smile nervously.

“What do you mean?” Zeke looks at his two friends as if they might understand what I'm getting at.

“It’s a neighborhood party, so I thought the neighbors would be here.” I wave my hands around in the direction of the street.

“Yep, and *you’re* our neighbor,” Conrad explains like I’m missing something.

“And so are a few dozen other people,” I add.

They all tilt their heads in confusion.

The BBQ must be loaded with enough to feed a small Austrian army at Oktoberfest. The smoker is chugging along too. The banquet table is covered with a ton of side dishes. “So, all *this*… is for just the four of us?”

Silas must see me eyeing the overabundant amount of food. He frowns and begins to take some of the scrumptious-looking dishes back into the house.

I rush over and startle him by reaching out to touch his arm. I quickly recoil my hand and look at him, then Zeke and Conrad. “No, no, really, it’s quite wonderful. Thank you, guys.”

Silas averts his eyes from mine as he places the dishes back onto the table. This is the closest I’ve been to the quiet one in the group, and I’m a bit surprised by his unusual eye color. They’re a yellow chartreuse in the center that fades into a bright green-hazel. I’ve never even seen supernaturals with this coloring, let alone humans. His raven-black hair and thick eyelashes only highlight his striking features. I wonder if he even knows how hot he is.

“Would you like a cold beverage?” Conrad walks behind a well-stocked portable bar and turns down the music on a large cassette player boombox that looks like it’s from the 1980s. “We can make most of the basic libations.”

“And even a few unusual drinks from—” Zeke stops short, then adds, “from around the world.”

I stare at the boombox, wondering what this music is. My best guess is some sort of metal from a Scandinavian country.

Zeke notices my gaze and contemplation of the music. “It’s the band Týr, a folk metal band from the Faroe Islands. Their songs are about Viking mythology. Týr is the Nordic god of war.”

“Cool.” Interesting choice for a neighborhood block party, but I’m game. They’re drinking local microbrewery craft mead, but I decided not to drink today. “Ice water will be fine for me, thanks.”

Conrad quickly grabs a highball glass and spins it in the palm of his hand, tosses crystal-clear ice cubes with his other into the glass mid-spin, and fills it with iced water from a glass water cooler. With a twinkle in his light-brown, amber eyes and a spin, he sets it on the bar.

“Lime or lemon wedge?” He grins.

“Lime, thanks.” Man, he’s very agile, and his hands are nimble. Wow. My mind drifts to delicious, fanciful thoughts. *Darlene, stop that!*

I take a sip of water, just as Conrad says, “Be a good girl and stay hydrated.”

I choke. Does he mean that to be sexual? I take another glance at the decorative pineapples and wonder.

Zeke walks over to check on the smoking barbeque, and picks up a pair of giant tongs. “Are you hungry yet?”

He quickly clicks the tongs twice to make sure they're still tonging like any self-respecting grill master as I take a large gulp of water. "Would you like to sample my hand-packed meat?"

I almost do a spit-take. "Uh, excuse me?"

"Our sausages. We stuffed them by hand all night." He picks up a thick sausage with the tongs.

"*Oooookay*." My dirty mind is doing me no favors here. "Uh, yes, *sausages*."

"We have: bratwurst, andouille, blood, Polish, Vienna, Taiwanese, and if you want a little spice with your meat, chorizo or choris from India."

"It's a verifiable sampling of the world's best meat sticks!" Conrad puts his arm around Zeke's shoulders. "You can taste-test all the different varieties and have your fill to your heart's content."

I bet.

As Silas sets down a tray of various mustards and condiments, Zeke adds, "They come in all different shapes and sizes."

I'm dead.

"Which would you like to try first, *Darling*?" Conrad smiles wide, almost mischievously with their silly nickname for me.

"I never had choris before. I'll try that."

Zeke grabs a link from the barbeque with his unusually long tongs. "Ohhh, our girl likes it *spicy*."

Our girl?

Oblivious to my surprise at his presumptuousness, he goes on, "Traditionally, it's served chopped up and placed in a poi dinner roll, but you can put it in one of our unconventional buns if you want to."

Oh my.

Conrad gestures to a tray of homemade sausage buns. "Yes, at our place, you can do anything you want with our meat."

What. Is. Happening?

Are these guys for real or are they putting me on? Are they really that innocent?

"I'll try it the traditional way." I fan myself with my hat, eyeing their tasty *meat*, and I don't necessarily mean the meat on the barbeque. Is it getting hotter out here?

Silas sets a tower fan next to me. He's so observant and attentive.

Zeke prepares four plates of poi rolls stuffed with choris sausages and sets them on the large teak wood table as Conrad brings over a pitcher of ice water and a small plate of lime wedges. Silas places four flatware sets out, rolled up in napkins folded to look like peacocks. Nice touch. These guys know how to throw a party, with the exception that they forgot to invite more than one person.

“Help yourself to any of the side dishes.” Conrad nods toward the banquet table loaded with mouthwatering delicacies.

“Thank you.” I take my plate to the table and scoop up a small portion of creamy dill and red potato salad. “Looks wonderful.”

After the guys load their plates with their choice of sides and return to me at the table, they watch me intently, waiting for me to dig in. Not feeling shy, I pick up the sausage-stuffed roll and take a large bite.

“My goodness, this tastes amazing,” I say genuinely. I’ve never had something with such unique flavors that’s so tasty.

Then the heat kicks in. I wasn’t expecting it to be *this* spicy. Oh my goddess, my mouth is on fire. I forgo gulping water, knowing that it will only spread the hot pepper oils around my mouth even more. Not wanting to make the guys feel bad, I do the only thing I can think of, and take another large bite. Then another, and another. Hell, I’m already in it, I might as well go all the way.

I gobble down the entire sausage sandwich in a couple of minutes, before the guys are even halfway through theirs. They beam with pride, happy that I seem to really enjoy it.

“You must have really liked our sausages.” Zeke bubbles with delight.

“Are you still hungry for another?” Conrad jumps from the table to make me another sausage sandwich.

“*No*, *no*, *no*. I’m good,” I choke out, trying not to cough.

“Okay, let us know when you want more.” Conrad sits back down.

With feeling slowly returning to my lips, I take a few small bites of the potato salad, hoping to squelch this inferno in my mouth. When I can’t eat anymore, I set my fork down and push the plate aside.

Silas jumps up with his napkin, and indicates I have a little bit of potato salad on my nose. Without looking directly at me, he gestures if it’s okay if he removes it. I nod, and he ever so gently wipes the tip of my nose and shyly grins.

I haven’t heard his voice at all yet, even when I’m *dropping the eaves*, listening to them talk over our shared fence. I wonder why he doesn’t talk. Not that I mind that he doesn’t speak. Maybe he just doesn’t have anything to say. Hell, when most people talk, they rarely say anything meaningful. No matter the reason for his quietness, I’m just dying to know what his voice sounds like.

While Silas takes care of me, Zeke and Conrad go into the house and come back carrying trays of heavenly delectable treats. Front and center are my cookies that I made and brought over.

“Care for something sweet?” Conrad waves his tray under my nose.

The guys each choose one of my cookies. Although I’m full, I can’t turn down a tempting dessert. It would be just plain rude, *right*? I pick a slice of cake that has pineapple and brown sugar on it.

They watch intently as I take my first bite, and I hum with appreciation. Then it hits me.

Oh, shit. It’s *Upside Down Pineapple Cake*…

Does this mean I've just said yes to being a swinger? I don't know the swinger protocol. Am I being vetted? Was this a test? Or am I imagining this whole swinger party angle?

To cover my naivety, I squeal, “Wow! This is absolutely delicious. I must have the recipe.”

“Your cookies aren’t too bad either.” Zeke helps himself to another.

Both Conrad and Silas vigorously nod in agreement, and I think I hear a muffled moan coming from Silas as he quickly covers his mouth with his hand.

Okay, good. Seems like I just let my imagination run wild. They aren’t stripping down and playing any *brown chicken brown cow* music.

After we eat our treats and the conversation is flowing about easy topics like the town’s amenities, I notice Zeke repeatedly glancing at the large analog clock hanging on the back of the house.

Thinking he’s getting antsy for the party to wrap up, I’m just about to suggest I head home when he suddenly jumps up from his seat. He rips off his T-shirt, revealing a strong yet cuddly upper body. I have a bit of a thing for dad bods. I note he has a tattoo of an anchor with a tentacle wrapped around it on his upper right arm. There’s another smaller tattoo over his heart.

He rushes over to their pool and waves for us to follow him. “Thirty minutes!” he shouts as though it’s the start of a race.

I look over to get an explanation from Conrad.

“The old wives say people must wait thirty minutes after eating to swim,” he explains as he pulls off his T-shirt too, revealing an identical tattoo over his heart. It’s a snake in a circle for an outline, and pyramids and water in the middle. As I’ve seen from afar, he’s fit, but not overly muscular. He’s deliciously covered with golden skin, and if he drops his swim trunks, his round ass would be just as tan.

Clearing my throat, and my dirty mind, I walk over to the pool’s edge. “Yes, I’ve heard that one, but it isn’t true.”

Zeke dives under the water, then pops up grinning up at me like a fiend. “That’s amazing news! We thought hu—people could get hurt.” He reaches his hands out, inviting me to join him.

There’s a carefree and joyful energy filling him now. He must be a water spirit at heart. I know even humans can resonate with certain elements, and they come alive when they do. I’ve never found my special place in the realms, but I find his enthusiasm infectious.

Silas slips off his shirt. I see the same tattoo as Conrad and Silas over his heart. Aww, how adorable, they have throuple tattoos.

They jump into the pool to join Zeke, and I’m standing there, feeling like an oddball.

“I didn’t bring a suit,” I confess, swinging the skirt of my sundress. I don’t even own a suit, but I don’t tell them that. Why would I go through the excruciating torture of bathing suit shopping when I don’t have to? I never planned on going anywhere near a body of water larger than my tub before now.

“You don’t need a suit.” Zeke smiles.

I blush, thinking about stripping down naked in front of these three cute neighbors.

“Uh, not skinny dipping,” I chuckle nervously.

Zeke’s face flushes pink. “Oh, I meant in your underwear and bra,” he rushes out.

I lift the hem of my skirt and cinch it around my thighs. “I’ll just dip my feet in the water if that’s okay.”

“Of course,” Zeke assures me. When I step into the water, he closes his eyes like someone just caressed him.

Conrad is close to Zeke, but not that close. It couldn’t be him, reaching out to his lover.

I suppose I should casually find out what the situation is between them. I hoped they’d bring up their arrangement before now, but I might have to be a bit more direct.

When Zeke opens his eyes again, they seem brighter. “You can walk around the edge here, it’s pretty shallow all around.”

I nod, but I don’t feel all that adventurous in the water. Memories from my past rise to the surface, and I become more uncomfortable. To distract myself, I ask about the pond-like pool. “Was this here when you moved in? Or did you have it made?”

“We built it.”

I remember their handyman van in the driveway. “Oh, do you make them as part of your services?”

“No, not yet,” Conrad answers quickly. “But maybe in the future.”

“Well, you definitely could with how awesome your yard is.”

The guys preen at my praise of their home.

I sit on the edge of the pool on a flat, natural stone. “If you ever want an updated logo for your business, I could help you out.”

“Is that what you do for a living?” Conrad asks.

“I work in advertising. Well, I work for an advertising company in the IT department, but I hope to get a position in the ad design and illustration side someday.”

“Is that your passion?” Conrad drifts closer to me.

“It’s a job.”

“But is it your passion?” he pushes.

I don’t know. I’ve never really asked myself that question before.

“When you were moving in, I noticed items that looked like large wrapped canvases.” Zeke drifts closer as well. “Do you paint, too?”

“I haven’t in a while, but I studied painting and illustration in college.”

“That must have been so rewarding,” Zeke says dreamily. Maybe it was Zeke who created the card.

“I enjoyed it a lot while I was doing it, but I suppose I get bored easily when it doesn't challenge me the way I need it to.”

Zeke and Conrad hum their understanding, but Silas remains quiet, as he has been the entire time I’ve been here.

I don’t think it’s about me. I sure hope not. It seems like he’s just super shy.

Without a word, Silas steps out of the water and toward the side yard. I wonder what he’s up to. I admire the way the water sluices down his sleek, trim body. He’s built like a runner or martial artist. If I were to meet him on the street, I’d guess he was a broody punk rock singer.

Oh no, am I attracted to my neighbors, the odd throuple? I really need to rein in my libido. I’m sure they don’t need a thirsty woman ogling them all the time as if they were a tall glass of sweet tea.

OceanofPDF.com

10
ILLEGAL LAWN DARTS

CONRAD

Darlene watches Silas cross our yard with keen interest. I wonder what she thinks of our quiet companion. She doesn't appear to be put off by his reserved nature. In fact, she's biting her lip and eyeing how his wet trunks hug his ass.

When I look at Zeke to see what he makes of her hungry gaze, I find he is staring at her feet, frowning. I quickly realize why he's upset. She doesn't seem to like water, which is a strike against him if he plans on pursuing her. It bodes well for my chances, but I feel bad for the guy. It's got to sting.

Silas carries over a huge duffel bag filled with summer-themed yard games to the middle of the grass lawn area. He makes eye contact with me after he looks at Zeke, knowing exactly where my mind has gone. With a tiny shrug most would miss, he doesn't appear to worry much on Zeke's behalf about her reluctance to be in the water. I guess we're all in it to win it.

Goddess, that sounds horrible. She isn't a prize in a game. But fuck, how I would cherish this woman if I won her affections.

I have no idea why just the sound of her voice and the music of her laughter rocks me to my core, but it does. Something about her triggers me,

but in a good way. It makes no sense. Why would one person out of all the humans on Earth have such an effect on me? Again, I'm reminded of the idea of a perfect mate match. Could she be mine?

Silas pulls various games out of the large duffle bag.

Darlene gasps and rushes over to check them out.

Silas, the bastard, slyly grins to himself at pulling her attention.

I swim over to Zeke, and whisper, "Tough break about the water."

"Yeah, but there's something deeper to this. I can sense it." Zeke gazes at Darlene with determination written on his face. "And I'm going to get to the bottom of it."

"Kraken sense? Or just wishful thinking?"

"My kraken picked up on it through our connection in the water. A fear, a horrible memory."

"Don't push her away trying to *fix* her." I suggest, concerned he might be reminded of the heartbreak with his sister. He's always taken responsibility for everything since that day.

"But what else can I do? She'll never be my mate if I can't get past her aversion to water."

Oh, that confirms it, he feels the mate match pull too.

"So you're only going to help her for your own sake?"

"*What?* No." He splashes water in my face with a tentacle. "No one should live with the trauma I sensed."

"Lawn darts!" she exclaims, pulling our attention to her presence again.

I pop out of the water and huddle next to her as she checks out the packaging. She leans into my bare chest, probably without even meaning to. I love feeling her soft curves press against me, and it only makes me greedy for more. She doesn't even seem to mind that I'm dripping water all over her.

"This is banned! Or I heard it was." She giggles like a kid.

"Want to play?" I'm already pulling the huge colored darts from the box and handing her one.

Her eyes go wide as she hefts it in her small hands. Damn. I'd love to see her palm another weighty object. *Down boy*. I swear I'm not usually this raunchy, but she brings it out in me.

"Where did you ever find this?" She runs her finger down the hard shaft to the tip of the dart.

Oh my fucking goddess. I almost pass out from the arousal of the erotic and sensual display as all the blood in my head is sucked down to my growing *dart.*

I don’t dare tell her that the game was popular with kids back home on our hidden island, Huldu. It, as well as anything from the mortal realm, was banned there as well, but with a stiffer punishment if we were caught. Nevertheless, it was a hit and popular contraband smuggled through the underground ring.

“We found it at an antique shop.” Zeke walks up behind us, finally leaving the seat of his power, the water.

“Oh! Antiques? We should go antiquing sometime.”

I love that she’s already planning future excursions with us. I can’t hold back the wide smile that’s plastered on my face. But with her, I don’t believe I have to worry about showing my happiness. She’s the opposite of my uptight parents and the sphinx pride members.

Silas sets up the circular target on the grass thirty-five feet from us and steps out of the way. Darlene is practically bouncing on her toes, antsy to play. Good call, Silas. Having some fun will win us some points.

“Ladies first.” I gesture with a bow for Darlene to take the first toss.

“You go first. I want to watch your form.”

She’s a competitor. This is going to be awesome.

OceanofPDF.com

11

JUST A FLESH WOUND

DARLENE

With the lawn dart in his hand, Conrad cocks his arm and quickly hurls the dart like he's an all-pro quarterback. It flies straight and fast as an arrow, landing dead center in the target.

Oh wow. Conrad is stronger and more athletic than he looks. That was crazy, *hot* as hell, but crazy nonetheless. My lady bits tingle and confirm the sentiment.

"Nice throw, but you're supposed to toss it underhanded, like this." I lob it like a softball pitcher. It glides through the air in a sweeping arc and lands a few feet from the circle.

"Nice toss. You almost got it." Zeke encourages while side-eyeing Conrad for being so competitive.

I chuckle to myself—*guys.* I don't mind the competition. I don't like to lose either. My plan is to lull them into a false sense of security… Yeah, right, who am I kidding, I can't compete with an arm like that.

After a few more practice tosses and Conrad explaining the rules, he asks, "Are you ready to try a game?"

"Sure." I'm as ready as I'll ever be.

Many rounds go by, but every time Conrad pulls ahead, I swear he eases off to let me catch up. I don’t know if I’m touched or pissed. It’s a nice gesture and all, but I want to win fair and square, without help. Silas is sweet enough to gather and bring back our tossed darts to us after each round. Seemingly over Conrad’s competitive streak, Zeke returns to the pool and floats around like a seal.

By the last round, I’m one point from winning the game. It’s my turn to toss for the win, but I choke and my throw is too short by several feet.

Without hesitation, Conrad steps up for his turn. Being the show-off I think he is, he faces away from the target. And like a shot-put Olympian, he executes a perfect full-spin throw to hurl his dart even faster at the target. Unfortunately, at the same moment, Silas trots onto the playing field to retrieve my dart.

Before I can yell a warning, Conrad’s dart hits Silas’ foot.

“Silas!” I race to check on him.

Conrad and Zeke are somehow at Silas’ side before I reach him.

“Shit, buddy, I’m so sorry,” Conrad says, pulling his fingers through his long hair with his other hand on Silas’ shoulder. He has a worried look on his face, feeling really bad about his foolish stunt.

Silas grimaces and groans under his breath. I think it’s his way of saying, apology accepted.

It looks like the dart pierced all the way through his bare foot, but it's hard to tell due to the amount of blood pouring out.

“Hold still.” Zeke jumps into action and carefully places his foot over Silas’ toes while he grabs the shaft of the dart.

“I don’t think you should pul–” I stop myself short as Zeke pulls the dart out in one swift motion.

Silas doesn’t even flinch. He must be in shock, or has the highest threshold of pain I’ve ever seen in the mortal realm.

“He’ll be fine.” Zeke tosses the bloody dart onto the ground. “I volunteer at the community pool, so I’m trained in first-aid. We’ll take care of him.”

Conrad wraps his arm around Silas’ waist and helps him into the house. Zeke and I follow along.

“I really think we should take him to the hospital. He’s bleeding a lot. This seems like something beyond first-aid,” I try to reason. “It might have hit an artery or need stitches.”

“Let me take a look at the wound.” Zeke places his hands on my shoulders and looks me in the eye. “If it’s something I can’t handle, I promise you I will seek professional help,” he says in self-assured low tones.

Wow, his focus, when directed entirely on me, is intense. I nod. Zeke goes into the house to attend to Silas, and I wait for an update on the back patio.

Fifteen minutes later, Zeke returns to find me pacing. On my worry pilgrimage, I wear a circular path in the stone like those centuries-old staircases in European churches.

“Silas is doing fine. He’ll be up and about in no time.” Zeke gestures for me to have a seat as he pulls up a chair for himself. “I cleaned and dressed the wound. The bleeding has stopped.”

“So it didn’t go all the way through his foot?”

“It was just a mere *flesh wound*.” He gives me a slight smile. “He’s a bleeder.”

I breathe a huge sigh of relief, and I relax in my chair. “Well, I’m glad he’s okay. Give Silas my best. Thanks so much for having me over. It was fun. Well, until—”

Zeke sighs and the corners of his mouth drop.

“No, really, it was lovely. Please extend my thanks to the guys.” I bite my lip, thinking I actually did enjoy myself until Silas got hurt.

“But I should be going.” I push my chair back to stand.

“Hey, listen, before you go.” He touches my forearm, but his hand lingers longer than someone only trying to get someone’s attention. “There’s a touring art exhibit at the museum in Perfect Valley. It’s a showing of art in advertising and book illustrations.”

He nervously pulls back his hand, seemingly just now aware that he’s still touching me.

“I thought maybe… would you like to go?” His breath stutters. “I mean, go with me?”

“Umm. I did want to see that exhibit, but let's talk about it later.” My eyes dart to the patio door as I’m still rattled and concerned about Silas’ injury. And I’m not sure what to make of his invite.

“Okay, sounds good,” Zeke responds with a hint of rejection in his voice.

He walks me to the gate that I came through earlier.

“Good night, and thanks again!” I smile in earnest, trying to smooth over my awkwardness.

“Have a good night, Darlene,” he utters his farewell with his hands in his pockets.

OceanofPDF.com

12

A HERMIT'S NIGHTLIFE

DARLENE

Apparently, my new life in Midville means trying new things. Not only am I going to quirky pool parties with cute neighbors, I'm accepting invites to hang out with co-workers, too.

Clover would make a great hostage negotiator. She's somehow convinced me, a recently confirmed homebody, to meet her friends at a local restaurant and bar, *The Well And Trough*. I chuckle at the salt-of-the-earth name that Clover says keeps away the pretentious jerks from Perfect Valley and Heaven Hills.

It was one thing to walk next door to visit with the guys, it's a whole other thing to take my friendship with Clover to another level and into the real world. And to meet her friends on top of it? Maybe I'm finally putting the trauma of my past behind me.

It was easy to dress for the pool party, I only have one sundress that was appropriate. But for a night on the town? I only seem to own comfy lounging clothes or professional garb for the workplace. Not much in between. Perhaps it's time for me to go clothes shopping if I'm planning on being social again.

I finally settle on a comfortable and flattering pair of jeans which hug my curves and a pretty red blouse I usually wear under a subdued suit jacket. I pile my shoulder-length mop of brown waves into a messy, yet cute bun and actually put on red lipstick left over from my dating days.

I back out of my driveway and glance over to the guys' living room window. A soft glow emanates, and I wonder what they're up to tonight. Maybe they're snuggled in together and watching a movie. Or… are they up to something more spicy?

Not for me to find out. Even if I'm wishing I could.

I'm still not sure if I should take Zeke up on his offer to 'hang out.' It feels like a recipe for disaster. I don't know what's going on with their relationship, but I don't think getting involved with any of them is a good idea.

Brushing aside that whole quandary, I focus on the potentially awkward situation I'm about to stumble into. Pulling up to the bar, I park close to the entrance since I don't like to make myself a target by parking in the outskirts of a lot. I text Clover to see if she's here. I do *not* want to be the first one in the building and stand around with nothing but my social anxiety to keep me company.

A moment later, Clover's text comes through, and I sigh with relief. She's already inside and waiting in a back corner booth. Perfect.

I check my makeup and slip inside the chill local bar. Everything is updated and clean, but it still has a cozy, homey vibe. I spot Clover, and she waves excitedly for me to join her.

I hope this works out. I don't have a great track record with friends or with boyfriends. Or family or anyone, really. I'm either too much, too honest, too weird, or not enough. The reminder that I don't fit in with the Fae realm hits me like a punch to the gut, because I don't really fit in with the mortal realm either. It's as if I'm in limbo. I didn't really even get along with the few other nulls I've met.

Maybe this city and friend group will be different. Not likely, but what can I do but try?

Clover jumps up from the booth and does a victory dance. "You made it! I knew I'd get you to come out."

I chuckle at her enthusiasm. It feels strangely good that she wants to hang out with me so badly. I'm not used to all the attention I've received lately.

“Well, it was either show up or never hear the end of it at work,” I joke.

“True, emotional blackmail is a specialty of mine.” She grins widely and waggles her brows.

I take a moment to admire her outfit. She’s wearing leggings and a soft, tight off-the-shoulder shirt that accentuates her curves. “You look great!”

“So do you!” she chirps back, waves to a server, and plops down into the booth. “Want a drink?”

“Sure.” When the handsome server comes over, I order a red wine.

Clover ogles him as he leaves and then giggles when she notices me, noticing her.

“What? I come here for the lovely view.” She busts up and takes a huge sip of her cocktail.

I shake my head and chuckle. I suppose it’s good to experience all life has to offer, and that means other people.

The cute server drops off my wine and gives Clover a saucy wink. I’m pretty sure he somehow heard her favorable comment about him.

“*Soooo*, you ended up going to the neighbors’ party?” she prompts. “Fair warning, I’m hoping for some juicy details because it must have been a *really* good time if you kept so tight-lipped when I called you earlier.”

I shrug and think about the bizarre and oddly wonderful time I had with the guys. “It was… nice?”

“Like boned you three ways to Sunday, nice? Or cookies and milk, nice?”

I bark out a laugh, then cover up my nervousness by sampling my choice in wine. I swirl the glass and contemplate what to confess. I still have to be careful about how I talk to humans. It’s so easy to say something odd they wouldn’t understand.

“They’re very sweet, and in fact, there were cookies involved. But I was the only person who showed up. I might have been the only one they invited.”

“*Okaaaay*.” She leans in and motions for me to go on. “What happened, girl?”

“Nothing.” I squirm in my seat. “There were some questionable upside-down pineapples, but it didn’t get weird or kinky. We just ate sausages and played lawn darts.”

“Upside-down pineapples?” a woman asks, stepping up to our table, looking confused. She’s with another woman, I assume both are Clover’s

friends.

Welp, I just outed myself as the freak in the group. My face flushes beet-red.

Clover scoots over and introduces her two friends. “This is Felicity and Ruby.”

Both women are beautiful and have an open demeanor, with bright smiles and eyes. Felicity reaches over, offering to shake my hand, such a human custom. And I remind myself, once again, that not everyone will dislike me.

I don’t pick up any magical signature from them. I dismiss the idea that these gorgeous ladies could be faeborn, because other than their beauty, there’s no other reason to suspect they’re supes hiding here on Earth.

“Nice to finally meet you!” Ruby says happily. “Clover was so excited to finally have a work friend.” She’s taller than me, about five-nine with a solid, athletic build. Her dark auburn hair and warm, dark brown eyes almost seem to have a reddish hue in this light.

“So what was this about pineapples?” Felicity brings us back to my tale.

“I thought, ever so briefly,” I quickly add, “that maybe, *possibly*, I attended a swinger party or at least a vetting process to join in.”

“At least tell me the swingers were tempting.” Ruby chuckles and then catches the attention of our server.

My cheeks redden with the thought of *swinging* with my three neighbors. “I’d say they’re easy on the eyes and are quite charming, if not a bit quirky.”

“I’d take quirky over an arrogant jerk who only cares about the gym and maxing out their protein intake.” Felicity rolls her eyes. “I swear, that’s all I’m dealing with currently.”

Ugh, Chad was obsessed with the gym. *No thanks*. He cared more about his body than mine whenever we were having sex.

“Oh? Why’s that?” I’m curious to know more about Clover’s friends.

For some reason, she looks at Clover quickly.

Clover shakes her head. “I haven’t told her anything about us.”

Why does that sound oddly loaded?

“I’m an events coordinator and working on a huge competition. It’s just sports nonsense, and there are a lot of thick-skulled, egomaniac guys at the pro level.” She waves as if shooing me away from the topic. Weirdly, I

sense something more going on there. Maybe she doesn't hate all the hot guys, or she's signed an NDA.

"Yeah, I've never been a big sports person." I try to put her at ease. "But it sounds like being an event coordinator could be an interesting and demanding job."

"It is." She laughs wickedly. "I love getting paid to tell everyone what to do."

We all chuckle at that.

"Eventually, I'd love to be my own boss. Except, I'd probably kick my own ass too hard," I say with a laugh, but know it isn't too far from the truth. I'd be harder on myself than any employer I've had.

The conversation swings back around to the topic of my neighbors, and I give them the rundown of what has happened so far.

"Sounds like you should see where this *friendship* takes you," Felicity encourages, and the other two nod their heads in agreement.

"But they're probably a throuple. I don't want to have to move after it all blows up in my face."

"If you're lucky, all three will *blow* somewhere other than on your face." Clover offers her glass in a toast to her sentiment.

"Unless that's your kink," Ruby adds.

I reluctantly join my glass to theirs. "Well, I don't know if they're only being playfully flirty or for real flirty."

"Then just have fun and flirt!" Ruby suggests, as if it's the easiest thing in the world to do.

She's right, though. I deserve a bit of fun and friendship in my life. I haven't experienced much of it. Why not start now… with these three women and maybe three cute guys?

OceanofPDF.com

13
PARTY FAUXPAWS

ZEKE

"Goddess, damn it!" I say to no one as I pace around our game room, aka living room. "This isn't the way I had hoped the party would go."

It's been a week, and we haven't heard from or even seen Darlene other than when she comes and goes for work. I hope she's just busy and isn't avoiding us.

I plop down onto our couch to figure out how to salvage our budding relationship with her. I'm going out of my skull. It's usually Conrad or Silas who loses it over big things, but this time I'm the one who's spiraling and can't get out of my head. And that's because it's all my fault.

What was I thinking, asking her out right after Silas got hurt? I'm usually more considerate than that.

What do I do? Should I check in on her or continue to wait for her to reach out? If I don't do something to rectify my blunder, I might never get the chance to talk with her again because she probably wants nothing to do with us after the party.

That would kill me.

I have to get to the bottom of why she hates water. How can we end up together if she avoids the very essence of who I am, and the source of my power, my magic? Hopefully, her trauma is something I can help her overcome to soothe her anxiety.

She's gotten under my skin, and I have to know why. There's something about her yet to be discovered, something deeper beyond her beautiful stormy gray eyes that reminds me of a gale at sea, gorgeous face, and full, luscious curves. Something draws me to her. I'm an out-of-control tsunami crashing into her world, and I must find out why that is. I *must* get to know her, *all* of her.

Hell, she's gotten to the three of us, including the easygoing, *I'll-never-be-tied-down* Conrad.

Conrad. It's his fault.

If it wasn't for Conrad sincerely feeling horrible about what he did, I would have half a mind to rip him a new one and send him packing with his tail between his legs.

Right on cue, Conrad waltzes into the room with Silas in tow to find me sulking.

"Any word from Darlene?" Conrad asks softly.

"No." I fume. "What in all of *Huldu* were you thinking?!"

Conrad takes a step back. "I'm sorry." He looks at Silas.

"You had to be the big hotshot. You were just being a selfish show-off," I bark.

"Selfish? Now you're just being mean. Stop being a *dork*," Conrad pokes, his ire rising.

"Really? A whale penis? You're going to resort to childish name-calling?" I jump up from my chair.

"You started it," Conrad huffs and takes a step closer to me.

"Well, it's true. You let your ego, your *pride*, get the better of you," I retort.

Conrad's hackles are fully raised, and he looks like he's about to pounce with my low blow. But fuck it, he deserves it.

"You stabbed Silas, and now Darlene wants nothing to do with us. You ruined everything," I growl through gritted teeth.

"I didn't mean to, and besides, Silas healed just fine in no time," he defends himself, raising his voice. "And you didn't help matters either by asking her out right at the worst possible moment."

He’s not wrong, but I'm not going to take any blame for this. “Are you saying it’s my fault Darlene doesn’t—”

Silas cuts me off and approaches me with his hands out as if he’s trying to calm a wild beast. Perhaps that’s what I am. “Darlene has probably just been busy.”

He turns his attention to Conrad. “I’m sure she forgot about the party faux*paw*.” He’s the jokester now? Then he addresses us both, “Guys, she’ll come around again.”

Conrad and I stare down Silas to butt the fuck out. Silas raises his hands in surrender and leaves the house, slamming the front door.

I snap my head back at Conrad. “It’s irrelevant that Silas healed quickly. You could have injured Darlene with your carelessness.” I square my shoulders and take two steps toward him.

Conrad stands stock-still, widening his eyes with that realization.

“We’re fortunate it was Silas with his healing abilities who was stabbed and not Darlene. Humans are fragile, and she could’ve been seriously hurt or worse.”

Conrad slumps his posture and sits down, backing off. “You're right.”

“Of course I’m right. You have to be… *We* have to be careful with her.” I let out an exhale to release the building tension.

“Man, what have I done?” His question is more for himself than for me.

“I know you have strong feelings for her. We all do. Even our introverted pal feels the connection.” I place my hand on his shoulder. “But let's keep her alive long enough so we get the chance to see where this leads.”

Conrad nods, flattening his lips.

OceanofPDF.com

14
INTO THE WEEDS

DARLENE

It's Saturday, and the cloud cover makes it a cooler day and easier to attack the front lawn weeds. I've been trying for a few weeks to wish them away with my mind to the cornfield, but alas, I do not possess such powers. The landscapers for my parents' estate were earth mages who would magically suck these eyesores into the soil and out of sight.

Too bad I don't get along with supes to ask someone to do this for me. Oh well, it doesn't hurt to get a bit of fresh air and work up a sweat by doing it the human way.

With my garden gloves on, I kneel and yank on the first weed. Then the next, and the next, and toss them into an ever growing pile. It's never-ending. The song "*Never Ending Story*' begins to play in my mind, showcasing my musical echolalia.

I'm humming along when I hear the guy's front door open and a snippet of a heated conversation, then the door slams shut. I guess they're having a lover's spat. I remind myself that it's *none-of-my-business*.

Guilt churns in my gut. For the entire week, I haven't touched base with Zeke about the museum outing he suggested. I'm not one hundred percent

sure it was meant to be a date, and I don't know if I want it to be either. With all I have going on with a new job and house, I don't have time for messy. And it feels like getting mixed up with my neighbors would be just that.

Continuing my weeding, I catch a glimpse of someone at the edge of my yard. I worry it's Zeke, expecting an answer about the museum.

When I finally get up the nerve to look, it's Silas pacing the property line like a caged tiger. He's not looking at me but at the weeds I'm pulling up. He seems anxious. I don't know what could be triggering him. I'm relieved to see his foot seems to have recovered as he isn't limping at all. Maybe the injury really wasn't as bad as it first looked.

I sit back on my heels and openly stare at him. I know he's practically mute, but I ask anyway, "Are you upset with me?"

His eyes widen and shakes his head no. Then he pointedly looks at the weeds.

"You don't like how I'm pulling weeds?"

Silas grimaces and lets out a little groan as I defiantly yank on another one.

Since he isn't outright mansplaining how to pull weeds, I don't know if he's being controlling or just wants to help. I feel a bit bad for the guy, his social anxiety seems to be off the charts.

"Do you want to pull weeds with me or just watch and grunt at me from over there?" I ask in a playful tone.

That's all the invitation he needs, and he's kneeling down in front of me in an instant. From his back pants pocket, he pulls out two tools shaped like large forked screwdrivers and hands one to me. I guess this sweetie really just wants to help.

He briefly makes eye contact and gives me a sexy smirk. I almost suck in a breath in shock, but I don't want to make him more self-conscious.

Without words, Silas shows me how to use the tool to pry the weeds from the ground along with their roots.

I notice he's not wearing gloves, but I suppose he's used to digging in the ground if his immaculate yard is anything to go by.

"Oh, the weeds will come back if I don't get the roots, huh?" I say mostly to myself, not expecting an answer. I never had to do manual labor growing up, so I didn't know better. Everything I've learned to do in the

human realm was either from the time I spent with Auntie or from online video tutorials.

He hums his agreement, and I feel giddy hearing this little sound. I don't know why this mysterious guy intrigues me like he does, but I find myself drawn to him and hoping one day we can be friends.

Maybe I can be friends with all of them. I'm probably assuming a lot by thinking they want something more than friendship. I've had human guy friends before in college who were gay and they were playfully flirty. Why did I immediately think their attention meant more? Perhaps because I'm desperate for attention.

"Do you only talk with people you're comfortable with?"

He nods without looking up, and continues his work.

"I hope one day you feel comfortable enough with me." I itch to reach out and touch his shoulder, make contact, make a connection, but I don't. "Thank you for helping me."

"You're welcome." *Holy crap.* Silas' voice is wonderfully deep and gravely, and my body reacts a bit inappropriately.

An ecstatic grin fills my face, and he smiles to himself, pulling another weed.

I feel as if I've won some sort of prize. Like when someone's pet runs up to me and they say, *"Wow. They don't usually like people."*

We spend another couple of hours plucking the weeds from the soil until I'm exhausted. I pause and watch Silas' long fingers work. They're surprisingly well-groomed and free of dirt. I don't know how he does it since my gloves are covered in grime. I guess it's his experience with yardwork.

"I think I've hit my weed quota for the day," I joke, standing and stretching out my tired muscles. "I appreciate your help."

He eyeballs the rest of the weeds in the yard. "Tomorrow?" he breathes out.

"Yeah, that'll be nice." I agree before my brain can catch up to what I'm saying. I guess I don't mind company after all.

Zeke races out of his house and over to me. He pulls up short when Silas appears above the bushes as he gets to his feet.

Huh, interesting. Maybe Zeke's odd reaction to Silas' presence has something to do with the argument I overheard earlier.

“Hey, Darlene.” Zeke ignores Silas and focuses solely on me. “I was wondering if you might still be interested in that museum show?”

In good spirits about Silas’ help and my new attitude about making friends, I decide it would be nice to have someone to go with.

“Yeah, I think so.”

Zeke glances at the pile of weeds. “Are you available now?”

Gesturing to my dirt-covered clothes, I shake my head. “Uh, I’d have to shower and eat something first.”

“We can grab something on the way, if you’d like. Then all you have to do is wash up.” Zeke’s eyes turn into begging puppy eyes.

Perhaps he needs to get out of the house for a bit and clear his head. I should be kind and take him up on his offer. “That sounds good. Give me a half hour for a quick rinse?”

“Don’t rush on my account.” He thumbs over his shoulder. “I’ll be on my porch when you’re ready to go.”

I give my thanks to Silas again and let him know I’ll be back to weeding tomorrow morning, and I hurry off to prepare for another excursion.

I swear I don’t even recognize myself anymore.

OceanofPDF.com

15
JUST TWO FRIENDS ON A DATE

DARLENE

After I clean up, I slip into my favorite jeans and a comfortable blouse. On the way out the door, I munch on an energy bar because I'm really hungry after pulling weeds all morning. Besides, getting something to eat with Zeke feels too much like a date. And this isn't a date, just two new friends hanging out at a museum together, right?

I find Zeke relaxing on his porch, sitting in a wicker chair with his legs stretched out and crossed at his feet. His hands are laced behind his head.

He changed into tan linen pants with a flowing cream-colored long sleeve shirt. The sleeves are rolled up, revealing his corded forearms. *Yum*. Brown leather boat shoes with no socks adorn his feet. He's wearing his sexy, nerdy, thick-rimmed glasses again.

His outfit compliments his dad-bod and matches his sunkissed brown, shaggy hair, which is styled like a business-cut after being on vacation for weeks on some exotic island. Zeke looks like he should be in an ad from a boating magazine from the 1960s. His comfortable vibe makes him even more attractive.

"All set?" Zeke jumps up to greet me with a wide smile that reaches his stunning sea blue-green eyes.

“Yes. I was really hungry, so I just had a quick bite. If you need to eat, you should have something before we go.”

“I’m good, but thanks.” Zeke gestures toward the van. “Let me get the door for you. It’s a bit tricky.” He rattles the handle twice and then opens the door for me to climb into the brown vinyl bucket seat. “Watch your feet,” he says before closing it.

The van is very clean even though it’s an older model. Oddly, for being a handyman vehicle, there’s not a tool in sight. The hairs on the back of my neck perk up. Not to the point that I should get out and run, but my intuition is telling me not everything is what it seems.

Either the guys’ business is a front, or they are just really bad at marketing themselves. Or I suppose he could have cleaned out the van for me and our excursion and stored everything in their garage. I don’t pick up on anything nefarious from any of them, but my instincts have been wrong before.

I conclude they’re just bad with the business side of things because the yard and what I can see of their house is model home level amazing. They definitely have vision and skills.

Zeke hops in, starts the van, and pulls out of the driveway. “We’re off.”

Yes, we are, as my curiosity is begging me to do a little digging.

“So this is the van for your handyman business.” I start the conversation as I look around. “Are you the one who handles the business end of your biz?”

“We all do what we can.”

“How long have you been in the handyman game?” I look back to the empty and spotless cargo area. Shit, I hope they’re not serial killers. I shake that disturbing thought out of my head. I’ve been reading too many dark romance books. My imagination runs wild enough without the help of creative authors.

“Since we moved to Midville.” He turns on to the main street headed toward Perfect Valley.

“How long ago was that?” Geez, I sound like I’m interrogating him.

“Oh, a few years now.” Hm, he doesn’t seem to mind my questions.

“And before that?” I’m hoping he volunteers where they’re from. I’ve detected a hint of an accent that I can’t quite place.

“We moved around a bit, but we like it here. We’re ready to plant some roots and stay a while, especially now,” he says suggestively with a slight

glance toward me.

“Wow, sounds like you guys have been partners in crime for some time?” I attempt to sound innocent.

“In crime?” Zeke eyes me nervously.

“You know, working together in a partnership,” I clarify.

Guess he’s never heard that saying before.

“*Ohhh*, yeah, we have been together for a very long time now.”

“And your *personal* relationships with each other?”

“We get along great. We’re like three peapods. It just works,” Zeke elaborates without elaborating.

“Yes, it definitely seems like you have a good thing going,” I agree and chuckle at his misuse of the saying.

Damn it! He’s not revealing anything. I don’t know if he’s on to me and keeping his lips sealed, or if he genuinely doesn’t understand what information I’m really after. Although I’m definitely getting a throuple vibe from what little information he did volunteer.

I abandon that line of questioning for now. We continue the rest of the drive to the museum chatting about the social hierarchy of our little town surrounded by the two ostentatious and prestigious neighboring towns of Perfect Valley and Heaven Hills. As far as I can tell, the people of Midville don’t give a crap about all that, other than they think it’s ridiculously funny.

I appreciate the down to earth, tongue-in-cheek attitude of our community. Thank the goddess I only live next door to *perfect*, I would lose my mind If I had to deal with arrogant snobs every day.

We pull into the parking lot of the PV Museum and park near the front door. I sigh. Although I’m happy we’ll get in to see the exhibit, it saddens my heart that more people don’t take advantage of cool opportunities to experience the arts or be exposed to different cultures in person.

Walking into the high ceiling lobby, my senses are awoken. I hear the echoing chatter of a museum, and I deeply inhale the cool air with the familiar smell. A fond grin stretches across my face as I become reminiscent of my college days.

At the ticket counter, Zeke says, “Two please for *The Expose of Book Illustrations and Advertising Graphic Art*.” He pulls out his wallet, and when he sees me reaching into my purse, he gently touches my arm. “I got you.”

I give him a pointed look and pull cash out to pay for my ticket anyway. He reluctantly takes my money. Good boy, he's learning the cues and expressions of my not-so-subtle face.

The attendant looks him up and down flirtatiously as she hands him the tickets, her fingers brushing his. He doesn't even acknowledge the interaction, focusing entirely on me.

Seemingly unaware of his actions, Zeke wipes off her touch on his pants.

My ego likes this entirely too much. I narrow my eyes at the woman, but don't entirely blame her for trying to get his attention.

With my brochure clutched in my hands, my steps become lighter and I'm giddy with excitement as we enter the grand gallery. There are free docent tours starting every hour, but I prefer to walk around the show myself like a drunk kitten high on catnip, letting my intuition guide me to discover all the treasures that await.

As we view the various pieces, Zeke inquires about the art and the artists who created it. He's genuinely interested in hearing about the work, and what I have to say about it. He even adds to the conversation, offering insightful perspectives.

This is so much fun. It's really nice to have a boyfriend, I mean a friend who happens to be a boy, to share my interests with, unlike the exes who could barely be bothered to do anything cultured. I shouldn't be comparing Zeke to my ex-boyfriends, though.

"Oh, on the subject of illustration, which one of you created the pool party invite?" I ask.

"We all worked on it."

"Wow. You did an amazing job," I praise.

He puffs up with pride. "Well, we must have because you showed up."

We round the corner and enter the children's book gallery.

"Hey, I know this one!" Zeke says with a bounce in his step. "It's the story about a frog and a toad who are best friends and like to spend their quiet time together just enjoying each other's company." He falls silent, reflecting.

Aw, I can imagine the guys sitting in their living room, sipping cinnamon tea with honey on a rainy afternoon, doing nothing together.

"It's written and illustrated by Arnold Lobel," he says with a wide grin, like a little boy proud of himself for knowing the answer in class.

“Impressive.” I wrap my arm around his bicep in a friendly show of support.

The next piece we come up to is missing the information placard.

“What’s this one about?" Zeke asks.

The piece depicts a sad young woman looking out of the window of a cozy cottage. By the style of the illustration, I figure it was for a book from the early 1900s.

Not knowing the artist or what book it’s from, I use my best professor voice and improvise. “You see the young lady in the window, looking outward beyond her world, waiting…” I tap my chin for dramatic effect. “…waiting for a man… to deliver… waiting for the world to finally invent same-day delivery service.”

I look at Zeke with a sparkle in my eye, and we both burst out in raucous laughter. The nearby pretentious visitors of the museum dart dirty eye daggers our way. We scurry off to a vacant portion of the children's book area with our hands over our mouths, trying to contain a flurry of giggles.

I cover the placard with my hand of the piece we end up at. “What’s this piece about?”

It’s a line drawing from the mid-1800s of a woman balancing on the toes of one foot. She has various birds flocking to her bonnet.

Zeke clears his throat. “The young woman is obviously promised to a rich, but decrepit and controlling old man in an arranged marriage,” he riffs, continuing my playfulness in his professor tone. “The ground is depicted as a single line, and she is standing one-footed on her tippy toes… this, most assuredly, represents the woman’s dilemma of balancing a suppressed life of convention with her own secret desire to be unencumbered.”

“Go on,” I encourage.

“While walking this tightrope, various friendly birds, who symbolize her support group, come to carry her away, rescuing her from a life of misery.”

“Ohhh,” I murmur.

“The smile on her face demonstrates that she happily accepts her friends’ help to finally be free.” He glances over to me, searching for my approval.

“Well done.” I clap my enthusiasm and admiration for his elaborate, on-the-fly story. But I can’t help wondering if he’s suggesting something more

than just playfully interpreting art.

I break his gaze and jump to the next piece. “This one feels lonely, isolated.” I cover my hand over the placard so neither of us can see it.

It’s a stark book cover of a golden-brown grassy field with a vast purple-gray stormy sky with a sliver of sunlight breaking through on the horizon at sunset. There are two small figures facing the sunset at each of the bottom corners of the piece.

“Hmm.” Zeke ponders the piece for a moment. “The use of negative space suggests life is empty, even meaningless.”

Oh, underneath that sweet dad bod exterior, Zeke is a brooding nihilist. I sense both tenderness and a deep sadness in his heart.

“And the stormy sky conveys life is also chaotic and unpredictable—dangerous,” I add.

“Yes, and they are two lost souls in this crazy, mixed-up world, sharing the same moment,” he says softly. “But with their own personal perspective because of what they’ve gone through.”

We move closer to each other, our arms brushing.

I nod and add, “I think the piece captures the moment these two souls finally meet.” Goosebumps ripple over my skin.

“The ray of sunshine peeking through the turbulence represents a glimmer of hope and finally… *connection*.” Zeke’s hand grazes my wrist.

“As the sun sets, this bleak day ends, but brings a promise of a brighter, new day.” My hand finds his.

Fingertips discover their place, interlocking.

The rest of our time viewing the exhibit is filled with conversation and laughter, holding hands, sharing thoughts and deep insights about this amazing show. I’m having a great time, and it seems Zeke is too. He has some unique viewpoints and ideas—the mind of an artist.

It’s inspiring to see some of the original pieces in person of the work I have been researching for my new job with the advertising firm.

We close the place down as the last visitors to leave, but I don’t want our outing to end. Before we get to his van, I say, “Hey, I’ll take you up on that offer of getting something to eat. You must be hungry. I know I could go for a bite.”

“I know the perfect place. Do you like sushi?” He gleams hopefully.

“*Mountain* sushi?” I widen my eyes.

“Yes, that’s the place. You’ve heard of it?”

“That’s the actual name?”

Zeke nods.

Nothing like truth in advertising. No guessing what you're getting at this place.

“I haven’t heard of it, but the idea of getting sushi so far away from the coast in the mountains doesn’t seem…” Not wanting to insult him, I don’t finish my thought.

“Don’t worry about it. It’s great. They fly it in fresh daily,” he assures.

“Okay. Let’s do it. I haven’t had sushi in ages.” Then I give him a serious look. “As long as the guys don’t have a problem with us going out like this.”

“No, we’re all good with whatever happens.”

“So you’re open?”

“Completely open.”

Whew, that makes me relax that I’m not some secret hookup. I suppose all I can do is see how this date goes before we talk about their relationship rules.

OceanofPDF.com

16

SUSHI WITH KRAKENS

ZEKE

We pull up to the valet at the entrance of a swanky, modern building, but with Japanese architectural flair. There are two signs above the entrance. On the right, there is a hip neon sign that reads, *The Mountain Sushi Bar* and on the left, in 3D backlit lettering, it says, *Kōkyū Ryōri - Japanese Fine Dining*

Darlene notices the helipad. “You weren’t kidding, they really do fly fresh fish in daily.”

“When it comes to sushi, I never kid.” I chuckle, only half-joking.

Parking lot attendants open our doors, and we hop out of the van.

“Please take care of this beauty.” I smirk and slip them a sizable tip.

“Good evening, Mr. Horven.” The doorman opens the oversized rustic cedar door.

“How are you tonight, Rick?” I palm him a large tip as we shake hands. “And I told you, call me Zeke.”

“Whatever you say, Mr. Horven.” We grin at each other. This is our running joke. “Enjoy your evening.”

Darlene has a bit of a surprised look on her face. But what isn’t surprising for a Saturday night, the place is packed.

“Oh no, it doesn’t look like we’re going to get a table.” Darlene frowns.

I grin and hold my finger up. “Reservations for two under Zeke,” I address the host while passing along another generous tip without Darlene noticing.

My cute neighbor purses her lips and narrows her eyes at me with suspicion.

“Table in the restaurant or at the sushi bar?” the host asks with a wink.

“You can get sushi in the restaurant,” I inform Darlene, and defer to her. “Where would you like to sit?”

“Bar would be fun,” she answers. “We can see all the action.”

She’s a woman after my own heart.

The bar is full, but we’re seated at my usual high-top table for two that’s reserved for VIPs. It’s tucked away in the far corner at the end of the bar with a view of the entire room which is an ideal spot for my people-watching pastime. The intimate, cozy space is perfect for my *date* with Darlene.

“Pretty confident that I would eat with you.” Darlene playfully elbows my ribs as we take our seats.

I grin. Little does she know, I have my own table with a standing reservation here because I’m a frequent regular who tips well.

The sushi chef gives me a welcoming nod.

“Popular guy here, aren’t you?” She grins and wiggles her eyebrows.

“I’m a regular.” I shrug. But by the way she’s looking at me, she’s suggesting something else… I think.

“It’s more than that. I’ve noticed how much attention you get. Do you ever, you know, *reciprocate*?”

“I’m friendly and a generous tipper.”

She shakes her head and chuckles. “Whatever you say.”

I take a moment to wonder what she’s hinting at. Maybe she believes I’m a bigger catch than I am. Forgetting about my silly glasses, I almost bump them off my face when I try to fix my wild mop of curls.

Why am I trying so hard with these things, posturing to look like a sophisticated human? Dammit. I have to get out of my head and focus on this date.

“Would you like some sake?” I ask.

“Sure. Normally, I’m a red wine kind of gal, but what the hell, when in Tokyo.” She laughs.

Goddess, I love her laughter. It’s music to my soul, and music is a big deal for kraken. We sing with the whales and for our mates.

Our server brings us a flute of sake and two small, ceramic cups. Out of tradition, I serve Darlene by holding the carafe with both hands and pouring

sake into Darlene's cup. She holds the cup in her right hand, supporting its bottom with her left. Once her cup is filled, she does the same for me. I'm impressed that she knows the formal custom.

We both raise our cups, lightly clinking them. "*Kanpai!*"

After a small sip, we set our cups on the table. As she takes in the opulence of our surroundings with awe, I use the opportunity to greedily admire her.

The sushi bar is separated from the fine dining restaurant section of the building by a large fish tank. Colorful, eye-catching tropical fish casually swim by diners in the middle of the hustle and bustle of the restaurant and sushi bar.

Comfortable high top chairs line the outrageously expensive and polished labradorite stone bar top that flashes an iridescent blue-green when light hits it. The rich, exotic woods that clad the walls, along with the subdued lighting create a classy, yet warm and inviting vibe.

"This place is incredible. Who's the owner?" Darlene watches the sushi chef work his craft.

"The Cage Brothers Corporation. The CEO, Axton Cage, has a taste for sushi, and owns a big ranch in Temptation Falls about twenty miles outside of town. It's one of the oldest in the area."

"Wait. I know that company. They're a client, a *big* client, of Tenth Muse Agency. We handle all of their advertising, logos, and their web presence."

"That's cool you're already associated with them. They give back to the community and host a huge kid-friendly fair in the fall that's free for locals, including food and drinks."

"Wow. I can't even imagine what that costs," she says in shock.

"Maybe you'd want to attend with us?"

"That sounds like fun."

After another sip of sake, we peruse the menu for what fish is available this evening.

"Oh dang, they don't have ika." Darlene pouts out her lower lip. "I've always wanted to try that."

I must look confused because Darlene adds, "You know, squid."

I clear my throat. "You want to eat a cephalopod?"

I have a tentacle for you to try…

What the fuck is wrong with me? My body, my kraken instincts want to betray me, and my tentacles ache to rise to the surface.

"Oh, it all looks so good. How about you order your favorites for us," she suggests, placing her warm hand over mine.

My kraken is now obsessed with the idea of feeding her our favorite dishes. I breathe deeply to tame my beast inside from revealing himself and claiming her right here on the table in front of everyone.

Our conversation flows along with the sake mixed with several rounds of tuna, salmon, yellowtail, and shrimp sushi. I love hearing her childhood stories, especially about her time with her aunt. She sounds like an amazing person, and I hope Darlene and I get to the point in our relationship that I get the chance to meet her.

Relationship. I want that. I want her. I want to share my life with her as my *mate*. Could she be my fated? That can't be, she's human. Then why do I feel this tidal pull toward her? With what almost happened here at the bar, I know my beast feels it.

After today, I'm certain that I need to get to know her. Not only because I want to explore her delicious curves, caress her gorgeous face, or get lost in her stunning and mysterious eyes, but I *need* to get to know her. All of her. All her joys and pains. It felt so natural being with her at the museum, sharing ideas, enjoying the contemplative quiet moments as well as laughing with her.

What I love most is her genuine passion for life. She still looks at the world with excitement and wonder. It was mesmerizing watching her absorb the works of creatives and artists like herself. I have always hoped that someday I could be this passionate about something. And that someday is today.

I found my passion. Her name is *Darlene*.

Since she's human, I'll take this courtship slowly and rein back my Mythic-sized urge to claim her. I'll take her home and won't even press for a kiss goodnight. But she *will* be mine, eventually.

Then I'll do everything in my power for the rest of my days to fill her life with joy. Goddess, I haven't felt this joyful myself since my childhood days before the tragedy.

OceanofPDF.com

17
LICK MY CONE

DARLENE

It's been a few weeks and I still haven't checked out the local library, and that feels like a shame.

After getting my new library card, I'm happy to find the library is well-stocked and equipped. I suppose that has to do with a community with plenty of kids.

Perusing the shelves, I'm drawn to a book called "Stolen Legacy: Greek Philosophy Is Stolen Egyptian Philosophy." I add it to my growing pile of books.

Eventually, I stumble across a book topic I was looking for: *Gardening for Idiots.* Perfect for me. Now I won't be a total newbie when I'm talking with Silas.

I can't wait to surprise him with some plant lingo. Maybe I'll render him speechless again. At least momentarily, because I do love the sound of his voice.

I stroll by the children's section and hear an onslaught of giggles. I never saw myself becoming a mother, but I find children's laughter delightful.

Then a familiar voice drifts out. Holy shit. That can't be, can it? Oh wow, I think it is.

I move closer to the door and see my cute neighbor reading to a gaggle of kids. They're enthralled by him. And so am I.

Conrad turns the page of his book and continues to read from *Frog & Toad Are Friends*.

Huh. Interesting. That was the book Zeke pointed out the other day.

I melt into the doorjam as I listen to his compelling voice.

A woman appears next to me and sighs longingly. "He's so good with them, it makes my ovaries ache." She must be one of the moms.

I chuckle, but there's a green-eyed monster that rears its ugly head in my chest. That can't be good.

"You know him?" I worry she's going to tell me he's a player with the moms here. That's an entire hookup scene I never anticipated.

"He volunteers every Saturday morning. Well, most of them. I never miss a show." She grins conspiratorially.

I swear people never just answer a direct question. Ugh.

"*And?*" I prompt her to elaborate.

She finally looks at me. "Oh, yeah, no. He's a total gentleman. He does the job and leaves without taking any numbers. What a shame." Then her eyes widen. "Oh, wait… Are you interested?"

Am I? I suppose I am. But I still haven't figured out exactly what's going on between me and my neighbors. Zeke said that they are open, but I still don't know how invested I should get.

They could just want an easy fling and to scratch a bisexual itch and leave it at that. I'd never want to assume they'd want anything more than some fun.

Conrad finishes, "The end!"

The kids cheer, then grumble that it's over. He talks to them about what they liked about the story and if they have any questions.

Then, as if sensing me, he turns to find me spying on him. He gives me a sly wink and continues his bit with the kids.

The mom next to me chuckles. "Lucky."

I shrug. I'm not sure if I am, but I do think my self-restraint is in trouble.

A few minutes later, Conrad saunters up to me at the door. "Stalking is frowned upon in most circles," he whispers with a smirk.

“Oh my. Is it? I didn’t read it in the rules.” I point at the list of rules outside the kid’s section, feigning confusion.

He guides me away to a more secluded area. “You don’t really strike me as a rule follower anyway. That is, if you don’t happen to agree with the rule.”

I chuckle. He has me there. Not many people pick up on that about me.

“What’s your excuse for following me to the library, then?” he asks like I’m actually stalking him.

“I came here looking for something to put a smile on Silas’ face.” Might as well test the waters to see if they’re up for me being interested in all of them.

Conrad checks out my selection and grins. “Noble pursuit. I approve. Nothing hotter than a woman with a thick… book.” He gestures to the exit. “But why don’t you put a smile on my face and let me treat you to an ice cream?”

“Ice cream?”

“There’s a place just down the street. I usually treat myself after reading here.”

“Let’s do it.” I check out my books, then we walk into the heat of the day.

“What makes you volunteer?”

He’s quiet, and I’m not sure if he feels comfortable answering. “I guess it goes back to my roots. My family is big on education and books. So even though I’m not a fancy scholar, the least I can do is get kids interested in the written word.”

Conrad appears a bit embarrassed. I get the impression his family are snobs. Or perhaps that’s just my gut reaction.

“I come from a bunch of overachievers,” I say. “They always knew what they were meant to do, or seemed like it. In comparison, I jump from one interest to another. I guess you could call me the black sheep.”

“Yeah, that’s exactly what my family is like. I’m the odd one out.”

“I don’t even talk to anyone except for my aunt. She’s a bit more like me. Different.”

He places his arm around my shoulders in a show of comfort. “It’s hard, isn’t it? I haven’t talked to my family either since I left home.”

Without meaning to, I lean into his touch. Fuck, I really miss having a connection with someone. If I just allowed myself to fall into the arms of

these guys, would it be so bad?

Just then, down the block, there's a man who looks strikingly similar to Chad, leaning against a building. I stop mid-stride to see if it is. Goddess, I hope not.

Concerned, Conrad steps in front of me and grasps my shoulders. "Are you okay? You look like you're about to pass out."

I step to the side to see around his broad shoulders, and the guy who looked like Chad has disappeared.

I'm probably just hallucinating since I'm toying with the idea of getting involved with someone again… nix that, more than one someone.

"I'm fine. I thought I saw a shithead from my past, but it can't be him."

"*Him?*" Conrad practically growls, and it makes my clit pulse, naughty little thing. His strong hand gently guides my chin so I'm looking into his pretty amber eyes. So pretty I'd swear he was a supe. "Are you in danger?"

"No, it's okay."

"I don't get the impression that it would be okay if it's actually him."

Frowning, I wonder how much I should tell him. He doesn't need to know my problems. "He was controlling in the relationship, but there's no reason for him to be here now."

I was careful to cover my tracks with this move. Chad shouldn't be able to track me down.

I take Conrad's hand and lead him twenty feet to the door of the *I Scream Shop*.

"Such a cute name!" I laugh to distract him from the topic of my toxic ex.

Conrad cocks a brow at me, but relents. He seems to know I won't divulge anymore details.

The *I Scream Shop* really leans into its name with its Halloween vibes interior. I'm sure it gets decked out during October. I already can't wait to come back here with Conrad then.

As we eyeball the variety of flavors, I figure I'll go with a standby, so I can judge the quality of their ice cream with a baseline flavor.

When the long line dwindles down, and we finally get to the counter to order, Conrad makes sure I go first, "What would you like?"

"Vanilla caramel chocolate swirl, please."

"I'll take the weekly special, Hibiscus Orange."

Interesting. He does seem like a flavor of the week kind of guy. I wonder if that's all I'll end up being. Is that what I want? A fun fling? Can't say I've ever gone into something thinking that's all it was. But expecting more hasn't worked out for me yet. Might be a good time to try out being free-spirited, if we can handle this situationship correctly.

I don't give him flack for paying for my ice cream, but I do offer to pay for his next time, which by his grin is a promise he likes.

We slide into a booth next to the window, and I take a long lick of my cone.

His eyes zero in on my tongue and darken with interest.

He stares intently at me as he takes a seductive taste of his ice cream. Damn.

"Good?" I ask.

"Why don't you try it for yourself?" He tilts the cone in my direction, but I have to lean into him to get a taste of the rounded cone.

Conrad sucks in a breath, surprised by my forwardness when I do.

"Wow. That's actually better than I thought it would be."

He glances over to my scoop. "May I?"

I give him a smirk and make him lean into me for his taste.

"Mm. I could see myself enjoying that every day." He licks his lips, savoring every bit of it.

I roll my eyes at this flirtatiousness, but secretly love the attention.

OceanofPDF.com

18
TENDING HER GARDEN

SILAS

Slithering back toward my house, I note several options for potential places to build the perfect nest. It's ridiculous that my beast believes a human would ever want to share the same space as him, let alone one meant for a mate.

At the treeline, I stop and shift, then dig my clothes out of the hidden storage locker. I'm not an exhibitionist like Conrad, strutting around the pool where Darlene could get an eyeful if she were to poke her head out of her upstairs window.

How embarrassingly desperate. If her refusing to wear a bathing suit to a pool party is any indicator, she's likely a modest sort.

After slipping through our back gate that leads to the forest, I decide not to rinse off in the pool as I usually do. Today, I'll put in some effort by showering and grooming.

When I exit the shower, I hesitantly wipe away the condensation on the mirror.

I hate what I see when I look at my reflection, but I force myself to look anyway so I can make myself presentable for her. Basilisk green and yellow glow in the morning light, as my parents' eyes stare back at me, and I shiver

at the memory of their venom. Not their *literal* venom, one of the few things that could kill me, but their distaste for other species of our fellow Mythics echoes in my ears, especially for my friendship with Conrad and Zeke.

They even tried to use their powers on me, to make me forget. Forget that I had a connection with someone outside our species. They didn't anticipate that my bonds with my childhood friends would make forgetting impossible.

I suck in a deep breath, trying my damnedest to calm down before I meet up with Darlene for our weekend gardening date.

Date? I suppose it is, for me at least. Not sure what she truly thinks of our time together. However, I am encouraged by her openness and acceptance of my quiet nature. She seems pleased when I speak, and I find my tongue loosening around her.

Yet, can I really be trusted to pursue a woman, a human woman at that? What if I accidentally use my powers? I could kill her. I could warp her mind to my will.

From the bathroom sink, I splash some water on my face.

I can do this. I can control my beastly nature.

Striding out the front door, I find Darlene grinning ear to ear when she sees me. My heart summersaults in my chest. Damn, she's a beauty, inside and out. I don't think I've ever met anyone who makes me want to be a better male, other than my two best friends.

"I was wondering if you had changed your mind about all the free labor you've been giving me," she teases.

"Never."

A small frown pulls at the corners of her luscious mouth. "Well, I did."

My soaring heart plummets like a lead weight.

"I want to pay you," she explains, and my fear eases because she's not telling me to not come back. "It's only fair. What do you normally charge for something like this?"

"No," I say succinctly.

"No?" she chuckles nervously.

I backtrack a little. "We can work something out later."

"I'd rather not push this off. I value you and our friendship, and I don't want anything to come between us."

Shit, when she puts it that way, I realize she doesn't really understand this is my way of spending time with her, wooing her. She's human and doesn't know that what she's saying is basically an insult. It isn't her fault. I will just have to work that much harder to make her understand I want to court her.

Until then, I'll have to appease her sense of justice and fairness.

I quote her a rate that's on the low end from what I know when we had researched what was a fair rate to use in our cover story.

She bounces happily and agrees.

We work on digging up the weeds, and I don't use any of my earth power so I can draw out the time spent in her presence.

When we're pretty much done with the yard, I start panicking. I stare at the basic and patchy crabgrass lawn and wish I could give her something better to come home to.

She glances around. "What's the yard done to deserve that glower?"

"Needs flowers."

Sighing, she nods. "Yeah, I love what you've done with your place, but I suspect that's a huge investment."

"Do you have some paper? A pencil?"

Her delicate eyebrows rise and her eyes light up with intrigue. Beautiful. Then she races into her house and brings me a notepad and a pencil.

I quickly sketch her house, the front gutter, and what I envision for a water catchment system to feed a yard full of wildflowers.

"Holy shit! That's great," she says with awe. "I didn't realize you were an artist too."

"Just for designs. Like the pool. Gardens."

"But this looks like a lot of work still."

"It's not that hard."

Her eyes narrow at me, sensing I'm not being completely honest.

I turn to look directly at her, gazing into her stormy gray eyes. I'm careful not to let loose my power, but I allow my need to show. "Let me. I want to do this for you."

Darlene gulps, eyes widening as she stares up at me, eating up the eye contact more than I ever could hope for. I think she's just beginning to understand that I like her more than a friend.

She nods. “Yes, do it.” Her voice comes out breathy. Perhaps she does like me as well.

Perfect. Well, until she discovers what I truly am.

OceanofPDF.com

19
FINDING THE CLEMATIS

DARLENE

What is wrong with me? I swear I'm a desperate fool when Silas speaks, stumbling over myself. I press my thighs together, trying to suppress my need. Well, that didn't work as intended. I clear my throat to get a hold of my sanity. I should probably pay him and call it a day.

"It looks like we're done with the weeds. Let me grab cash for today, and maybe you can write up a quote for the flower garden." This is a great idea. I get to spend time with Silas and fulfill my debt to my aunt by fixing up the place.

Silas casts his gaze down and shakes his head slowly. "I can't yet. I'll need to know what flowers you like first."

"I'm sure you'd be a better judge of what to put in."

"Come with me to the nursery."

"Now?"

"Now."

It isn't quite a command, but damn, even if it were, I'd follow willingly. "Yes, sir!" I mock-salute and race off to wash my hands and swap out my clothes for something a little more presentable.

Within minutes, I hop into their work van after Silas opens my door for me. Such a gentleman. I notice, once again, there's nothing inside. So weird. I wonder if they are low-key trust fund babies and don't have to work for a living. Whatever, it's none of my business, even if I do hook up with one or more of them for some casual sexy times.

As per usual, Silas is fairly quiet on the drive to his favorite nursery in the tri-city area. Perfect Plants is located just over the border into Perfect Valley.

As we pull into the parking lot, I say, "I just hope the prices aren't too inflated. I probably wouldn't even know if they were."

Silas looks over at me and becomes overly serious, which for him is a lot. "I would never do anything to harm you, physically *or* financially."

"*Okaaay*." That was a fucking lot for an offhanded comment about pricing. "I didn't mean it as a comment against your character."

He nods and lets out a breath as if he was worried about just that. "I will take care of you."

I don't respond. It feels like there's way more weight to his words.

Wait… Does he *like like* me? What, am I five years old now?

Not that I need a man to take care of me, but I do appreciate someone looking out for me other than my aunt.

Wow, I suppose Auntie's superior psychic ability picked a great place for me to land after my breakup with Chad. And the universe aligned with a job opening at a dream employer. Maybe my luck is starting to shift in my favor.

As we step into the flower section, a young girl and boy run up to Silas.

"Hi Mr. Silas! We're showing our mom the flowers you taught us about." The girl bounces with excitement.

"We're going to plant them in our yard," the boy adds.

"Bye!" they say in unison and scurry off.

I look at Silas with a quizzical expression.

"I volunteer at the community garden. Sometimes there are classes," Silas explains, looking down at his hands.

Well, there's more to this shy guy than meets the eye. I guess he's fine if he's talking about plants.

Silas pulls out the same notepad he sketched his initial design on, and flips to a fresh page and notes any flower I'm drawn to. I've never had

anyone pay this close attention to me and my preferences, and it's a bit disconcerting. Every *oo* or *ah* is recorded and catalogued.

"I need a mini break," I say. "Why don't you keep scoping out some prime specimens, and I'll grab an iced coffee at the cafe? You want anything?"

Yes, this bougie nursery has a freaking cafe.

"I'm good. Thank you." He looks like he's going to offer to pay by reaching for his wallet, but with one stern expression from me, he retreats and goes to hide in the flowers.

After I order my iced coffee, I sit at one of the bistro tables and take a moment to relax. From here, I watch as Silas' eyes light up and a soft smile graces his lips as he admires the plants. Just like Zeke with water, and Conrad with the morning sun, he's found his *thing*. I long to figure out where I belong. Art comes close, but nothing within that broad category has really clicked. I tried drawing, painting, sculpture, ceramics, and printmaking but nothing resonated.

My name is called, and I grab my drink and take a huge sip of icy goodness. I moan when the sugary caramel hits my tongue.

Just then, Silas rushes toward me, excitement plain on his handsome face, and I'm a bit stunned. "Finally, I found a clematis!"

I choke on my drink. "A *what* now?"

The women sitting at the next table chuckle at us.

His brow furrows with confusion. "A clematis."

Oh, I swore I heard him say *clitoris*. My bad. Dirty mind.

"Good for you?" I encourage.

"We can get the bush. Or I could sink in a post and train the vining one all the way up. I'll have to teach the guys how to treat it right, of course."

My face is beet red, I'm sure. My dirty mind is doing me no favors right now. The tittering women aren't helping.

"Are you okay?" he pauses and grips my upper arms. "You're red… overheating. We need to get you inside immediately."

I wave him off. "I'm fine. Show me your clematis."

I hear the women giggle again. Glancing over my shoulder, I find them checking him out as if he's a cinnamon roll on the menu.

It turns out it's a gorgeous flower that I've never heard of. I get why he's excited, but I'm taken aback by how talkative Silas gets when he's in his element and feels comfortable. Maybe that's another reason he's quiet,

he knows he won’t shut up if he gets going. Nevertheless, I love hearing him speak about his passion.

He buys the vining clematis *and* a bush variety. On the way home, he asks if there was any flower that stood out to me. We chat about our favorites and find we both have similar tastes.

As we near our neighborhood, he stops talking, snapping his mouth closed.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, alert to danger. Goddess, I hate that I’m like that.

“Sorry for talking your ear off.”

I dare to reach out and offer my hand. He slowly slides his calloused palm into mine.

“There’s nothing to be sorry for. I love the sound of your voice and what you have to say. You’re excited and it’s wonderful when people can truly enjoy life and share something special to them. *Never* be ashamed of being happy.”

OceanofPDF.com

20
SHADOWCRAFT SHADE

DARLENE

After work Monday evening, I come home to find Silas doing his preliminary prep work for my flower garden by ripping out the grass.

He's made remarkable progress, and I wonder if maybe the other guys helped him.

He straightens up, but waits for me to approach instead of assuming I'd want to talk right after I exit my car. I don't know if I've met a more considerate person.

I've been meaning to ask all of them over as a sort of thanks and maybe as a casual group date.

"Hey, I was wondering if the three of you would like to come over for dinner on Saturday?"

"Yes, thank you."

I chuckle. "You don't need to check in with the other two?"

"They'll say yes."

Feeling sassy, inspired by his outright enthusiasm, I prod further, "What if they have plans?"

"They don't, but if they did, they'd cancel them."

Wow. I'm sort of shocked by his confidence that they'd drop whatever else they have going on. But I love it. Being a priority is a new and exciting prospect.

"Great!" I beam and swing my arms happily, and a shy smile spreads across Silas' handsome face. "How does six on Saturday sound?"

"Perfect."

"Oh, any allergies I should be aware of?" I ask, and he shakes his head no. "Anything you dislike?"

"I'd eat anything you serve me."

So intense, but dang, his eagerness makes me want to rush to him and plant a kiss on his full lips.

"Okay. But let me know if you think of anything." Then I glance at the yard. "Weren't you supposed to get me a quote first?"

He nods, but doesn't agree. I hope I don't have to fight to pay him.

I wave goodbye and hurry inside. Since I just committed myself to a dinner party, I'll need to get my house in order before the guys show up.

Thankfully, a huge chunk of the boxes have been dealt with, and I've made it a priority to square away my kitchen so I don't have to worry on that front. Whatever boxes I don't get to this week, I'll just haul into the den and extra bedroom and lock the door.

I glare at the box labeled Shadowcraft Prep. Oh, well, I might as well get this over with. I suppose that school wasn't *all* bad since I did make at least one ally when I was there. A student tutor and wolf-shifter, Quade Hollis was one of the few who treated me decently.

Pulling back the already sliced flaps, I sigh from the wave of memories flooding back. On top is my old uniform, and I toss that aside for now.

Underneath is a protective charm bracelet my aunt gave me. So that's where that ended up. I'll have to put this with what my aunt calls "A null's emergency kit," which is a small collection of powerful protection charms and battle potions. It was her gift to me when I attended Shadowcraft Prep. I now store the kit under my bed just in case I ever have to defend myself. I hope I'll never have to use it.

I also find the only school essay I wrote and kept, which was about the plight of magicless nulls surviving in a magic society.

Growing up, the other kids were always picking on me, calling me ugly or a loser null. I didn't possess the ethereal beauty and strength of the fae,

which was an early sign I was magicless. Even my brother and sister would walk past me, ignoring anyone abusing me.

But my ex-boyfriend turned bully, Mackle, who was a bear shifter from a wealthy and powerful family, turned out to be the biggest prick. One day at school, Mackle and his shifter friends cornered me in a busy hallway, just so they could embarrass me with maximum efficiency.

“Did you really think someone of my status would ever want a defective null like you?” Mackle shoves me so hard I land on my ass.

I bite back the tears forming in my eyes.

The gathering crowd laughs.

But he wanted *me. At least in secret, until he got what he was after from me sexually. Then he discarded me like I was a joke, and reminded me I was worthless because I couldn’t offer magic, strength, or protection for a future family.*

I didn’t say a word about us, so I don’t know why he made this whole thing public. Maybe someone saw us, and he wanted to save face.

“You’re pathetic.” Mackle leans down and raises his hand as if to slap me.

Quade suddenly appears and grabs Mackle’s arm, spinning him so it’s twisted behind my bully’s back.

“Let go of me, you trashy, scholarship pup,” Mackle snarls while immobilized. He doesn’t shift to fight him off. It’s not allowed in the halls, so he probably doesn’t want a mark on his precious record.

Even Mackle’s buddies don’t try to help because Quade is a powerful mage prodigy and could shift and half-shift earlier than any other shifter known.

His fingers turn to claws, and he threatens Mackle. “You won’t go near Darlene again, hear me?”

“Fuck off.” When Quade moves his claws closer, he adds, “I don’t want anything to do with her anyway.”

Quade shoves him away, and Mackle turns to face him. “I’m reporting you.”

“If you do, I’ll report what you did to her,” Quade counters.

Mackle storms away, and the crowd quickly disperses when Quade turns his glower on them.

“I’m sorry if I just got you in trouble,” I say as he helps me to my feet.

“Don’t worry about that.” He brushes off my apology, then offers, “Maybe I can help you uncover your magic.”

“You think I haven’t been poked and prodded and even tortured by the realm’s experts? They didn’t find a sliver of magic. I know you’re supposed to have a special sniffer, use it now and see for yourself. Do you smell any magic in me?”

He sniffs me and shakes his head. “I only scent buttercream and berries.”

“See? I’ve known since I was five years old that I’d be magicless. And it’s okay. When I turn twenty, and legally prove I’m a dud, I’ll be able to leave these fae pricks behind, including my family. I want a normal, mortal life away from all this. I’ve only ever experienced cruelty in the supe world. You’re one of the few nice people who've been kind to me other than my aunt.”

He nods solemnly. He knows exactly how cruel the supe world can be. “Okay. I only wanted to help you find your magic. But I guess everyone has their own path. At least that’s what my mentor, Maxum, says. Sorry for presuming. And if anyone gives you trouble, let me know.”

“Thank you.”

I shake off the memory. Last I heard, Quade became a professor at Shadowcraft Academy. It makes sense since he always wanted to help others on their path in life.

But thank goddess, I’m not around supes anymore.

OceanofPDF.com

21
ERR ON THE SIDE OF CHEESE

DARLENE

Saturday evening snuck up on me while I was busy all week fixing some small, mostly cosmetic things in the living room, kitchen, and dining room in preparation for the guys coming over.

Lasagna is in the oven to stay warm, and all the side dishes are ready to go. In the fridge chilling, I have the local microbrewery craft mead the guys were drinking at the pool party.

I pop into the downstairs bathroom to check my hair and makeup and make sure I don't have food stains dripping down my front. I've done it before when I'm in the zone and cooking. Not that I usually put together meals this elaborate.

Satisfied with my appearance, I check my phone and watch as the clock turns to six.

Knock knock.

Wow, talk about punctuality. Hope and excitement stir in my chest like butterflies when I realize how they go out of their way to show up for me.

"Coming!" I take a few calming breaths and consciously slow my need to rush to the door. I don't think I've ever felt this drawn to anyone, and

I've hit the jackpot with three handsome, considerate men. Real men who treat a woman with respect and kindness.

I swing open the door, and my jaw drops. They're all polished up in dress shirts and slacks. Zeke is just a bit more dressy than his norm. Silas is rocking a dark and mysterious look with an all-black ensemble of a button-up shirt and sleek slacks. Even *Mr. Casual* Conrad has on real shoes instead of sandals.

It's like a champagne cork pops open in my head, making me all fizzy inside.

They're dressed up for me.

Conrad bites his lip, and I know he's dying to tease me. Instead, he drags his long fingers through his blond locks and clears his throat.

I snap my gaping mouth closed. "Welcome to my humble abode!"

Ugh, did I just say that? I'm such a dork.

I chide myself for being so nervous, but it suddenly feels like tonight is the beginning of something wonderful in my life. Maybe it'll only be a lust-filled fling, or maybe it could lead to something more. Do I dare even hope for that?

"You sure you don't need us to fix your doorbell? We'd be happy to do that for you," Zeke offers as I wave them in.

"That's okay. I don't know if I want solicitors bugging me," I joke, sidestepping the idea since they likely wouldn't let me pay, and I don't want them to think I'm using them for their handyman skills.

From behind his back, Silas reveals two small flowering plants in pretty pots. "A hostess gift."

Of course he wouldn't bring me cut flowers, the gesture melts my heart. "I love them! And I forgot to get a pretty center piece for the table. They're perfect. One second." I accept Sila's thoughtful gifts and rush to place them on the dining table and hurry back.

Zeke holds the baking tray, now refilled with fresh cookies they've made. Conrad has a bottle of liquor in his hands, extended for me.

"What's this? More gifts?" I place a hand over my chest. "You guys are too generous. Come with me, and I'll give you an abridged tour of the place." I take the bottle and cookies and lead them to the kitchen.

As I'm about to set the bottle down on the counter, I glance at it and bark out a laugh. "*Malört?*"

“Malört for m’lady,” Conrad says with a deep bow, speaking with a faux British accent.

“Um, why?” I ask. This has to be one of the most intriguingly horrible liqueurs known to humankind.

“When I asked the saleslady at the liquor store for something special from your hometown, Chicago, she said it was a unique concoction…” Zeke starts to sound unsure of his purchase.

“She didn’t mention how it tastes?” I smirk.

“No, but she had that same strange look you do.”

“Well, its own company even leans into how ridiculous it tastes. One slogan says, ‘*For when you want to unfriend someone… in person.*’”

“Oh, god.” Zeke grimaces and palms his face in embarrassment. “We’re sorry.”

Silas reaches out to take back the bottle. “That’s *not* what we want.”

I touch his arm and smile gently. “I know. It’s actually very thoughtful and I love that. And once you have it, you’ll never forget it.”

“Now I want to try some.” Conrad chuckles.

“Of course, you would.” Zeke knocks his shoulder.

“*After* dinner.” I shake my finger at him. “You won’t be able to get rid of the taste for a day or two.”

“Yes, she worked hard on this meal, *Conrad*,” Silas warns.

So protective. He’s giving dom vibes, and I’d like to see how that works for me in the bedroom.

“I got the mead you had the other day,” I offer, crossing over to the fridge. “Or would you like some wine?”

“Thank you for thinking of us.” Conrad leans against the kitchen island. “And a mead is good for now.”

I hand one to each of them.

“We appreciate you inviting us over.” Zeke inhales happily. “It smells amazing.”

“I made lasagna and a bunch of sides.” I point to some of the dishes on the counter that are fine sitting out at room temperature. “If your pool party was any indication, I know you guys can almost eat your weight in food.”

The guys share a look. I’m not sure if it’s shame, embarrassment, or something else.

“You didn’t have to spend so much time and money on us.” Zeke sets his drink down and bites his lip.

“I really like you guys.” I pause, wondering how much to admit. “I want to get to know you better.”

There, that isn’t too needy, is it?

“We really like you too.” Conrad strolls over and slings his strong arm around my shoulders and squeezes. Wow, he’s stronger than he looks.

“Don’t damage her,” Silas growls.

Perhaps he doesn’t like Conrad so close to me. I worry how we're going to navigate this situationship that’s brewing between the four of us. Will I have to interact with them separately?

I suppose eventually we should talk about it, but it doesn’t feel right to do so tonight. I want to deepen our friendship first.

“Need help?” Silas gestures to all the dishes of food.

“Yes, why don’t we start?”

While they fill the dining table to the brim with food, I take the huge lasagna out of the oven, and pre-cut slices to make it easier to serve.

They are standing by their chairs, waiting for me before sitting down. What gentlemen. I swear my snooty family didn’t even have manners like this.

I blush with their eyes on me as I set the steaming casserole dish in the center. “It’s okay to sit down and dish out what looks appealing. Do you all want a slice of lasagna?”

They hum their assent. I dig out the first slice and it has extra gooey strings of cheese.

“That looks great!” Conrad licks his lips.

“I always err on the side of cheese.” I chuckle. “And garlic.”

“My kind of woman.” Conrad waggles his brows. “Good thing we’re not vampires,” he mutters and winks at the guys.

Jokes on them, vampires love garlic.

After serving a slice to everyone, I sit down, and we begin filling up our plates. The guys each ensure they have a taste of everything.

They begin to make appreciative sounds and the conversation commences. Mostly we talk about our favorite foods and cooking tips. The scene is adorably domestic and heartachingly sweet. At one point, it hits me like a smack in the face. I don’t think I’ve ever had a place of my own where I felt so at ease, especially when my romantic interests were around. Yet, these guys make me feel at home in a way no one ever has… or as needy for touch.

Even Silas seems more relaxed now. I wonder if in time he'll begin to show more of his playful side that's peeked out on a few occasions. Maybe when he knows he's safe to be himself around me.

A nasty doubt rises as I try to enjoy the moment. What if I can't really trust them as much as I hope I can? There could be some ugly secret side to them that comes out after I've become too involved.

What if they turn out to be like Chad?

He was nice enough in the beginning, but when he didn't get what he wanted from me, he became more controlling and aggressive. Until I had to escape in fear.

OceanofPDF.com

22
FIXER-UPPER GUYS!

CONRAD

This dinner is going much better than I expected. Other than Silas' warning about my strength, which might have also been a bit of his monster's jealousy, it's been pretty easy to share time with Darlene.

Once again, it makes me wonder if she might be destined for us. Not that we'd ever considered sharing a woman. But I'm starting to truly consider it now since they both seem to have the same level of interest in her as I do. It's not like a multiple-mate relationship has never been done before. Supes and humans have been known to have polyamory.

My stomach turns as I take another bite of Darlene's delicious offering. Not from her cooking, but from the idea of what my parents would do if they could see me now. Thank goddess I have cut them out.

"Conrad?" Darlene's lovely voice shatters the nightmare image of what my father might do to remove her from my life. "Is everything okay?"

I offer her an easy smile and a version of the truth. "I was thinking of my family."

"Oh?" Her eyes fill with worry. "You didn't look particularly happy about that, but I guess you did mention things were strained between you and your parents."

Fuck. My expressive face has gotten me into plenty of trouble, and now I have to give her something. Maybe I should share the bad and the good if I really do want a future with her.

“It’s complicated. They’re… a lot.”

“Sounds like my parents,” she grumbles.

“All our parents, it seems,” Zeke adds.

Silas grunts his agreement. I’m not sure whose parents are worse, his or mine.

“I’ve noticed a bit of an accent, where do you guys come from originally?” She finally asks the question we’ve been dreading.

“We’re originally from a mostly unknown place in the Faroe Islands,” I answer carefully.

“Oh, wow, those islands are gorgeous. I’ve seen pictures of them when I was in art school.”

“Yes, it’s quite beautiful.”

“That explains the unusual accents and…”

“And what?” Zeke asks.

She shrugs. I know we probably don’t fit in as well as we hope we do. To divert attention back to us, she asks, “So did you all know each other growing up?”

“Yeah, but our parents weren’t really fond of our relationship. We were the misfits in our families and spent as much time as possible away from them. We ended up finding each other at an isolated beach, Reflecting Bay. We bonded because of being different, and became our own family of sorts.” I look at Silas and Zeke, and they purse their lips and nod in agreement.

“I’m happy you had each other.” The quiver in her voice makes me think she didn’t have much of that growing up.

“We were lucky in that,” I agree. “But then our families forbade us from seeing each other anymore. When we refused, they disowned us.”

Banished is the real word, but that doesn't sound like a human thing to do. But the story is far more complicated than that.

“I’m so sorry. I don’t know why family is like that sometimes.” Darlene picks at her food, seeming to have lost her appetite. “Technically, I’m not disowned, but I might as well be. At least my aunt loves me.”

“I hope we get to meet her one day.” I take another bite and pray we can shift to another subject. My eyes snag on the impressionistic style oil

paintings of colorful landscapes leaning against the walls. “Did you paint these?”

“Um, yeah.”

We take a moment to admire them.

“They’re fantastic.” Zeke nods with approval.

Then Silas adds, “You’re quite talented.”

“I’d hate to see them get damaged. Do you need help hanging them?” I ask.

“Actually, I’d love to hire you for that. It’s a bit of a chore for me.”

I rankle at the idea of taking her money, but agree since I can sense it’s the only way she’ll let me do it.

“You all seem to have made something of yourself here.” She raises her eyebrows, hoping we give her more information about ourselves.

“We’ve done our best,” I answer vaguely.

“How’s the handyman business going for you guys?”

“We get by.” I shrug.

“Well, you ought to, with how awesome your yard is.”

All of us beam from the praise of our home. It’s a source of pride.

“We never thought we could build stuff, but we learned from the villagers.” Human villagers from the town nearest our secret pocket realm on another of the Faroe Islands. I wonder if we’ll ever see our homelands again. Do I want to?

“I know you didn’t ask me to, but I couldn’t stop myself from sketching a few ideas out for your business. It could help with marketing.”

“You want to help our business?” Silas’ eyes widen at her interest.

“Can we see them?” Zeke perks up, since she’s showing concern for our well-being, not that we actually need the business.

“Yes, of course.” She rushes from the room and comes back with a stack of thick paper with designs for “Fixer-Upper Guys.”

The three of us gawk at her talent. She obviously cares about us. I don’t know why it scares me a little that she might like us just as much as we like her.

“Of course, we should take pictures of your yard, and put them on a website that I can whip together for your business. Your yard could represent the quality and creativity of your work. And don’t even think about paying me, I know Silas is undercharging me for his help.”

Silas grimaces, but doesn’t argue since it’s true.

Her generosity and concern for us warms my heart.

Although I fear that if we use her wonderful designs, we'll actually have to work.

OceanofPDF.com

23
JOKES ON YOU

DARLENE

"So did the evening end up in an orgy?" Clover smirks over her wineglass, and Felicity and Ruby laugh at her coming in hot with the big question.

I should be glad she waited for us to order our food and the server walked away before the interrogation began. We're at an upscale restaurant instead of the casual restaurant bar, *The Well And Trough*, where we met up before.

"Sorry to disappoint you, but no," I answer flatly and roll my eyes. "It was a perfectly lovely dinner where I got to know them a bit better."

"My version has you getting to know them a *lot* better," Clover teases. She's in rare form tonight. I think she might have pre-gamed at her house. Thankfully, she asked Felicity to be the designated driver.

I take another healthy swig of my red wine. "I don't really know what's going on with us, and I didn't bring it up either."

"But they've been flirting with you?" Ruby's eyes twinkle with mischief.

"I went out to the museum and for sushi with Zeke. I figured that was a good time to break down and ask if they had an open relationship. He

confirmed they did."

"Well, then get some Vitamin D, girl!" Clover cheers.

"Clover!" I hiss. "This is a fancy place."

"Meh, the *Perfect* people need to remove the stick up their golf holes."

We laugh a bit too hard at that.

I don't know where all this is going with the guys, but having heard some of their backgrounds and what they've been through makes me trust them a bit more. They have faced challenges and stood by their love for each other. Even if they never fall for me, I appreciate that they chose love over outside influences. That's something my immediate family couldn't do for me, since they allowed fae society and expectations to destroy our relationship. Just like my first supe boyfriends.

Integrity, that's what the guys have. I want more people with that in my life.

Clover continues, breaking my ruminations, "Speaking of loosening up, I want to check out the Comedy Club in downtown Midville."

"Oh? I didn't know they have a comedy club." I suppose I haven't looked into all the nightlife yet.

"It's open mic night, but I like to live on the edge," Clover explains. "The sets can totally suck, but sometimes there's some great new talent. What do you say?"

We agree to head over after our meal.

The comedy club is about a twenty-minute drive this time of night, but we sing along with the radio and have a blast doing it. None of us are the next top pop star, but we aren't horrible either.

The dim lights and velvet-covered walls create a cool club vibe. We belly up to the bar to grab our drinks before heading into the main performance area.

I decide to not order my standard red wine and try something new. I glance over at Clover's crimson-amber colored drink. "What's that?"

"A gin forward negroni. I like to call it *Sweet and Spicy*."

"Spicy?"

"Well, it's technically more on the herbaceous side, but it sounds sexier to describe it as spicy." She chuckles.

"I'll have what she's having," I say to the bartender.

I love her whimsical name for the drink, and I feel like trying out a more carefree attitude. Might as well if I'm making friends and perhaps gaining a few boyfriends.

The bartender slides over a decked-out cocktail, and I toss down enough cash to cover my drink and a nice tip.

Just as I'm savoring my first sip, I hear a familiar voice. Again. What the hell? He's going to think I'm actually stalking him.

"So why do people give *bouquets* of flowers?" Conrad says as he paces the stage with a mic in hand. It sounds like him, but more of a caricature of himself.

I keep my hand over my face so he doesn't recognize me as we take some seats at a back table.

"No, really. I want to know." He pauses and looks to the audience for dramatic effect. "Because to me it seems like a bit of a *F-U* situation."

At the front tables, a few feet from the stage, a couple of drunk and rowdy guys boo Conrad. Looks like we found the asshole hecklers for the night. Their dates each have a bundle of flowers. It's a nice enough gesture, but I sense it's their first date and the flowers are just a ploy to get some action.

"Now, now, now, work with me here, people." Conrad extends his arm, addressing the hecklers. "We give flowers when someone dies. Seriously? That's just morbid…"

"*Boo*, you're morbid. Get off the stage, you hack!" the big drunk douche yells through his cupped hands.

"Yeah! What he said," big douche's little buddy squeaks in an unusually high-pitched voice for a man.

Conrad ignores them and dramatically continues in one long breath, "So they can watch the flower whither, bending at the stalk, only to have it looking to the ground where it's going to end up as compost, unable to look upwards to the life-giving sun, its petals drying to a crisp and falling off, and finally it'll get that smelly, slimy goop in the vase from the water that once gave it life but now rots it, breaking down the whole thing to its core elements, only to, in the end, be thrown out, reminding us of the impermanence of life, sending us into an existential crisis about our own mortality just when a loved one has passed?" He stops and sucks in a *huge* breath for theatrics. "That's just fucked up, man."

Chuckles and a couple of hoots ripple through the audience.

Biggie yells, “You’re fucked up, man!”

“Yeah! What he said,” little douche echoes.

“Or when you want to impress someone, like on a first date, you give them flowers…” Conrad gestures to the douches’ table and addresses their dates, waggling his eyebrows, “Am I right, ladies?”

The audience warms up as laughter spreads through the room with more hoots and a couple of whistles. Biggie glowers and crosses his arms, and Smalls follows his lead.

“So now these ladies have a visual representation of the arc of a relationship, watching their budding romance bloom and then whither and, as most do, die,” he continues.

“You're dying on stage!” Biggie blurts out.

But before Smalls can get the words out, Conrad steals his line and leads the audience to answer. “Yeah! What he said,” the entire room shouts in unison and then erupts in raucous laughter.

Embarrassed and fuming, Biggie jumps up and gestures for his date to leave with him. Smalls mimics him. But the women shake their heads and don’t budge.

“Fucker!” Biggie yells at Conrad and storms out of the room.

Of course, Conrad doesn’t miss a beat and again conducts the audience like a maestro to yell out, “Yeah! What he said!”

The room explodes with hollering and full belly laughs.

Once the crowd settles to a calm simmer, Conrad puts his hand over his eyes, squinting in the stage lights. “To the two young gentlemen standing in the back, I think there’s a couple of seats available up front here with the *now-dateless-by-their-own-choice* ladies, but first let me get their consent. And to the gentlemen in the audience… This is important, always… always, *always* get consent.” He addresses the women in the front row, “Ladies, are you okay with these fine young men joining you?”

They check the cute guys out, then smile and nod.

“Okay. Good. Come on up here, guys.” He waves for them to come forward.

Wow, the smooth-talking playboy Conrad is a *match-breaker* and now a matchmaker. He spared those women from wasting their time in bad relationships, or at the very least, a bad evening.

“So florists…” Conrad picks up where he left off. “Yeah, the whole thing just stinks of *Big Flower.*”

The audience laughs wholeheartedly. He has them in the palm of his hand now.

“But my roommate, he’s smart. He’s *planting* flowers.” Conrad sits on a stool on the stage.

“You see, my two roomies and I have this hot new neighbor who just moved in next door… *Darling* is what we like to call her. We’re doing our best to *woo* her because she’s pretty special. Did I mention she’s smokin’ *hot?*”

The crowd laughs while my face flushes.

Clover looks at me with eyes wide and mouths, “*What the fuck?”*

Exactly, what the flippin’ fuck.

“But in all seriousness, it’s a bit of a competition between us because, well, we’re highly competitive gamers.”

Some of the women groan.

“Now, not a competition like *that*. It’s only because she’s an amazing woman through and through. Talented, bright, smart as whip, funny, caring, and she’s also *sexy!*” Conrad stands up and begins to pace. “What can I say? I have needs too.”

“But seriously, any of us would be the luckiest jerk in the world to win her graces. In fact, she’s so incredibly wonderful that it would take the three of us combined to even begin to compare to her awesomeness.” Conrad gazes beyond the crowded room for a moment, and his pensive eyes soften.

“The sophisticated, debonair one of our bunch is taking her to museums, talking and philosophizing about art, her passion, with her. They're going to swanky sushi bars and eating things I don’t even know how to pronounce.” He pauses, timing the beats of his routine.

“Then there’s the quiet one. He’s the nurturer, alert and attentive to her every need. Always making sure she has a napkin or something to drink, adjusting her chair, or making sure she’s comfortable.” He exhales.

“He’s also the reserved, smart one playing the long game. He’s planting flowers in her garden, if you know what I mean. No, for real, in her yard, perverts.” He winks at the crowd. “He’s planning a whole nursery’s worth of the most gorgeous specimens you’ve ever seen, arranged like a three-dimensional Monet painting.” Conrad raises and extends his arms wide.

“He’s got this whole zen Feng Shui, holistic thing going on. Really, his design is brilliant. He’s a genius, no doubt.” Conrad smiles, obviously proud of Silas.

“He’s building something that will last. He’s sowing his seeds. No annuals, mind you, only evergreens and perennials.”

“So what do I do?” He touches his chest and sighs. “Right in front of her, I impale my buddy in the damn foot when playing lawn darts. Yes, the game that’s banned. I was trying to outdo everyone, and I literally *nailed* it.”

The crowd laughs.

“You can’t even get that game anymore.” Conrad takes on a stereotypical German spy voice, steepling his fingers and tapping the tips together. “But we have our ways… we’re *connected*.”

He sits back on the stool and pauses. “I can’t compete with my roommates for her attention, at least without impaling someone. I don’t know anything about art, or how to dress hip and trendy like my buddy. I’m not observant and pick up on subtle cues like my other friend does.” He sucks in a long, slow breath.

I tear up, feeling the weight of what he’s saying. It’s more than just a joke in a comedy sketch.

“But what I do have is an amazing tan.” He jumps up from the stool, pulling up his unbuttoned sleeve, revealing his corded forearms and golden sun-kissed skin.

The crowd bursts out into laughter and whoops.

“It’s even on the underside, too.” He raises his arm so we can see.

“Take it off!” Some bimbo eggs Conrad on.

“You want me to take it off?” He addresses the audience.

“Yeah!” The crowd shouts collectively.

“Like this?” Slowly and seductively, he lifts his shirt, revealing more of his golden tan.

The crowd whistles, hoots, and howls.

“All of it!” Bimbo yells.

“All of it?” Conrad looks at the audience.

“Yeah!” The audience coaxes.

Rising above the crowd, I hear in a shrill voice, “Yeah, what she said,” Bimbo’s friend, Bimbette, joins in.

“Okay!” Unexpectedly, Conrad does the Superman pose, and rips his shirt off, buttons flying everywhere.

The crowd goes wild.

“Show us if it’s an all over tan!” Bimbo goads him.

I feel my face flushing again, but this time it's not out of embarrassment. I have the mind to put Bimbo in her place and tell her to back the fuck off.

Conrad turns around with his hands on his waistband, suggesting he's going to moon the rowdy crowd. Shit, he's not going to actually do it, is he? I mean, he's a bit of an exhibitionist. He does yoga in his birthday suit, afterall.

Conrad quickly turns around. "Come on now, you guys are so bad. I'm not going to get arrested for you." He waves off the audience.

"*Boo!*" Bimbo and Bimbette shout.

"But it's funny you should mention being naked." Conrad smirks. "I work very hard on this tan. I know… 'what's an easygoing Colorado guy doing with a tan worthy of a muscle head holding a surfboard from Venice Beach." Conrad then lays down a thick California beach accent, "Surf's up, dude."

He shrugs. "But hey, what can I say, the sun's my jam."

"So every morning I do yoga facing the sun… totally nude. All this comfy softness over my bendy muscles is on full display." He flexes like he's in an Iron Man competition.

He truly is strong, and we can see his muscles, but he's not flashy cut like a typical supe. Or like human bodybuilders when they dehydrate themselves to look like cover models.

More than anything, I admire his confidence on stage, especially exposing himself, both emotionally and literally, as his shirt is torn to shreds. It's sexier than any six-pack I've seen.

The crowd is getting worked up and rowdy, whooping and whistling uncontrollably at his display.

"The thing is, I do it in my backyard, within eyeshot of my hot neighbor's bedroom window…"

Oh goddess, oh goddess, oh goddess…

"I know she's taken a peek or two on more than one occasion. So now I'm obliging her with a longer show and making her late for work in the mornings. It's my gift to our *Darling* neighbor." Conrad turns his backside to the audience and shakes that thing.

The crowd goes nuts.

Oh, just fuck me.

"You dirty little perv!" Clover leans in and whispers.

“Thank you, you’ve been a great audience. May you have the evening you deserve. And remember…” Conrad looks across the crowd with his hands reaching out to them. He points the microphone to the audience, and we all shout along with him, “Yeah! What he said!”

With a mic drop, he exits and heads backstage while pandemonium erupts with a standing ovation from the audience. The MC picks up the mic, “Give a big round of applause for Isle Man Conrad. He’s going to be a tough act to follow for sure! Next up, we have…”

The entire situation hits me. Conrad was talking about me in public, about how they all like me. I’m a bit flustered by it, even if part of me is buzzing with excitement.

“I need to go to the bathroom,” I announce.

“Need company?” Clover asks.

“No, I need a minute alone.”

The girls nod, and I rush to the service hallway that leads to the bathrooms. Just as I turn the corner, Conrad exits the stage access door.

He freezes, goes pale as a ghost, and slowly leans to hide behind a stack of beer crates. I almost laugh at his reaction. I don’t think it’s a bit, but true horror that I’ve caught him talking about me.

“Conrad?” I call as I approach.

“Did you see my set?” he breathes out.

“I did.”

Without a word, he launches into action, takes my hand, and practically drags me through the backstage.

Conrad pulls me into the back alley, and the noise from the next comedian cuts off as the metal door clicks shut.

He grasps my shoulders, looking shocked and maybe a little embarrassed. This is the opposite vibe from when I caught him at the library reading. “Did you know I was performing?”

“No. Clover wanted to come. I just went along.” I rest my hands on his forearms so that we’re creating a strange bridge. I hope I can cross it and discover why he’s so unsettled. “What’s wrong?”

“What’s *wrong*?” he repeats, then releases me to drag his fingers through his long, blond locks. “I can’t believe you caught me here… and what I was saying…”

“It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not.” He turns away, his shoulders hunched.

“Why?”

He spins back to face me, his eyes a bit wild. “I’ve been trying to impress you and now you know I’m just some stupid jerk who’s trying to tell jokes.”

“I thought you did an amazing job.”

“I did?” He sounds suspicious, like I’m about to rip him apart.

“Didn't you hear the audience? They were freaking out and absolutely loved you!”

Was Conrad in the same room as me? The poor guy, he’s so down on himself that he doesn’t even recognize the enthusiastic accolades from his admiring audience.

“It takes a lot to do what you did. To be a good comedian, you have to be smart and possess a divergent mind to connect seemingly unrelated things in a funny way. The way you handled those jerks, how you thought on your feet and maneuvered their heckling, that takes intelligence. And you have to have charm and skill to deliver the lines to get people to laugh.”

“But… but it isn’t a revered talent.” He mutters, “My parents wouldn’t think so.”

“So what if it isn’t revered by them? I’d argue that it should be.”

“Really?” Hope sparks in his voice.

“Yeah.”

He blushes then his gaze drops to the space between our feet. “What about the things I said about you?”

“That you’re trying to *woo* me?” When he nods, I chuckle. “Uh, I’ve already noticed a bit of that. And I like it.”

“You do?”

“I wondered if you were actually ever going to make a move. Or if you were just going to prance around your yard naked until you lured me in.”

“I knew it! I knew you were checking me out.”

“Uh, yeah, I’m not a nun.”

Conrad steps closer, sliding his hands over my hips. “You liked what you saw?”

“I’d like it more if that damn tree didn’t cock block me.”

He throws his head back with a laugh. “Damn, I think you should take a whirl at comedy.”

“Nah, I like working in the shadows.”

He eyes our surroundings, a dark alley. “How’s this for shadows?”

I step closer, my breasts grazing his bare chest. I wish we weren't in public so I could lose my shirt and bra and feel his skin on mine. My nipples peak, and I gaze into his dark amber eyes.

Slowly, so slowly, he leans down. I'm a fucking mess by the time his lips press against mine. Panting for him, I deepen the kiss and slide my hands under his torn shirt and feel his silky skin. My tongue slides over his plush lips.

He moans and tugs my hips flush against his. I can feel his excitement poke against my stomach. He murmurs my name like a prayer.

His hand grips the back of my head, keeping our kiss going. Our tongues tangle, and I don't know if we're in some primordial battle and if I'm winning.

Wait, of course, I'm winning. I'm kissing Conrad.

We break the kiss, and he curses. "I wasn't expecting our first kiss to be in a dirty back alley. Next time, it'll be a more appropriate location."

"Next time, huh?" I taunt.

"Yeah, now that I've tasted you, I'm addicted." He twirls one of my long locks between his fingers. "Do you need a ride home?"

"No, but thank you." I give him a quick hug. "My friends are waiting for me."

We part ways after he sees me inside, and my heart pounds with the memory of his soft lips on mine.

OceanofPDF.com

24
SWIMMIN' WITH KRAKENS

DARLENE

Zeke runs out of his house, catching me alone at the curb as I take more boxes to the recycling bin.

"Hey, I've been meaning to talk to you about something…" He pauses and furrows his brow as if to figure out the best way to broach an uncomfortable subject.

Crap. In my experience, what usually follows is not good. Are they already breaking it off with me?

"Go ahead. Spit it out. You can be honest," I say bluntly to get him to rip the emotional bandage off quickly.

He breathes a sigh of relief, realizing he can be straightforward with me.

"I couldn't help noticing that at the party your hesitation to swim in our pool was likely something more than just not having a bathing suit." He rubs the back of his neck when he notices me slumping my shoulders from feeling vulnerable about being seen. "Then, when we mentioned having you over for another pool party, I sensed you were feeling apprehensive about being in the water."

Damn it. Zeke found me out and is confronting me about my water *thing*. Of course he would. Water is his happy place.

He puts his arm around my shoulders, preventing me from sinking into the earth from shame. “Do you not know how to swim?”

“Well, sort of.” I bite my lip to bring feeling back to my face. “No, not really. But it’s more than that… I had a bad experience as a kid.”

Zeke gently guides my chin so I have to look him in the eye. “I can teach you.”

“But can you teach me how to get over this stupid phobia?” I almost plead.

“It’s not a phobia if childhood trauma is the cause. Fear and anxiety are a *rational* response to a threatening situation.”

That’s reassuring.

“Let me help you.” He pulls me into an embrace, and I melt into his soft, comfortable pillow-top chest. “If you know how to do something, then you will feel in control, and the fear of that thing fades away.”

It would be wonderful to be free of this hang-up and not carry this anchor around anymore.

“I got you,” he whispers in my ear in a gravelly voice that reverberates down my spine and vibrates my core.

I look into Zeke’s eyes, wondering how a woman like me got so lucky to know such a caring man like him.

“Okay. We can give it a try.” I stand on my tiptoes and place a soft kiss on his cheek. “Thank you.”

I laugh into his chest.

“What’s so funny?”

“I guess I have to face one of the most harrowing quests known to womankind.”

He jerks back, concern etched on his face. “What do you mean?”

“I have to go buy a bathing suit,” I groan.

“Only if it makes you feel more comfortable, some find *au naturel* is the way to go.” He waggles his eyebrows.

“You’re a bad man!” I swat his perky butt.

I head over to the guys’ house for my ‘water therapy session’ with Zeke, wearing my new bathing suit under a lacy wrap. Instead of getting a one-

piece like I would have in the past, I opted for something that makes me feel sexy. It's to help give me confidence in confronting my fears, or so I try to tell myself. But the real reason is to impress Zeke.

I sigh. It kinda sucks knowing myself so well. Life would be so much simpler if I was blind to my subconscious motivations.

Of course, the noisy *I-know-everything-that's-going-on-in-the-neighborhood* Betty is walking Lil' Bit right in front of their house. Ugh.

"Hmm." She eyes me up and down.

Oh well. If she didn't already know that I've been hanging out with the guys a lot, she was bound to find out soon enough.

"Nice to see you, Betty. Have a great day!" I say with extra enthusiasm, leaning into the fact she caught me. There's no use pretending I didn't see her.

She grunts and throws up her hand dismissively as she walks away.

I pop through the gate to the pool in their backyard to find Zeke sitting in a patio chair in his usual relaxed pose, with his hands behind his head and his thick, muscular legs stretched out, feet crossed.

He's wearing nothing but his swimming trunks. I pause for a split second to take a snapshot in my mind of his sexy physique. I notice more detail of his tattoo on his right forearm, the tentacle is actually sea green-blue. Wait, forearm? I could have sworn it was on his upper right arm, and I have excellent memory, especially for detail. *That's* not concerning at all, my memory lapse. I guess I was more anxious about their party than I thought.

Zeke's not a gym junkie, overtly trying to show off his muscles every chance he gets, but underneath his dad bod and softer exterior, there's hidden raw power and strength.

What I admire most is that he's comfortable in his own skin. His confidence is sexy as hell and intoxicating. It only makes me feel sexier in response.

"Hello, Darling!" Zeke jumps up to greet me while quickly checking me out in my pretty flowing wrap.

"Hi. I made it," I breathe out and sit in a chair next to his.

"I knew you would." He smiles and sits back down in his chair.

"You mentioned you had a bad childhood experience." Zeke shifts his chair to have better eye contact with me. "I don't want to push you into anything you don't want to do."

“No, I’ve been carrying this weight long enough. It’s time I deal with it.” I sigh, trying my best to release my nervousness.

“Would you like to talk about the incident?” Zeke takes my hand in his, looking deep into my soul.

Goddess, he can be so intense, but I appreciate his caring support.

I suck in a breath and begin. “Ever since I was five, I knew I was *different*. I didn’t fit in with the rest of my family.” I pick at the lace strings of my wrap.

“I have a brother who is two years older than me and a sister a year younger. In my parents’ eyes, they were—*are*—the golden children, heaven’s gifts to the world, especially my little sister. They can do no wrong.”

Zeke gently strokes the back of my hand with his thumb.

“When I was seven, we were on a trip by a creek that had a large swimming hole. It was mine and my sister’s first time in water other than a bathtub. My brother was athletic and knew how to swim well.” My shoulders tense.

“Of course, my little sister took to the water like a frickin’ fish. With a little guidance from our brother, she was swimming like she was on a school swim team. With no help from anyone on how to swim, I was left at the shoreline, wading ankle-deep.”

Zeke nods, continuing to hold space for me to spin out.

“There was a cliff face where they would jump off into the deep part of the water. Not wanting to be the odd duck out, they were able to coax me to the top for a jump.”

I wrap the arm not attached to the hand that Zeke is holding around my stomach.

“From the top, it was a lot higher than it looked. It was scary. I froze. They kept pressuring me to jump and yelled, ‘What are you, a scaredy cat? Stop being a baby’ and then–”

I look to the sky, fighting back an onslaught of tears.

Ever so softly, Zeke wipes an escaped tear that’s streaming down my face. He gently takes my arm from around my waist and cups both of my hands between his.

“They pushed me. They fucking pushed me off the cliff.”

Zeke squeezes my hands.

“I landed in shallow water closer to shore, so I hit bottom. My foot got wedged between some rocks. When I stood up, my mouth barely breached the surface of the water.”

I suck in some air, desperate for it, just like I was then.

“I was screaming for their help, and they just laughed at me.” I feel my face becoming flushed.

“I repeatedly gulped in a breath and plunged my head down to my foot to try to dislodge it. I frantically pulled on my ankle, but I couldn’t budge the rocks that were crushing my foot. I wasn’t strong enough.” My body trembles as I relive the shock of that day.

“Then, to top it off, they started throwing sticks at me, saying, ‘grab on to this.’ But they weren’t really trying to help.”

It was a test of sorts, to see if the *runt* could survive. Everyone sensed I was defective. My siblings had taunted me, *“You’ll never be able to offer anything to this family. You’re just an extra mouth to feed.”* Sentiments they picked up from our parents.

I feel the anger I’ve been carrying inside for so long begin to boil.

“A large stick hit me in the head, nearly knocking me out, but I grabbed onto it. Fortunately, it was big enough to pry my foot free.”

Zeke caresses my cheek.

“Of course, my parents believed them over me, thinking that I’m just an attention-seeking and problem-creating klutz.” I stare at Zeke’s hands holding mine in my lap.

“It was at that moment, I knew I was alone. But fortunately, my aunt stepped in as much as my parents would allow, which wasn't enough for either of us. Auntie would have taken me in full-time if she could have.” I sniff back the building tears again. “She’s my real mom.”

After a long period of silence while Zeke allows me to process my bubbling emotions, I jump up completely pissed. “You know what? Fuck them! Fuck all of them!” I slam my fist into my hand and pace the patio in my usual *spinout* circle.

When I complete several laps, I stop and stare at the pool.

Zeke comes up from behind me and wraps his arms around my waist. “Yes, fuck them.” He spins me around and places his hands on my shoulders. “Are you ready to conquer this?”

“Yes.”

In one swift motion, Zeke releases me and jumps into the pool as smoothly as a plunge-diving osprey. He's graceful yet powerful underwater, and swims across the pool then back to me without resurfacing to take a breath. I'm in awe of his strength and agility. Fuck me, that's magnificent.

He pops his head up at my feet and extends his hand for me to join him.

Straightening my shoulders, I drop my cover-up wrap and reveal my string bikini, feeling self-conscious under his intense gaze. I pull the pin out of the loose bun and let my hair fall to my shoulders. I shake it free, trying to be the nerdy girl who becomes hot in a rom-com by just taking down their hair.

I hope he likes what he sees.

OceanofPDF.com

25
TENTACLE WATER SPORTS

ZEKE

Darlene lets her wrap fall to the ground, revealing herself to me like a gift. Oh my goddess. Her sea-blue bikini matches the color of my eyes, and it barely contains her sexy curves and silky skin. Is she feeling for me what I feel for her? Perhaps subconsciously, since she's wearing my kraken color as she enters my domain. It can't be a coincidence, even if she's not fully aware of what she did.

She shakes her hair in the most provocative way, tilts her head, and bashfully looks into my eyes. I almost come undone from that alone. That she doesn't fully realize what a catch she is makes her even sexier, if that's possible. I intend to spend the rest of my life convincing her every day that she's the most gorgeous woman I've ever seen.

My kraken wants to claim her and my tentacles can't be contained any longer. They unfurl to reach for her underneath the surface of the shaded water, wishing to entice her to me, like the krakens of old luring ships and fair maidens to the depths of the sea.

Well, that just got dark. I don't want to destroy her. Well, maybe her pussy. It takes everything in my power to prevent that from happening, for *now.*

Darlene slowly steps into the shallow pool's edge and my body vibrates with the tingling bite of electricity. With each step closer, every inch deeper, I can feel her energy infusing the water around me and enveloping me. I'm delirious with her presence so close and in my element.

Once she's knee-deep, she stops. Through the water, I sense her anxiety building. Her pulse quickens and adrenaline spikes.

"You're doing great, Darlene," I encourage. "You can stop whenever you want to. We're working at your pace. You're in control."

When she clasps my hand, I feel her trembling. She takes quick, shallow breaths, and her pulse is like a rabbit running for its life.

"Take a long, slow breath in through your nose and hold," I guide to calm her. "That's good, now breathe out through your mouth… That's it, keep going until you completely empty your lungs, releasing all that fear with your exhale."

After a few repetitions of breathing, her heart rate is down to just a human running for its life. She flashes a quick smile and indicates she's ready to go a little deeper. I hold on to her hand to support her, being careful not to pull her, allowing her to move at her own pace.

When Darlene is waist-deep, I slide my hands to her waist, offering my body as an anchor for her to lean on. She accepts by placing her hands on my arms. Goddess, it's everything I can do to control my tentacles from pulling her closer, kissing her, then ravaging her.

I yearn to untie her string bikini and slide around her luscious curves, exploring every inch unencumbered. I'm only a few fragile knots from having her, *all* of her, revealed to me. And I could. She's in *my* domain… with a monster.

Except I can't give in to the pull I feel, because she doesn't know what I am yet. But if she is to accept me as her *mate*, then she will have to accept my monster as well.

I shouldn't be having these thoughts right now.

I try to push my overwhelming feelings down deep. I'm supposed to be helping her with her fear. But my monster wants her to tremble at its power, relent to it, and if she accepts him, bond with him. Then all my power will be at her command, and I'd be forever bound to submit to her every need.

Facing Darlene with my hands on her waist while fighting my tentacles to behave, I guide Darlene ever so slowly into deeper water.

"Eww, I stepped on something squishy!" She squeals. "What is that?"

I moan in delighted pleasure.

Misreading my reaction, she gasps and clasps her chest. “Did I just step on your fish?”

You could say that.

“Oh no! I crushed it.”

And you could say that as well.

“Oh no, oh no, oh no! Look! It’s bleeding!”

That’s not blood.

“But why is it dark?”

Because it’s ink.

She covers her face with her hands. “Oh, Zeke, I’m so sorry!”

Don’t be. It was my pleasure.

“Don’t worry, you didn’t hurt it. It was just a defense mechanism of sorts,” I half-tell the truth. What am I supposed to say, you stepped on my tentacle and in a state of blissful ecstasy I squirted ink?

“Really, will it be okay?” She bites her lip.

“It’ll be more than okay, it’s made to do that,” I reassure her.

With Darlene distracted, I’m able to guide her into water up to her shoulders.

“Look how far you’ve made it.” I stop walking. “How are you doing?”

She looks around the pool and smiles.

“So now we’re going to try floating on your back a bit, okay?”

“Okay,” she says with more confidence.

“I’m going to walk behind you and hold you from under your arms, while you let your legs float.” Without removing my hands from her body, I slide them around her waist, and move into position.

“Now lean back into me and kick your legs up. Don’t worry, when you’re floating, I’ll be right here to make sure your head stays above water.”

She rests her head and shoulders on my chest, but her legs don’t budge. She’s having a hard time letting go, and I sense she isn’t trusting that her body will float.

“Relax your legs,” I say softly.

Darlene lets out an anxious little squeak.

“I got you,” I whisper in her ear.

She releases the tension in her legs, but they still don’t float. In one quick motion, I lean back, pulling Darlene on top of me. She yelps, and I

feel her pulse quicken as we float on the surface of the water.

“It’s okay.” Keeping her arms free so she doesn’t feel pinned, I hold her by the sides of her chest, my fingertips pressing into the sides of her perfect, round breasts. Her plump, curvy ass lands just above my cock, and I feel myself grow hard between her thighs.

Fuck me. My beast hopes she will, but I’m supposed to be helping her. How did we end up here in this awkward but totally hot situation?

My tentacles are pushing my resolve of good behavior. *But this is good*, my beast reminds me. It wants to burst from the confines of my human flesh, envelope her body, pull her to the depths below, and claim her.

Using the magic within the water to soothe her, I send a pulse of comforting energy toward her.

Unwittingly, she accepts my gift and relaxes her body into this compromising embrace.

It’s not lost on me how much she naturally trusts me to receive my magic and allow me to hold her this way. It only reinforces my belief that she’s my mate and deep in her soul she knows she can rely on me to protect her.

My cock stirs at the idea of finding my mate. She must feel my rigid length throbbing between her legs because she flexes and undulates, pushing her crotch onto the head of my shaft. I’m about to explode from this alone.

Feeling more confident and forgetting that we’re floating in water with the current distraction, she arches her back to position her entrance above my shaft. The thin fabric of our bathing suits is the only thing preventing me from sliding into her.

“You feel so good in my arms,” I whisper, afraid to destroy this moment.

As the tempo of her gyrations increase, I slip my hands underneath her bikini top and cup her breasts. Darlene lets out a soft moan. My fingers find their way to her pebbled nipples and squeeze gently. She bucks into my cock. I squeeze them a bit harder with a little twist. She gasps and grinds against me again.

She turns her head and says in a breathy voice, “I need to look into your eyes.”

With that request, I fall for her even harder. It makes a monster’s heart soar knowing that her passion is for *me* and not just the sexual act. Not that

there’s anything wrong with that, mind you.

With minimal effort, I pick her up, flip her around, and set her perfectly over my bulge. She lets out another cute, little yelp, surprised by my speed and strength. With parted lips, she narrows her wide eyes and focuses on my grin.

“You’re gorgeous” I tuck a wet, loose lock behind her ear.

“So are you.” Her mouth crashes down onto mine.

Goddess, I have never tasted something so delicious. Her parted lips invite my tongue to explore her mouth. My tentacles float just below the surface of the water, anxiously waiting for permission to explore her body.

She feverishly kisses me for several minutes, like she has been starved for affection, then finally comes up for air. I now know for certain she’ll be able to hold her breath underwater.

She sucks in a breath, then pulls her bikini top off in one swift motion. Freeing her perfect tits, they bounce inches from my face for me to lustfully admire.

Before she can crash her mouth down on mine again, I take her breasts in my hands and lay a trail of kisses from one nipple to the other. I circle my tongue around each areola, sampling each and teasing her breathless. Her nipples pebble harder, begging for my mouth to take them in.

I have my connection to the water to thank for my insight into her emotions and physical pleasure.

Unable to take any more of the teasing stimulation from my tongue, and overwhelmed by need, she grabs the back of my head, shoving my mouth to her breasts. “Please, don’t stop,” she begs.

I oblige and take her nipple into my mouth fully and suck furiously to relieve her building tension. I reach around and claim a handful of her ass.

She bucks wildly, sliding up and down against my shaft, and now I’m the one who can’t handle the building tension.

My cock is going to explode, but I don’t want this moment to end so I shove my hand down, cock blocking myself. I cup her grinding pussy, massaging it. Then I pull the thin fabric of her bikini aside and explore her sensitive flesh with my fingers.

She sucks in a breath and closes her eyes, just experiencing the feel of my hands on her. “Yes, more.”

With her plea, I’m unable to continue the fight of keeping my tentacles at bay, I succumb to my overpowering beast. Out of her sight, one of my

tentacles breaches the water and slips up to her luscious ass, searching for her channel's opening. As it slowly undulates over her folds, my fingers tease her clit.

"*Fuuccck*," she groans, slowing her grinding to relish the new sensation.

Encouraged by her bliss, another tentacle reaches for her ass and teases her rosebud with little circles. She moans in elation.

"What… are you doing to me? Your hands… are everywhere," she rasps between desperate breaths. "No one has made me feel like this before."

When I don't detect a lie in her statement, pride fills me. Then I'm shocked since she's mentioned having a few boyfriends. None of them made her this aroused? Which means they likely didn't make her come. Well, I'm going to do my damnedest to remedy that. Hopefully, for the rest of our lives.

My tentacle at her pussy slowly slips into her. Finding its destination, I place one of its suction cups on her fleshy pad.

Her channel clenches down for dear life on my tentacle, as if it was trying to strangle it. Goddess, her chokehold is going to be mind-blowing when her tight pussy is filled with my cock, milking me dry.

Darlene's body ripples with tension from head to toe like a taunt string on a bow, poised to make its arrow fly. All she needs is the snap of the string.

All at the same time, my tentacle massages her g-spot, another tickles her rosebud, my mouth gently but firmly bites her nipple, and my fingers pinch her clit.

And she soars with her climax, taking flight. Her pulsing grip on my tentacle and her cries of bliss send me with her, triggering me to shoot my bolt inside my trunks.

I keep stimulating her pussy, and our ecstasy feels timeless as we both ride the waves of release.

Finally, she collapses in my arms. "That was amazing."

"Agreed." I squeeze her to my chest.

Someone clears their throat from the patio.

It's Silas and Zeke with *cum-eating* grins plastered over their smug faces. At least I'm not seeing any jealousy.

Darlene lifts her head to see who it is, blushes, then drops it again to snuggle into my chest. Smiling, she exhales a little moan and wraps her arms around me tighter.

She doesn’t seem to mind that the guys saw us in the throes of passion. Perhaps she would be okay being with all of us.

The guys thankfully leave us be, and Darlene and I drift around the pool for a long while in an embrace until we must return to Earth.

“I’m definitely going to need more swimming lessons,” she says sleepily, and lands a sweet kiss on my lips.

OceanofPDF.com

26
GAME BOYS

DARLENE

I'll finally get to see inside their place since the guys asked me over for a game night. I have a feeling with three dudes, that means video games. I'm not a big gamer since I didn't grow up with technology because powerful supe magic fries electronics, especially when their emotions are triggered.

But the activity doesn't matter, I can't wait to hang out with Zeke again. He blew my damn mind with that orgasm. I don't think he realized the significance of how he perfectly worked my body to a climax. And when I caught Silas' and Conrad's hungry gaze, that only made me come harder.

I wonder what it will be like to be around them again. Will Silas and Conrad be interested in me now? Or have I inadvertently chosen Zeke to date solo?

For tonight's get-together, I didn't bake any cookies, but I devised a plan for that. It's becoming a cute tradition for us to swap the cookie-loaded tray back and forth.

I check my bag for all my goodies, not that it would be a big inconvenience to hop back home to get anything I've forgotten.

Swallowing down my nervousness, I remind myself that whatever happens after we talk tonight, it'll be okay. And even if it isn't *okay* right now and things get weird, I can always rent out this house for Auntie and move on with my life.

I lift my hand to knock, but the door swings open before I can make contact. I should have known they'd be watching for me.

Conrad grins and sweeps his arm dramatically in a bow. "Welcome to our home."

I giggle at his antics, and he gives me a sexy wink. Just beyond him, Zeke and Silas stand at attention in their living room… or what I assume is the living room.

I step inside and glance around. The house has an open-concept floor plan. The kitchen has an attached dining area and is mostly visible with a long bar separating it from the front room. A hallway leads to where I assume the bedrooms and a bathroom are located.

The living room has a long couch, a cushy chair, and a large wood cabinet along the opposite wall. That must be where all their gaming consoles are stored, since it makes sense they'd have it right across from their comfy couch.

Otherwise the space looks barren. There's no coffee table, no end tables, not even a random dude poster taped to the wall. It's such a contrast to the yard that I'm confused.

"Wait, did you guys just move in?"

"No. We've been here for a few years." Zeke frowns and looks around like he's just noticed the place. "Uh… we're minimalists."

Okay, so they are like regular dudes in some ways.

"Cool." I shrug it off. I figure they probably have the half-naked hot people posters and other personal decor in their rooms.

"No cookies?" Silas deflates a bit. Aw, he liked them more than I realized.

"I didn't really know what you had planned, but I thought we could make cocktails and bake cookies together," I suggest.

"That sounds fun." Zeke pats Silas on the shoulder, and the quiet guy nods.

We pour into the roomy kitchen. Now I'm impressed. They have a bunch of gizmos and gadgets on the counter, from a high-end espresso machine, mixer, and blender. These boys do not skimp.

I unload my oversized canvas bag onto the polished granite counter with my supplies and the empty cookie tray. I already pre-made the icing. But we'll have to make the cookie dough from scratch.

Silas preheats the oven, Zeke grabs a mixing bowl, and Conrad pulls out eggs. It's amazing how we work like a team, but I suppose I'm just joining this group that they've already established. Or at least, I'm hoping to join in some capacity.

We dump the cookie ingredients into their expensive Ankarsrum stand mixer. I didn't even know this thing existed until I started researching home dough-making mixers last week.

I nod with approval at their excellent taste.

We set the mixer to blend the potential goodness.

"As we wait, would you fancy a cocktail? I was thinking of a Bramble." I pull a gin bottle out of my bag.

"Don't think I've had one." Zeke moves closer, intrigued.

"It's gin, blackberry liqueur, lemon juice, and I riff on it by topping it with ginger ale."

"Sounds great!" Conrad glances in their liquor cabinet. "Do you have the blackberry liqueur? Because we don't."

"Yep. I have everything in my bag." I smile, then realize Silas hasn't responded. "How does that sound?"

"I enjoy blackberries," he says sheepishly, like it's a secret.

"Wonderful!" I quickly mix up the drinks, while the guys supply pretty glasses for me to fill.

We toast for a long and happy life, and they take a sip. Thankfully, they like the sweet and fruity drink. Though I suspected they would because of their love of cookies.

Once the dough is done, we make simple round sugar cookies and place them on the trays. We'll figure out decorations later.

Zeke pops the cookies into the oven, and Conrad sets a timer. Fortunately, Silas has been cleaning up our mess as we go, so we can relax.

"Should we pick out what games we're into?" Conrad asks as he heads back into the living room.

We follow, and I watch in fascination as he swings open the cabinet doors. I expect to see a giant television and a ton of video game consoles.

They've mentioned a couple of times that they were gamers so why wouldn't I?

But no. Every board game I've ever heard of is packed inside the cabinet. Everything from chess to Risk to Candyland. And Twister…

What the actual fuck is going on?

I swear I'm being punked right now, except they aren't chuckling or waiting for a reaction. From a hall closet, they pull out a folding table and four chairs, setting them up in the giant empty space.

The guys debate without my input which game would be the best for me to play with them. Amused, I watch them. It definitely sounds like it's not the first time they've argued over which one to play with me.

I clear my throat to remind them I'm in the room.

They appear startled by my presence, then Zeke asks, "Do you have a preference?"

I eye their selection of games, taking into account what game they were all arguing for, but I pick something none of them have mentioned. "How about Cards Against Humanity?"

Zeke frowns. "But the strategy is that you have to know what the card czar for that turn will like best as a match."

"Yeah, exactly." I shrug. "But it'll be fun to see if I can pick correctly for each of you. And if you can figure out what I'll find the most amusing."

We deal out the cards and begin to play. I find it hilarious that I'm doing quite well even though I know them the least. And somehow they seem to pick up on my sense of humor. It's strange how a game like this can reveal how even new friends can *get* each other.

I ask where the bathroom is, and they direct me down the hallway. I quickly do my business, and as I exit, I hear them whispering. *Perfect*. I tiptoe down the hallway to take a peek into their rooms. Invasive? Yes. Does my nosy self do it anyway? Again, yes.

I peek in the open doors, noting that each bedroom has nothing on the walls and nothing of note displayed on their dressers or around the room. Maybe everything is in their closets or under their bed. If it's not, then I really need to wonder why they are such minimalists, and if I can fit in with that.

When I return to the living room, they're all smiles. Hmm, that's not concerning at all.

Then I realize they're just excited to continue our game.

What would it be like if I had this cozy family vibe in my future permanently? I don't think I'd hate it.

When our cookies have cooled, we're ready to apply the icing.

"Should we do another round of cocktails or would you like ice cream?" Conrad asks.

"Uh, the answer is always sweets!" I joke, but I'm not really joking.

Conrad pulls a carton out of the freezer. The *I Scream Shop* label is plastered on the side. "I got the vanilla chocolate caramel swirl you liked so much."

I'm flabbergasted that he remembers my go-to flavor. "Wow. That's so thoughtful of you."

"I also got a buttercream and berries flavor, if we gobble this one up."

"Buttercream and berries?" I ask.

"Yeah, uh, for some reason, it reminded me of you."

Huh, my shifter schoolmate, Quade said I smelled like that. Could it be they have just picked up on that scent? Maybe my scent projects more than I thought, even to human senses. There's no way they could have supernatural blood, could they? I don't even know how to broach that subject. Technically, I can't. If they're human, that's a violation of the Supernatural Protections Act.

Conrad dishes a small bowl of ice cream for each of us. I brush off my worries and get to icing the cookies.

"How do you paint the designs?" Silas asks.

I pull out my detail brushes and food dyes so we can paint the white icing, and he smiles. Wow. His handsome face lights up my heart when he smiles and makes my downstairs pulse with my heartbeat. I squeeze my thighs together and try to focus on cookies.

I can't get over what they do to me. I wonder what it would be like to kiss Silas. I sure hope my next conversation with them means I get to.

The guys opt to watch me decorate the cookies for a bit before diving in themselves. They have a lot of suggestions about what sort of monsters we paint. Krakens, basilisks, and sphinxes seem to be at the top of their list. Not the most common, but they're a bit odd, and I like the challenge.

Zeke leans over me as I finish painting my second cookie—a blue kraken. "Your cookies are so good, you could make these for a living."

"Really?" I sit with that thought for a moment as I admire my work. These 'monster' cookies are pretty fun. And it isn't like cookies and treats don't sell. I could give the brand a gourmet, but fun aesthetic vibe.

"Definitely." Conrad takes a bite of the freshly decorated cookie.

“Conrad, don’t eat her cookies,” Silas snaps. “She just made those.”

I set my hand on his forearm. “It’s okay. I want you to enjoy them.”

I’d love to get lost right now in the daydream of creating my own business, but I need to deal with what’s brewing with the guys before I do.

OceanofPDF.com

27
COOKIE SHENANIGANS

SILAS

The sparkle in Darlene's eye as she considers the idea of selling her cookies makes my basilisk purr with happiness. I have to stifle the sound from actually leaving my throat. That would seriously unnerve her.

Refocusing her attention on the decorating, she encourages us to try our hand at painting. I'm pretty adept with a pencil, but a brush has a different technique. I do okay, though, and so do Zeke and Conrad.

When we are done, Darlene fidgets uncomfortably, her sexy shoulders beginning to curl inward. She seems to be closing down.

"Are you okay?" I stoop so I can read her expression.

She looks up and gives me a smile. "I'm good. I just have to talk to you guys."

Oh no. It's happening.

I know from human books and movies that isn't usually a good phrase to hear during a budding relationship.

Zeke and Conrad also go stock-still.

"What about?" Conrad finally asks.

"Well, I thought we should address what happened with Zeke."

Fuck. Is she choosing him? My basilisk threatens to erupt and eat Zeke or race away to the forest to sulk. I was hoping if she didn't pick me alone, that she might choose to be with all three of us.

"Go on." Zeke doesn't sound confident about this topic either.

She lets out a big breath. I wonder if she's going to tell us it's all too much and we can only be friends. I'd accept it, but I don't think my heart will ever be the same again.

"We should discuss the rules of… *cookie eating*," she says hesitantly.

Huh?

"I knew you shouldn't have eaten her cookie!" I chastise Conrad.

She covers her smile and shakes her head.

I don't get the impression she's actually talking about cookies. *Probably*.

When we don't respond to her announcement, she continues. "No, like how will it work… me being with all of you?" She maneuvers four cookies together on the polished granite counter. "Will it be me and just one of you eating each other's cookies?" She moves two together and slides two away. Then she pushes them all in a cluster. "Or is it okay to eat our cookies together?"

Oh, I get it now. She definitely means sex.

Darlene goes on, "And if I happen to be eating with one of you, will the other two be eating each other's cookies?" She stacks the cookies on top of each other. Then bounces them off each other from different angles. "Or do you only want to do that in private?"

She's lost me again.

I glance at Zeke and Conrad. They have the same look of confusion I'm sure I'm currently wearing.

"I just don't want to cause any jealousy accidentally. Nor do I want to harm your sex lives."

Our what? How would she…?

"Oh my, Darlene." Conrad rubs his face. He appears both amused and flustered. Then he places the cookie that represents her and arranges the other three in a triangle around her. "It's definitely like *this*."

"Yeah. The three of us aren't with each other sexually," Zeke states.

"What?" I blurt out, and so does Darlene.

"But I thought you were a throuple." She turns to Zeke, her face flushed red with embarrassment. "I even asked, and you said you had an open

relationship.”

He’s quiet for a moment, then his mouth drops open. “*Ooooh*, that’s what you were getting at. I thought you meant if we were open to all of us pursuing you at the same time.”

“Which, for the record, we all are definitely open to eating *your* cookie,” Conrad adds.

Darlene briefly smiles at his assurance, but then covers her face with both hands. “Oh shit. I’m so sorry for assuming. I’m such an idiot.”

I come around the counter and gently turn her to face me, then guide her hands from her face. “It’s okay. We aren’t offended. There’s nothing wrong with people loving other people, no matter their gender or sex.” I dare to stroke her soft cheek and I instantly harden with the contact. “I’m happy that whatever you thought we were doing with each other, it didn’t dissuade you from your interest in us.”

Her eyes are huge by the time I’m done.

“What? Did I say something wrong?” I drop my hands away from her.

She grasps my fingers and grins. “No. I just don’t think I’ve ever heard so many words from you at once in the time I’ve known you.” Her eyes sparkle again. “And I like what you have to say when you *do* choose to talk.”

Goddess, she’s a beautiful soul who truly sees me. I won’t ever be able to give her up now.

“What do you need?” she asks.

Such a simple question, but the answer is all-consuming. I *need* her every smile. I *need* her body, mind, and soul. I *need* everything she’s willing to give me. I *need* to make her mine. I need to claim her.

“Whatever you are able to give,” I say aloud.

She giggles, and it’s the greatest thing ever. “I meant, are you okay with me dating your friends?”

“If I’m to share your affection with someone else, then they are who I would choose.”

“Would you like our relationship and sexual explorations to be separate from them?”

I pause and wonder how much my basilisk and I can handle. It would do no good to answer without thinking. “I believe I wouldn’t mind *sharing* on occasion, but I also would like time for us.”

“Fair enough.” She seems pleased with my answer.

Still holding my hands, she turns to the other two. “What about you?”

“I’m good with anything you have to give me, Darling,” Zeke chimes in.

“Can I say how fucking hot it is thinking of us all fucking you at the same time?” Conrad gives her a wink, and she blushes.

I think she likes that idea a lot. I suppose if it turns her on, I can get on board too.

OceanofPDF.com

28
THE CHOAD

DARLENE

I can't believe this conversation is going as well as it is.

We wrap up our relationship chat, where I let them know I'm on birth control. I just don't mention that it's made by a fae mage. We also cover that we're all clear of anything health-wise. Which is a supernatural blessing even nulls have, we don't contract colds or non-magic diseases or ailments.

Sure, the guys might have a little competitive streak and some may rather not share, but they're up for whatever might come.

And I have a feeling I'm going to be *coming* a freakin' lot.

I'm still embarrassed that I assumed so much about their dynamic, but like Silas said, I was open to them no matter what.

Now, they're open to what they're exploring with me as well.

Three boyfriends. At once. Geez. I'm doubling my body count in one go.

I make plans to have a date with Silas tomorrow since we haven't been physical yet. I want to make sure they all have time with me. Damn, I sound full of myself, but I worry I might create some imbalance if I'm not conscious of my time and energy with each of them.

Just because they aren’t together romantically doesn’t mean they aren’t bonded emotionally. Their connection reminds me of a pack of shifters, and I don’t want to be the reason a lifelong friendship falls apart. They gave up their own families to remain in each other's lives, and that’s no small commitment. I hope I’m worthy of the risk to their bond.

I don’t want the fun night to end, but I’m also not ready to do anything physical with the guys tonight.

“Want us to walk you home?” Conrad presses into my side, not being shy with his attention any longer.

“The whole forty feet?” I chuckle.

“A lot can happen in that distance,” Zeke teases. “And a lot more can happen in less than a foot.”

I smack his chest and then lean into him. Goddess, his body is made for hugs.

“Please?” Silas implores, and I can’t deny him. Fuck, I’m in so much trouble here.

“Fine.” I pick up my oversized tote bag and head for the door. “Field trip time!”

They line up, and my heart nearly explodes with how amazing they are and how easy it is to be with them. I don’t think I’ve ever felt so relaxed around anyone other than Auntie.

It’s a dark night with no moon, but fortunately, my eyesight is better than a normal human's due to my blood. The guys rush to my side. Zeke and Silas win out to hold my hands, but Conrad pushes ahead to make sure nothing impedes our progress. Their protective instinct is a bit ridiculous since I’m pretty confident I have the best eyesight out of the four of us. It’s one of the few blessings from my fae lineage. Though, the guys seem to be familiar enough with our yards to not stumble on the path.

Suddenly, the hair on my neck stands on end.

All four of us come to a stop, they must sense the wrongness in the air as I do. Just ahead, something large moves in the deep shadows by my car.

I’m kicking myself that in my hurry to get to game night I forgot to turn on my porch light.

Since Conrad has taken point, he takes another step forward.

“Careful, it could be a bear or mountain lion,” I warn.

“Like that could take me,” he chuckles under his breath, thinking I can’t hear him grossly over estimate his fighting ability.

What's he going to do? Yoga a bear to the death? So ridiculous how men think they can take on wild animals. Hell, a house cat can mess someone up if they're in a mood.

"Conrad," Silas warns. At least he has some sense.

Conrad subtly sniffs the air and then barks out, "Show yourself!"

A man steps out of the shadows and into the faint light coming from my living room windows.

"Choad?" I blurt out without thinking. Not that I care if I hurt his feelings.

"You need to leave, *Choad*." Conrad appears almost twice the size than he normally does.

"What the fuck is going on here?" Chad demands.

"That's none of your concern. *We are over.*" I'm more hostile toward the bastard than I ever was before.

"It's not over, you just disappeared."

Technically, that's true, but I had attempted to break it off with him several times over the six months we dated, and he just ignored me. And then he hunted me down, stalking me.

"I left the state to get away from you. Take a hint."

"You heard her. Leave," Zeke snarls.

"I just need a few minutes to talk with you." Chad doesn't even acknowledge that there are three guys ready to rip him apart.

"No. Fuck off." Dammit. It probably *was* him the times I thought I imagined him in a crowd.

Silas steps to Conrad's side, then Zeke flanks the other. If I didn't know any better, it's as if they were stalking prey as a pack.

"You heard her, now *fuck off*," Silas hisses.

Who knew, my kind, awkward guy has an alpha protector vibe. My clit perks up, awaiting his attention. *Fuck me*, it's going to be fun exploring this dominant side of him, in and out of the bedroom. My fanciful musings are interrupted by the immediate problem at hand.

"Or what?" Chad flashes open his jacket revealing a handgun in his waistband. He's a little-dick (and I should know) attempting to show he's the one in control here.

Completely unfazed, my guys close in on him. I don't know if they're calling his bluff or they're just crazy.

"Leave now, before things get messy," Conrad commands.

Betty’s porch light turns on, and she’s looking through the curtain in her window holding her phone.

“This isn’t over.” Chad turns and storms away in a huff.

Oh my fucking goddess, that was scary, yet hot as hell to watch the way my guys stood up to my gun-toting ex. I know it’s probably not a sane reaction, but I want to jump them.

“Let’s get you inside.” Zeke escorts me to my front door while Conrad shouts to Betty that everything’s fine.

She huffs, but closes her curtains and turns off the light.

Zeke stays with me in the living room while Silas rushes upstairs and Conrad checks through the first floor to see if Chad has done anything to my house. I hate to think that he’s broken into my home, but the possibility is real.

Goddess, I hope Silas doesn’t find my toys, but he probably will. I just hope he doesn’t realize what they’re for.

They come back and shake their heads. “I don’t think he’s been inside,” Conrad assures me, and Silas agrees.

Zeke pulls the curtains aside and checks to make sure Chad hasn’t returned.

“He’s dangerous,” Silas states like there’s no question about it.

Zeke looks like he’s barely holding it together.

“Did he ever hit you?” Conrad’s voice is laced with a fierceness I’ve never heard before, not even when he was telling Chad to fuck off.

“Um, he was becoming increasingly more unhinged. He shouted in my face, but he didn’t hit me.”

The pink scar on my wrist itches, demanding attention, but I try to ignore it.

Silas snatches up my hand and gently grazes a thumb over my knuckles. “But you were afraid he would start?”

I can’t tell them that he threw a vase and it shattered, then one of the pieces cut me. I pull my wrist away and fold my arms over my stomach. I’ve been terrified of him since that night. Of what he wanted from me.

“I believed things would only escalate. I escaped the next day while he was working so he wouldn’t catch me. After that, I lived in a neighboring city. Then my aunt offered me this place.”

I don’t tell them he’s hunted me down before this, but I thought it was because I had remained in the same general area. I thought I’d covered my

tracks better this time, but the befuddlement spell Auntie paid for obviously didn't work on him.

I'm shaking at the idea that I've brought this lunatic to their door. The guys crowd around me and make me feel a security I don't really deserve.

"I'm sorry. I didn't think he'd find and follow me to another state."

Silas cups my chin and makes me look at him. "This isn't your fault. He's the perpetrator. You did nothing wrong wanting to be safe."

I nod, but don't really accept his words. I should have known better than to get involved with Chad.

"Do you feel comfortable telling us more about him so we know how to handle this?" Zeke asks.

I can't tell them everything that happened. I have to be careful with what I say since the entire story includes the supe world.

I walk toward my living room, and motion for them to have a seat. I sit in an armchair because I don't want anyone touching me while I remember all this. It feels like they might get tainted.

"We met at an art show I was in while I was in art school. Chad was there admiring my work, and he struck up a conversation, telling me I was gifted. He asked me out and proceeded to love bomb me."

Silas jerks in his seat. "Love *bomb*?"

I smile at his innocence. "He basically showered me with affection and gifts at first. He encouraged me to paint more. I thought he might actually be good for me because of his supportive attitude. I haven't had a lot of luck with relationships, and even though I wasn't really into him, I thought I was somehow the problem."

I had worried that my trauma with my family and boyfriends had broken me. I'd wondered if I was just incapable of loving a man. Being around these three, that worry is falling away.

"You didn't love him?" Conrad's brows go up in question.

I shake my head and study my fingers instead of looking at any of them. "I cared about him, but my heart wasn't in it."

"After meeting him, I can see why," Zeke mutters.

"He wasn't such an asshole at first. He was a charmer. Perhaps that should have put me on alert. I have a family full of charmers, not that they ever used it on me."

"So what happened? How did it fall apart?"

“He kept pushing me harder and harder to paint things he wanted me to paint. Then he became angry when he couldn’t control me.” I can’t tell them more than this part, and it’s killing me.

“How long did it last?” Conrad asks.

“We only dated for six months.”

“Does he have a reason to carry a gun?” Silas asks in a low voice. “Is he in law enforcement?”

“No.” A chill races up my spine. “That’s new. He’s a personal trainer and fitness influencer. Or he was when I broke it off.”

“I want to hunt him down,” Silas growls.

“No. Don’t.”

“We are staying with you,” Zeke states.

“That isn’t necessary. I can set my house alarm. I don’t want to put you guys out.”

They begin to argue, but I stand and walk to the door. “I’m sorry he upset you, but I don’t think he’d be stupid enough to try anything tonight.”

I hope, but I don’t know for sure. It doesn’t matter. I’m not going to allow them to get hurt because of me. They’re only three human guys, not almost indestructible supes. I have to protect them from my mistakes.

In the supe world, I couldn’t offer any magical protection for a powerful mate and family, but now, I can use what little advantage I have to make sure no harm comes to them.

Seeing their anger and tension, I say, “Promise me you won’t do something stupid and try to go after him.”

They mutter, but I make them say it.

Grumbling, they file out of the house, but Silas lingers before leaving. “I’m still taking you to the Farmer’s Market.”

“I don’t know if that’s a good i–”

He cuts me off. “Please.”

Dammit, I can’t turn him down. Besides, I shouldn’t cancel my plans just because a piece of trash blew back into my yard.

“Okay. Nine?”

“How about seven?” he asks.

“What are you? A monster?”

His eyes go wide, and he steps back.

I chuckle. “It’s just my day off, and I like to sleep in.”

“Oh,” he mumbles, and I realize he might be sensitive about Chad showing up. I probably shouldn’t tease him too much.

Once the guys return to their house, I grab my purse and rush upstairs. I glance around and don’t see anything out of place. I sniff the air and don’t smell that the bastard has snuck in here either. Getting down on my hands and knees, I reach under my bed and drag out my Null’s Emergency Kit. It’s a small but secretly powerful box, with a look-away spell so only I can find it. Flipping open the lid, I slide on the protection bracelet from Auntie I used to wear back in my Shadowcraft Prep days.

I stash a selection of other defensive and offensive charms and potions in my purse’s false bottom. Goddess, I pray I won’t be forced to use them in front of the guys.

OceanofPDF.com

29
A FARMERS' MARKET BASILISK

SILAS

As soon as we're out of Darlene's house, we search the area to ensure that Chad is no longer lurking in the shadows. Satisfied he's gone, we meet up in our backyard to talk about what happened.

"I want to hunt that asshole down and kill him," Conrad says, beating me to it.

I never wanted to be a monster, but if it keeps my mate safe, then that's what I'll be.

"But if we kill him, Darlene might frown upon that," Zeke warns.

"Does she have to know?" Conrad whispers.

"We're already keeping enough secrets from our mate." I hate that we'd be adding to that list, and that gives me pause.

"But if he comes after her…" Zeke shrugs, and we nod our agreement to his unspoken threat.

"We can't be held responsible for what happens," Conrad adds.

"Exactly." Zeke grinds his teeth. "Besides our human sides' protectiveness, our beasts won't allow our mate to be harmed."

I nod slowly, and my beast pushes forward, wanting to protect her at all costs, even if she might not forgive me. My basilisk's eyes cast a glow on

their faces, and my brothers know how close I am to being lost to rage. “For now, let’s just keep watch over her.”

None of us get any sleep. Conrad, Zeke, and I take turns watching over Darlene’s house throughout the night to keep her safe, but no one truly rests.

I pace the hill at the edge of the forest behind our houses. It has the best vantage point. All is quiet, *so far.*

In every scale of my hide, I know we have not seen the last of Chad. I must remain vigilant. I can’t let my guard down, *ever.* If that means I never rest my eyes again in my life, then so be it. I must protect my Darlene. If I lose her, it will be my undoing.

My mate.

Yes, that is what she is.

Mate.

At dawn, the sun on my scaled and feathered back warms my blood. A surge of energy rushes through my veins. The curtains are drawn in Darlene’s bedroom window. It’s Conrad’s turn to patrol, but I will stand vigil until Darlene is awake. Then I can prepare for our date.

After cleaning up, I load the van with my oversized backpack full of supplies with anything that might be needed and a picnic basket.

I planned to shower her with my attention and gifts, but now I worry Darlene might think I’m falsely *love-bombarding* like Chad did.

At 9 am sharp, not a minute early, not a minute late, I’m at Darlene’s door. I’m just about to ring the doorbell we covertly fixed, but Darlene opens the door first.

“Hi!” She gazes at me like I’m actually worth her time and affection.

My heart melts like warm icing. I’m relieved that she appears (almost) as excited as I am about our date.

She’s wearing a flattering sundress with a tiny purple-blue clematis print, strap-up gladiator sandals, and the cute, wide brim sunhat she wore to our pool party. Stunning. I’m touched that she’s wearing a printed fabric of my favorite flower. If there ever was a female worthy enough to wear such

a gorgeous and majestic bloom, it's Darlene. I wonder where she found this lovely item, and how I can buy more like it for her. Perhaps it's available on the *enter-webs* she uses.

I open the van's door for her, making sure her dress is all the way in before I close it. She lets out a soft, happy hum and smiles wide. Goddess, I love her smile. It's the brightest part of my day when I'm lucky enough to see it, let alone be the reason for it.

I wait, like any gentleman worth his weight should, for Darlene to buckle and situate herself before I start the van.

"The farmers' market is in the town center. Only a ten-minute drive," I inform her, not knowing what to say to break the ice. "They're all local, organic farms."

"That's good." She adjusts her dress meticulously. "Thank you for thinking of this. I've been meaning to check it out."

I've never been good at social interactions, and this is no ordinary situation. Everything is riding on it, but thankfully, when I'm around her, I'm not as nervous as I usually am. It's another sign Fate meant her for me.

After some light conversation about the only thing I can come up with —the *weather*—we finally arrive at the farmers' market. *Stones below*, I really need to work on my conversational skills. I'm comforted by the thought that at least here I'll have the opportunity to talk about things I know and enjoy.

When I pull the picnic basket out from the back of the van, Darlene makes a sound of approval.

"What a cute wicker basket!" Darlene runs her fingers along the smooth wood of the handle.

I can't wait until I can check out her *wicker basket* and she *handles* my *smooth wood* like that. Oh no, I sound like Conrad now.

I take a deep breath to calm myself. I can't let my beast rear its monstrous head. Today is about wooing Darlene.

With the conversation flowing easily, we wander around the market. I take her to my favorite local growers and vendors.

I've been watching Darlene through her windows, and she doesn't eat enough. She often skips *entire* meals. I'm going to make sure she's properly nourished. Starting today.

We load up on an assortment of various fruits, vegetables, bread, cheese, pepperoni, salami, and some sparkling apple juice and natural sodas

brewed right here in Midville.

For our picnic’s dessert, I’ve brought some of the cookies we made together.

I take note of all the items Darlene picks out for herself: local honey, handmade soaps, candles, and aromatic oils. With our arms full and smiles on our faces, we are ready to leave the market.

“And now to our picnic,” I announce.

“Where are we going?”

“To a little-known trail. We can find a spot that feels right to stop and eat.”

When we turn onto our street and park, Darlene asks, “Did you forget something?”

“No. I figured you haven’t had the chance to explore the woods behind our houses yet.” In fact, I know she hasn’t because I would have noticed her heavenly scent of buttercream and berries.

“It’s some of the most wild and beautiful land in the area. This forest is why we picked this spot to make our home.” I now know we were destined to pick this place because we were meant to meet Darlene.

From the back of the van, I sling on my backpack.

“That’s a big pack you got there.” Darlene raises her eyebrows.

“It’s best to be prepared for anything.”

The corners of her mouth curl up slightly, revealing a not-so-innocent looking smirk. “What's in it?”

I go through the abridged list: “Emergency blanket, first aid kit, compass, water purification straw, flare gun–”

She blurts out in surprise, “Wow, that's a lot. Were you a boy scout or something? And also, should I be worried?”

“I prepared so you wouldn’t have to worry.”

“But you prepared so much. Don’t you know these woods?” She glances out at the forest, and concern coats her voice. “How far are we going?”

I know the woods like the back of my scales, but she doesn’t.

“Not far. I won’t allow anything to harm you.”

She nods, hearing the truth in my vow.

With the picnic basket in hand, we enter the woods on the unofficial trail behind our back gates. My pulse quickens. I’m anxious to show her a few places I have in mind that are special to me.

Within several steps, our houses are obscured from view by the Douglas firs, ponderosa pines, and blue spruces. The narrow trail gradually ascends into the mountains as it meanders through rich green, lacy ferns of the forest floor.

Darlene slows her pace and inhales deeply. I can sense her stress melting away. I'm pleased the forest has the same effect on her that it does on me.

"Forest bathing," I comment.

"Huh?"

"The phytoncides in the forest air reduce cortisol and adrenaline. The Japanese call it Shinrin-Yoku."

"Wow. You really know your forest facts." She smiles at me, and I don't detect any sarcasm. She truly enjoys my knowledge.

As we slowly stroll into the high country, we discover vibrant patches of new varieties of fragrant flowers around each bend. Darlene beams in wonder at the aromatic bouquet of sensational swathes of reds, purples, blues, oranges, and yellows. Our eyes, as well as our conversation, are stimulated on our tour of the botanical gardens of the goddess.

With unguarded curiosity, Darlene cheerfully points out and inquires about the different species of flora we come across. She tells me about how artists through the ages have painted flowers and the implied meaning of their work—from Monet to Van Gogh to O'Keeffe. Her imagination runs wild in this alpine oasis as a well of inspiration springs forth new ideas for her own paintings.

I didn't think she could become even more beautiful, but she's sharing herself, her soul, with me, and I'm left speechless in total awe of this goddess.

We crest a small ridge and the sounds of babbling creek greet us. I lead her to a tucked away setting right next to the water. In a copse of maples, an outcropping of granite encircles a small grassy field like sentinels.

"Oooh, pretty. I bet this is one of your secret hideouts." Darlene playfully bumps her hip into mine.

Impressive.

Darlene's more intuitive than I expected for a human.

She walks in a circle along the edge of the field, examining the granite. Once she reaches the creek, she stops a few feet from the water's edge. Basking in the warm sunshine filtering through the maple's leaves, she

enjoys watching a dragonfly and a damselfly chasing each other over the fast-moving water rushing over the creek's boulders.

"Where to next?" She's glowing with happiness.

"How about you lead the way?" I suggest with a bow, seeing if she will pick up on where I want to go next.

"Don't mind if I do."

Darlene begins with a little hop, following a small path beside the creek that heads upstream. After a few minutes, we come to a fork in the trail, with one path leading up another ridge to the left.

"I wonder what's up here." Intrigue fills her voice.

Good. She's headed to exactly where I want her to go. We ascend a couple hundred feet to the top of a granite bluff that juts out above the surrounding forest. Far below, you can just make out our homes, nestled on the edge of Midville. Quaint houses and small farms dot the landscape of rolling hills as far as the eye can see.

With a breeze across her face, Darlene walks right up to the edge of the cliff with her arms outstretched, ready to soar. Apparently, heights don't faze her at all. Another win for me.

"You like it here too?" she asks.

I nod, happy that she is enjoying *my* forest.

Let's see if she can find the hidden path to my next location.

When she's ready to move on, she scans the trees at the forest's edge. After a few moments, she walks right up to a narrow path's mouth concealed by a small thicket of Golden Currant shrubs surrounded by tall pines.

Interesting, Darlene has keen instincts. She would make an excellent tracker. *Hunter*. If I didn't know any better, I would think she has supe blood coursing through her veins.

Darlene navigates through the trees and underbrush with me in tow like she's been here before and knows exactly where she's going. The path opens up to a small meadow. Soft grasses are dotted with patches of colorful and fragrant wildflowers. A stand of Quaking Aspens interspersed with Rocky Mountain Maples enclose my private sanctuary.

She walks around and takes it all in, brushing her hands across the soft florets of the tall grasses. Their tips slide through her fingers, and I long for her soft, gentle touch across my skin.

“This is really nice. Let’s sit here.” Her smile reaches all the way to her eyes.

The warm glow of the sun filtering through her wavy locks, the easy, relaxed sway of her body that’s hidden from view under her dress, and her radiant face beaming is because I brought her here, because of *me*. Her presence cracks open my heart and gives hope to my soul.

That settles it. This is the location for *our* nest. If I were in my basilisk form, my joy would fill my entire length, from my crown feathers to my tail feathers. I was really hoping she would pick this spot.

She studies my eyes with a soft smile.

My gaze lingers longer than it should before I look away.

“You seem… tranquil… happy here,” she comments as we listen to the sounds of the babbling creek drift up from the gorge below.

My heart leaps as she senses what this place means to me. “It’s my home.”

“Thank you for sharing your sacred place.”

It’s true that I’m happiest here, in my domain, but my new favorite spot is beside Darlene, no matter where she is.

She takes my hand to lead me to the center of the meadow.

Her touch almost makes me jump out of my skin, my beast demanding to be seen. This is dangerous territory. If I unleash him, there’s no telling what he’ll do. Or how she’ll react.

I know within every *scale* of my body that she’s my *mate*, but he might try to claim her before she’s ready of her own freewill. Or goddess forbid, he could accidentally hurt her, or worse. Basilisk mating venom might harm a fragile human. I shudder at the thought. She needs to know who I am, the *real* me, before I can even consider shifting in front of her.

I turn away and pull out a blanket for us to sit on at the spot she’s picked. I set out plates, flatware, and glasses for our picnic while Darlene pulls out our procured treats.

After we eat and drink our fill, I’m startled when Darlene lays her head in my lap. Then I dare to stroke her sensuous hair. She hums her approval, and I ease into caressing her.

It’s the first time since… Come to think of it, it *is* the first time I’ve ever been truly happy. This simple act of comforting my Darlene is all I need. All I’ll ever need.

She sits up to take her sandals off, untying them. “These straps on my lace-ups are digging into my calves.”

I frown. I made her hike around all day while she was wearing inappropriate footwear.

“Oh Silas, it’s not your fault,” she says, sensing my sudden mood change.

Goddess, she really is intuitive. It’s as if she can read my mind.

“You told me we were hiking today. It’s my fault that I decided to wear these to look cute for you.”

She feels the need to impress *me*? Perhaps she senses the mate match as well. But how could she, she’s only human.

I must make a greater effort to convince her how magnificent she is. “You already are the most beautiful blossom in the world.”

Darlene bites her lip sheepishly and looks away. Now she’s become the shy one.

Interesting…

With her sexy calves unbound, deep indentations from the laces crisscross her soft skin.

“You need to drink some water.” I hand her a bottle and put her legs on my lap.

Starting at her feet, I massage the grooves and creases out of her silky flesh.

“That feels amazing,” she breathes out in a sultry tone.

After I work out the marks on her calves, Darlene slowly hikes up her dress with a coy smile, encouraging me—no, daring me—to keep going up her thighs.

I have never touched a woman this way. Until today, I’d never even held hands with someone. Darlene is my first, and no matter if she accepts me as her mate or not, I vow she will be my last, for I can never touch another after this goddess allowed me the privilege.

How did a *monster* become so blessed to even talk with someone as incredible as Darlene, let alone please her with just my touch? The goddess works in magical ways.

Who am I to question the goddess when she bestows upon me such a wonderful gift as my mate? It would be an insult to *All-magical Herself* if I didn’t oblige.

As my fingers press into her strong but sensual thighs, my groin throbs with need, wanting more. But I might erupt, then my beast surely will claim her.

Only her legs.

It's all I'll allow myself to touch. I feel guilty enough doing just that. Anything more and Darlene must know who I truly am, *what* I am.

I avert my eyes from hers, fearing that the gorgeous windows to her soul will be the final trigger my beast needs to rise and show its monstrous head.

OceanofPDF.com

30
NATURE BOY

DARLENE

Silas' strong but sensual hands are driving me wild. Fortunately, my shy boy is taking my hint that I want *more*, that I *need* more. His hands pursue the hemline of my dress as I pull it up my thighs. I need his fingers exploring me, taunting my clit, sliding inside until he makes me come. I need his mouth ravishing me with the fervent kisses I believe he can provide. I need his cock deep inside me, pumping and filling me until we both release these pent-up feelings for each other.

With his fingers advancing toward my center at an excruciating glacial pace, I spread my legs so he has the motivation to finish what he started.

Silas' eyes go wide seeing the outline of my pussy through my thin, silky purple panties, and his pace quickens.

I suck in a breath, anticipating his hands reaching their final destination. With his fingers a mere molecule away from where I want them, the thin fabric is all that stands in the way of me finding my bliss.

"Touch yourself," Silas demands in a low, gravely voice. "Show me what you like."

My breath catches. Oh my fucking goddess, quiet Silas is a nurturer in the streets and a dom in the sheets. I always wanted to explore that side of

myself, being a sub, but I never was with anyone I felt safe enough to do it with.

I slide my hand under my panties, finding I'm already soaked. I'm into the dom sub thing more than I realized, and of course, into Silas. I finally get to experience this kink with someone I care about that actually seems to care about me. I intend to live this dream to the fullest and obey his every command.

"Panties off," Silas growls.

I slide my underwear off, and he gently, but firmly spreads my legs open again. My pussy glistens in the sunlight as the breeze teases my flesh. His gaze alone builds waves of pre-orgasm ripples throughout my body.

Fuuuucck me, and I wish he would. My clit pulses as if I'm about to come without any physical touch.

His eyes on me almost feel like a caress as he admires me.

"Now work that pussy how you like." Silas' eyes are filled with a hungry need while he watches my every single movement. Every stroke, every brush with singular focus.

I obey without delay, working myself to a peak. But I'm conflicted because I don't want this moment to end.

My fingers slip through my folds and circle my clit. I slide my other hand up my dress and squeeze my breast.

He licks his lips, looking as if he might launch forward and rip my dress off to expose my tits.

As I feel the building energy for an orgasm, I slip two fingers into my channel and pump. Wanting to give into the pleasure, the intensity and tempo of my ministrations increase.

"Slow down. Not yet." Silas senses that I'm about to come. "Make it last."

Goddess, that command thrills me.

Knowing that my fingers stimulating the sensitive fleshy pad inside my channel is my trigger, I remove them to slow the coming wave of release. I resume stimulating just my clit, which frustratingly lowers my sexual energy to a roiling simmer.

"Silas. Please!" I plead after what feels like an eternity of riding the pre-orgasm wave. "I *need* to come."

"Just a little more, my blossom." He grins ever so slightly.

Fucker. Silas is thoroughly enjoying this. Well, who am I to complain? I am too.

My breathing becomes ragged and my face flushes as I continue to work my pussy. “Let me come! I’ll do anything,” I beg.

“Anything?” He raises his eyebrows.

“Yes, anything, just let me fucking come!” I yell through gritted teeth.

“Then be a good girl, and come for me.” Silas’ words set me free.

I slam two fingers into my wet pussy and with just one stroke of my trigger point, my building sexual tension explodes. My thighs tremble as my pussy clamps down on my fingers.

I scream out my bliss to the sky, and a flock of birds scatter from a nearby tree, cawing as they fly away. I have never come this hard by myself with my own hand.

“Silas!” I collapse.

He catches me in his arms and cradles my head, soothing me as my mind reassembles itself.

As I bask in the afterglow in the safety of his embrace, I hear the annoying sound of a synthetic mosquito growing louder. I squint my eyes to see a drone high above and a couple hundred feet away, approaching us fast. Silas quickly pulls my dress down over my legs to protect my virtue.

“Fucking menace, how dare they invade *our* sacred space.” Silas jumps up with a furrowed brow.

He hurls a rock the size of a baseball at the dreaded machine and hits it dead on. It spins out of control in a death spiral with a whine.

Well, fuck me. That was badass and hot as hell. I’m not sure a professional baseball player could do that.

He brushes his hands off and rejoins me sitting on the blanket.

“Do we need to leave?” I gesture in the direction where the drone crashed. “I’m sure its owner will come looking for it.”

“I doubt it. There’s a gorge beyond the trees where it went down.” Silas’ eyes flash with anger while he clenches his fists.

“And if he does, he’d wish he hadn’t,” he hisses.

“My ever-vigilant protector.” I grin wickedly and place my hand on his knee, blinking rapidly. “What could I ever do to repay you?” I slowly move my hand up his thigh, toward his crotch.

Silas takes my hand in his. “No, not yet. Today is all about you.” He looks into my eyes a moment longer than usual. “Just being with you is

reward enough."

Aw, Silas is such a sweetheart for not expecting me to satisfy him. Although I've been longing to taste his mouth *and* his cock, I appreciate the unfamiliar commitment of a man focusing solely on my pleasure.

I curl up in his lap while he holds me, stroking my hair. We sit for a long while in silence, enjoying being in the moment together. As we listen to the untamed sounds and breathe in the natural fragrances of our special place in the wild, the sun warms our spirits.

It's wonderful to be truly present with someone, without the need to fill the quiet space with idle chit-chat and empty drivel.

Silas' presence calms me, stilling my overactive mind, and allowing my heart the space to feel. He brings peace to my soul. All of my worries and anxieties, sorrows and regrets melt and float away in the heat of the summer breeze.

On the way back down the mountain, Silas leads the way to the creek. We take the path that leads upstream along the water's edge back at the fork in the trail we encountered earlier.

After a short stroll, we veer off to the left, following a smaller tributary of the creek. Tucked behind a thicket of shrub trees, Silas shows me a bramble patch. He picks a large blackberry and hands it to me.

"Here, try it."

I pop it in my mouth to discover it's the sweetest tasting blackberry I've ever had. I hum my approval, but the berry doesn't even compare to how sweet Silas is.

"Blackberries usually don't do well in this area, but I found this special spot." He grins like an innocent boy sharing his secret briar patch with the girl he likes.

Even though Silas suggests he's only found these berries, I suspect he cultivated them here with his green thumb and wizardry plant knowledge.

"I thought we could harvest some wild berries to use in your cookies." He looks down at his hands.

"Yes, I love that idea. Thank you." I give Silas a quick hug.

We spend the rest of the afternoon, filling his wicker basket with wild blackberries, boulder raspberries, strawberries, and even mint.

On our way home, instead of taking the trail to the right that descends toward our neighborhood, Silas continues to follow the trail that leads downstream. “One last stop.”

After a short walk, I hear the water shift from a gently babbling creek to roaring rapids. We stop on a small outcrop of granite, and I see the creek slip away over a set of waterfalls to the floor of another gorge far below.

I’m stunned by how a tranquil little creek can turn into such a powerful force of nature so quickly. I’m glad Silas showed me this. Not that I was planning on it, but I’m definitely not going to swim in this creek. At least not without Zeke’s company.

It’s dusk when we finally return home to the back gate of the guys’ house. Silas, like the perfect gentleman he is, escorts me to my front door.

“Thank you for such a wonderful day. I loved every second of it.” I lean in and kiss him for the first time.

He sucks in a breath, almost surprised by my lips making contact with his. Did I go too far by initiating this? He’s watched me touch myself…

Right as I’m about to pull away, he returns my affection. He slides his hands into my hair and deepens the kiss with a sweep of his tongue.

My knees shake, and it feels like his do as well.

“*My blossom*,” he whispers, and the full weight of the endearment hits me like a wave.

OceanofPDF.com

31
CAMPFIRE AND CHILL

CONRAD

The last few days have been exhausting, secretly watching over her place at all hours of the day and night.

Despite Darlene's assurances that Chad isn't a threat, I know in my gut that isn't true. My sphinx's instincts have kicked into high gear. I'm certain Darlene is meant for us, and I have to protect her.

The new logo Darlene designed for our business has already arrived. Zeke and I are in the driveway waiting for her to come home from work, so we can unbox it together. Silas has been watching her place in his basilisk form all day to make sure Chad doesn't try to break in, but appears right on cue as soon as she pulls into the drive. I swear, we're tuned into her energy, like needy puppies waiting for their owner to come home.

"Hi!" Darlene beams her gorgeous smile at us and waves. "Oh, wow! Is the new decal here?"

"We were waiting until you got here to unveil it." I take her hand and lead her over to our van.

"I hope it turned out okay," she says with a bit of worry. "I know it wasn't a cheap investment."

She doesn’t know we don’t need to worry about finances. The only reason we bought this thing is because she designed it for us, and we want her to be happy.

Goddess, I dread her design will work too well, and we’ll have to actually do a job.

I throw my arm around her waist, pull her against my side, and she lets out a happy squeal of excitement.

Silas and Zeke unfurl the roll and place the decal right over the sad old one painted on the side of the van.

“It looks amazing.” I kiss her cheek.

She blushes and wraps her arms around me in a hug. Fuck, I love having her so close. I hope we can do it naked in the near future. I can’t wait to hear her make happy noises for other reasons.

“Thank you.” Zeke smiles over at her. “I love it.” What he’s really saying is that he loves her, but being human, she’s not ready for our level of devotion.

“Thank you.” Silas nods and averts his gaze. His monster is riding close to the surface with the threat of Chad lingering.

“Are you sure you like it?” She bites her lip.

We assure her that it’s perfect.

“Hey, I was wondering if you have time on Saturday for a date?” I finally ask.

Her face lights up again as she gazes up at me. “I do. What did you have in mind?”

“It’s a surprise.”

“Okay, but what should I wear?”

“Wear something comfortable for the outdoors. And maybe a light sweater in case it gets chilly.”

“I’m intrigued,” she chuckles.

It’s a legit eternity until Saturday arrives. I’ve had to ease the building pressure in my dick the last couple of days thinking about my special alone time with my Darling.

Ugh, I have it *baaaad*.

I can’t wait to taste those luscious lips again and see if I can taste the lower set and make her see stars.

I knock on her door at five. She answers, giving me a brilliant smile that makes my heart flipflop.

“Hey,” I breathe out, completely dumbfounded by her beauty. Why she’s taking a risk on three idiots like us, I’ll never know.

“Hey,” she responds, then opens her door wider and twirls. “Is this good?”

She’s wearing a cute little sundress with a light cardigan sweater. I take my sweet ass time admiring her legs and her curves accentuated by the flattering dress.

“You are perfection itself,” I say and mean it. She’s the perfect woman for me. “I couldn’t dream up a more lovely vision.”

She blushes and pats my chest in protest. “You look handsome, as always.”

My chest puffs out in pride at her words. Sure, I’ve known human women who think I’m cute, but to have *her* admiration is heady. I wasn’t the hot guy in the land of supernatural Mythic-level hotness. None of the three of us were. We were below average at best. And average here among humans.

“Thank you.” I extend my hand. “Ready?”

Her soft hand slips into mine without hesitation, and all is right with the realms. Something deep inside me settles after years of unease.

Then the nagging reality butts its head into my happiness. I’ll have to admit I’m not human at some point if I want forever with her.

Will she accept me? Us?

I have to convince her that we’re worth taking a risk on. That even though we are monsters, we can be loving partners. That we’ll do everything in our power to keep her safe. Even from our own family.

“Conrad?” she asks, confused as I walk past the van in the driveway.

I shake my head, but don’t explain as I lead her to the garage on the other side of our house.

Her eyes go round when she sees my vehicle. “What the… Why don’t you drive this all the time?”

It’s a cherried out, 1948 Ford F-1 Flatbed Pickup Truck painted an unusual bronze color. Flames that fade from red to orange to yellow stretch

from the front and down the sides. The grill and bumpers are all chrome. The flatbed is solid wood and has wooden side gates to hold cargo.

“I don’t want to get it dinged up, so I only take it out sometimes. But you’d be worth any scratch,” I tell her.

She rushes around to admire it. “This looks like something from a hayride, but tricked out. Is it from the 1950s?”

“Close, 1948.”

“I love it!” she declares as I open the passenger door for her to hop in.

We talk about classic cars on the way to our first stop. She’s oddly knowledgeable about vintage vehicles, but it makes sense as an artist that she would value the aesthetics of older cars.

I pull up somewhere I hope Darlene will appreciate.

“Bernie’s Cafe?” she asks with a grin.

“I hope it’s okay for a date.” I worry about the casual farm-to-table restaurant being a mistake. “But you mentioned how much you liked it and how you haven’t had a chance to make it back here.”

“You remember that?” Her mouth drops open. “I only said that in passing.”

“Of course I remember. When you speak, I listen.”

Her eyes water, and she waves her hand over them. “Sorry. It’s just… you guys have been all too good to me.”

“No, you’re too good to us for giving us a chance to woo the heck out of you.” I settle my hand on her knee and give it a squeeze. “Is it working yet?”

Her head bobs with the affirmative, and I’m pretty sure I float out of the truck on my way to open her door. Wait, I better not be actually flying. I remind myself to keep a leash on my beast. Thankfully, I have a bit more control than Silas and even Zeke. At least, on a normal day, but this isn’t a normal situation.

We study the menu, and she’s stuck between two choices. When she picks one, I order the second. She gives me a look, and I tell her, “So you can have some of mine.”

Darlene pecks my cheek right in front of the server.

Our meals come out right away, and we dig in, quietly making moaning sounds at the delicious food. I think she’s trying to work me up, and she’s

doing a great job. If her blooming scent is anything to go by, she's just as turned on by my moans.

She eyes my sandwich and waggles her brows.

I throw a protective arm over it and pretend I'm hoarding it. "Changed my mind." I growl. "*Mine*."

She barks out a laugh. "Hmm. Is there anything I can do to change your mind again?"

"This is a sandwich hostage negotiation now. What are your terms?"

"This date *might* end with a… happy ending." She winks.

I shove the entire plate toward her. "Deal!"

We trade sandwich halves, and I envision us doing this again and again. It feels effortless to be with her, spending time chatting and sharing a meal, unlike my family and the rest of the sphinx pride. They're the uptight Keepers of the Records Of Time for the Mythic Gnostics. Then I came along, a chaotic jokester who ruined their plans to continue their prestigious legacy.

Oh well. I take my last bite and my attention shifts back to where it should be, on Darlene.

When she's done, I ask, "Ready for phase two?"

She snorts out a laugh. "How many phases are there?"

"That's for you to find out." I give her the wink she seems to enjoy.

We both wash up and jump back into the truck.

When we get to Heaven Lake, she sucks in an appreciative breath at the sight. My sphinx preens at the choice of location to bring her. I've always fantasized about taking my mate here. I come often to watch the sunset, wondering if I'd ever meet the woman of my dreams.

She's here now, and I fear something will destroy it all before it truly begins.

Will it be her ex? Or my secret? Only time will tell.

"It's beautiful." She leans into me and rests her head on my shoulder.

We gaze at the lake's rippling water as the setting sun alights it with sparkles. The surrounding pine forest and mountain range provides a gorgeous background. That's one thing about Mythics, we love nature. And from what I know about other supernaturals, they do too.

It's a shame we have to hide away from the rest of faekind. But 'acceptable' supes have hunted us to near extinction. If my ancestors hadn't

found our island and hid it in a pocket universe, I wouldn't exist.

Fear can drive people of any lineage to do the stupidest things.

And I can't allow my fear of being rejected stop me now.

"I can't believe there isn't anyone here," she says.

"This is a secret spot. The general public visits on the far end." I pick up her hand and give it a squeeze, then kiss her knuckles. "I thought you might like to chill by a fire," I say it as more of a question. Goddess, I hope this isn't a dumb idea.

"Bonfire and chill?" She giggles. "Actually, that sounds fun." She bounces with excitement and my eyes catch on how her breasts dance in her fantastic dress. I can't wait to drag my canines over that plush flesh and nibble at her soft skin. Lick her nipples with my rough tongue and make her come.

Shit. I snap out of my lust-filled thoughts and find her staring at me with a knowing gaze.

Her tongue darts out to wet her lips, and she winks before she rushes out of the truck like a proper temptress.

Fuck. She doesn't know that my beast wants nothing more than to chase her down, tear that dress from her delectable body, and fuck her into the ground as we claim her.

"Minx!" I laugh and jump out of my door. I have to force myself to grab the basket of treats from the truckbed instead of hunting her.

She's already sinking her toes into the narrow strip of sand on the lake's beach when I reach her. Her eyes go wide when she sees the fire pit is ready to be lit.

"I came out here earlier," I admit.

Darlene happily perches on the log I picked out for us to sit on to watch the sunset and fire.

"I've never done this before, a fire on the beach." She frowns. "I suppose there are a lot of things I haven't done."

"From what you've told me, you've also done stuff others haven't. I mean, how many degrees and certificates have you acquired? Most people never get any higher education."

"You're right. I'm lucky to have an aunt who has supported my need to learn everything. It's silly for me to complain."

"I would feel sorry for you that no one has done this with you, but that just means I get to be your first." I sit down next to her and press to her

side. “I hope I get to be your first with a lot of other things in the future.”

She nudges me with playful affection. “I’d like that.”

“Okay. On with the evening!” I announce and fling a match into the pile of firewood as I light it with a bit of flair.

“I hope you left room for s’mores.”

“I thought you said you listened to everything I say?” she challenges.

Oh, shit. Did I miss something about her hatred of s’mores along the way? Dammit, I could have if I was daydreaming about her.

She bursts into laughter. “I *said* I’m *always* up for treats.”

“Oh, fuck, you’re messing with me.” I drag my hand down my face and sigh in relief.

Darlene wraps her arms around my bicep and squeezes tightly. “This relationship isn’t a pop quiz. I’m happy that you remember anything about me at all.”

“You need to have higher standards, but I suppose I’m happy you don’t, and you like me.”

She lightly smacks my arm. “Stop it. No more bad talking about yourself. One of the things I really find attractive about you is your confidence, especially when you’re performing. I want you to know I find you smart, good-looking, and amazing. I sort of feel like I can’t live up to your expectations. Or the others.”

“If I have to stop thinking I’m not enough, then so do you. Deal?” I offer my hand to make a pact. It’s dangerous for a human to do this with a supe under normal circumstances, but I won’t push any magic behind this bargain.

She leans against me and groans, glowering at my hand. “Okay, fine.” She relents and shakes on it.

We watch the fire take hold, without my magical encouragement. I want the magic for our night to be what Darlene and I can make together. Ugh, corny, but she brings it out in me.

“So what was it like growing up on a tiny island?” she asks.

“It was a bit frustrating since everyone knew everyone and all my business. Silas, Zeke, and I often snuck off and visited neighboring islands so we could be ourselves. It’s what really bonded us. We knew we couldn’t live there when we grew up, especially when…” I stop short.

“When what?” She turns to watch my face.

“This isn’t a great date topic.”

“If it’s about you, then it is,” she encourages. “I hardly know anything about you guys, even if it feels like I’ve known you for a long time.”

“My parents had promised me in an arranged marriage.”

“Oh, shit. I didn’t think that happened on… well, anymore.”

“They do happen in my family and on our island. But I didn’t like her and couldn’t imagine forcing myself to live out my days with her.” The idea that my long life could have been filled with a loveless bond makes me shiver with disgust. Especially now that I’ve found my mate match.

OceanofPDF.com

32
MARSHMALLOWS AND MAKEOUT POINTS

DARLENE

My heart goes out to Conrad with the idea that he was almost forced into a loveless marriage to please his parents.

As we toast our marshmallows, I think about how horrible it would be to have never met him. He brings a playfulness and sparkle to my life I hadn't realized I needed.

"I forget sometimes arranged marriage isn't just a trope in a romance book," I mutter. If I'd had any political or economic worth, my parents might have done the same to me.

"It's more common than most people realize," he agrees. "And it's ultimately what made the three of us flee the island. We were tired of living under our parents' thumb. We never fit in there anyway."

"I can relate." I hold his hand to let him know I appreciate him opening up to me about his past. "I'm glad you left and found some happiness here."

"And it's only gotten better in the last couple of months." He gazes into my eyes.

Damn, the fire really highlights his features. He practically glows, just like he does when he's worshipping the sun during naked yoga.

“Life has been getting a lot better for me since I moved here.” I lean over to give him a kiss and just as our lips touch, my marshmallow catches fire.

I yelp right in his face and blow out the blaze. He bursts out in joyful laughter. It’s good to be dating a guy who’s so easygoing for a change.

Instead of graham crackers, he places the marshmallows and a melted chocolate bar between two double chocolate chip cookies.

Be still my aching sweet tooth.

“You do *not* mess around with treats!” I praise, and his face lights up with happiness.

I don’t have a lot of playful childhood memories, such as making s’mores. With Conrad, I feel free to be fun and silly without judgment. I can’t wait to explore that side of myself with him.

We enjoy our dessert treat, and I begin to lick the melted chocolate from my fingers. He snatches up my hand and pulls it to his lips. All while staring into my eyes, he sucks each of my fingers, one by one into his mouth, licking me clean. I never expected this to be an erotic experience, but I’m squirming with a throbbing clit by the time he’s done.

He pulls out two wet towelette packets from his basket and hands one over while using one on himself.

I chuckle. “You had these the whole time?”

“Yeah, but my way was more fun. Wouldn’t you agree?”

I nod.

The fire dies away to coals, and Conrad gets to his feet, pouring some water over it to snuff it out completely.

I guess the night is over as Conrad helps me up and grabs his basket.

“It’s been a lovely night,” I say as my lips pull down into a frown.

He opens my door and then gets into the truck. “But it isn’t over yet.” He turns to drive up a narrow dirt road.

By the ambient light of the city, I can make out the shape of the hill we’re going up. “That sort of looks like a pyramid.”

“Very good. That’s Pyramid Mountain.”

“Are you taking me to a make-out spot?” I tease.

“Yep.” He gives me a look that tells me despite his teasing tone, he’s serious.

Damn. I’m here for it. I’ve been waiting to get my lips and hands on him again since that smoldering first kiss behind the Comedy Club.

He parks near the pinnacle and shuts off the engine. I can see the lake down below as it twinkles.

“Be right back.”

I hear him rustling around in the back of the truck, then my door opens, revealing Conrad’s handsome face. “M’lady.” He offers his hand.

“*Malört*,” I tease back, referencing our liquor joke, and I’m rewarded with his beaming smile.

When we reach the back of the truck, he easily lifts me by the waist and sets my tush on the truck bed. Instead of a hard surface, there’s a soft camping mattress covering the back. Toward the cab, there’s a pile of throw pillows and blankets.

“Oh, wow,” I breathe out, and he hops up next to me.

He encourages me to climb deeper into the bed and lean against the pile of pillows. Then he tosses a light blanket over my legs.

Conrad stretches out next to me and gazes up at the clear, starry night overhead.

“The stars are even brighter up here,” I whisper as my gaze follows his, and I admire the view.

“I come out here a lot.”

“With all your girlfriends?” I poke. Only a tiny bit jealous that he’s probably *wooed* plenty of women here. Okay, maybe more than a little.

He glances over at me. “No. You’re the first.”

“*Suuure*,” I scoff lightly.

“Seriously.”

I hear the truth ring in his words. “You’ve never been tempted to bring a date here?”

“I haven’t dated anyone.”

“What do you mean? So you only do hookups?”

“No. Unless you count my hand, I’m a virgin.”

I nearly choke on my spit. “You?”

“What does *that* mean?”

I flush with embarrassment. I guess that sounded weird. But he mentioned he was in his late twenties. How does someone like him get to this age without someone claiming his *innocence*?

“I just thought you were sort of a player. You kind of have a confident fuckboi vibe sometimes.”

“Thank you?” He lets out a soft chuckle. “I suppose I should be glad I don’t come off as a loser.”

“Hey!” I cup his cheek and make him look me in the eyes even though we can barely see each other’s faces. “Being inexperienced isn’t a bad thing. Actually, I find it incredibly hot.”

“Really?”

I think about the fae, and how most of them are very free and open with sex and their bodies. Exploring is encouraged. Which was completely fine, but it meant I never got to be anyone’s first in anything.

Welp. The virgin trope is hot for a reason, and I have more than one book with it in my collection.

“Yes, really.” I lean over and press my lips to his.

He cups the back of my head and deepens the kiss. My lips part, and his tongue brushes over mine. We both moan, and my hand slides up his shirt to feel his warm chest, his muscles rippling when he moves to get closer to me.

Conrad rolls over my body, and his muscular thigh slides between mine, giving me something to rub my needy clit against.

Feeling lightheaded, I suck in a breath, and his sunshine and bergamot scent fills my lungs. Damn, why does he always smell so good?

His large hand moves down my side until he finally grips my ass and squeezes. “Fuck, Darlene,” he murmurs against my lips, as if just getting a handful of me will undo him. Maybe it will.

His hard cock is poking into my stomach with each slow grind of his hips. Then he slips his hand under the hem of my dress, moving my underwear out of the way so he can knead my ass with nothing between us.

I pull on his shirt, needing it off him so I can get my fill. Hell, I need his pants off too. He’s been teasing me with his nakedness, and now I want to lay my hands on the golden skin he brags about.

“Off. Now.” Then I remember to be polite. “Please.”

He gives me a panty-melting chuckle, and lifts away quickly to appease me, tugging his shirt off.

My eyes must light up with excitement as I murmur the word, “Mine.”

There’s a quick inhale of breath, indicating he might just like a possessive woman. I can be that for him.

“You like what you see?” he asks.

I pull my dress over my head. “Yes. Do you?”

A low growl rumbles in his throat. I briefly worry he could be a shifter, but no, he's just a horny virgin.

"I love it," he says with hushed awe as he takes in every inch that isn't covered by my panties and bra. "You're the most gorgeous sight I've ever seen."

Our mouths crash together in a feverish kiss, then he works his way down my chin to my breasts. His teeth scrape along the edge of my bra, making me whimper with desire. I'm ready to rip the damned thing off my body when he sets his hot mouth over my hardened nipple through the lace and bites just hard enough to make me keen.

I arch my body to get him to take more from me. He obliges and pulls down the lace and sucks on my tit. Grinding against his clothed thigh, I reach out for the button on his pants.

He stills when he feels where my hand has gone.

"Is that okay? May I touch you?"

The cat has got his tongue. I hope my pussy cat will get a chance with it soon.

He nods vigorously. "But fair warning, I may not last long if you do."

"Tell me if it's too much. And even if you come the second I set my hands on you, I will take it as a compliment."

"Okay," he whispers, then gives me a sweet kiss.

The zipper flies open as his hard cock presses against the pants. No underwear to be seen. I knew he would be a commando guy.

I shove the pants aside to admire his hard length.

My hand strokes down to the base, and he lets out a pained groan.

"*Darlinggg*," he says like a prayer.

His dick is perfect. Not too big, not too small. This thing is going to fill me up *just right*. A perfectly average and wonderful peen. No insanely gigantic supe cock that will perforate my lungs… in either direction.

This is the… Goldilocks cock.

The Goldicock.

OceanofPDF.com

33
PERFECTLY SIZED

CONRAD

"You're fucking perfect," she murmurs as she strokes my shaft.

"And your soft hands are gripping me perfectly," I praise. *Thank goddess. I made it the right size for her.*

I didn't want to freak Darlene out with my sphinx dick. Shifters have the ability to do a lot with their bodies, and one of the gifts of a sphinx is to manipulate any body part… Well, mostly. Eventually, she'll have to see it in its natural state if she says yes to a mate bond and accepts me as a monster.

I'll show her the other version of me when she knows the truth. But we're not ready to confess that we're supes, and especially not about us being Mythics. I hope our secret is out soon since none of us are okay with keeping it from her. We can't just spill the secret to a human that isn't our mate, and she'll need to feel the pull to us too before we can tell her.

If I didn't wholeheartedly believe she's my mate—*our* mate—then I wouldn't be going this far tonight. I feel a bit guilty, then I remember how Zeke used his tentacles on her. Even Silas had the scent of her release on his skin when he returned home the other day. I want the honor of bringing her to bliss too.

My sphinx side practically demands I give her as many orgasms as we can tonight, thinking it'll prove to her that we're a mate match.

"Tell me what to do to please you," I ask, hoping she'll get off on teaching a dumb cub like me. And fuck, the idea of a woman bossing me around during sex has always turned me on. It's the central theme to most of my fantasies.

Darlene was shocked that I'm a virgin, but she doesn't realize that at twenty-seven years old, technically we've only just come of age as Mythics, and we don't even have all our powers yet. Our parents considered us unruly teens when we set out on our own.

"You're doing a great job already." She squeezes my dick, and I almost come.

Even though it kills me to do it, I pull away so she can't torment me as I ride the line of sanity.

Darlene pouts, and I close back in and nibble on her luscious bottom lip. She turns away with a giggle. I kiss down her delicate neck and when I get to her bra-covered breasts, she commands, "Take it off."

A shiver runs down my spine to my balls as her demand washes over me.

Reaching around, I find the clasp and gratefully barely fumble with it. The bra falls away and reveals the most beautiful set of breasts. I thank my supe eyesight that I can see all of her in the dark.

I cup her full tit and pinch her pebbled nipple with my thumb and forefinger.

She moans and begs, "Suck it. I don't mind it a bit hard."

Doing as she says, I start off gently suckling because I doubt she wants it as hard as I could give it to her. I'm encouraged by her arousal blooming in the air and her cute little noises. My hand drifts down over her soft stomach to dip between her thighs.

Her panties are soaked at the gusset.

"You're so wet. Is this all for me?"

She nods and cants her hips to encourage my touch.

"May I please taste you?"

"Yes, I want your mouth on me."

Instead of launching straight to the prize and diving in, I remember the saying slow and steady wins the race. I can do this. I can make this good for

her. I just have to pay attention to what her body tells me it likes. If I can't figure that out, I'll tell her to boss me around.

My cock throbs with that thought. And that I'm going to taste her nectar from the source… from my mate.

Trailing kisses down her torso and just over her mound, I chuckle darkly as she squirms with excitement and need. I love that I can make her feel this way.

I give her pussy a kiss right over her panties, and she sucks in a breath and bucks.

"Rip them off," she orders.

Out of her sight, my finger extends a claw and snaps the string at her hip. She gasps when I yank the damaged scrap over and down her opposite leg and out of the way.

Her legs fall open, and I'm welcomed to the holy land. The starlight is strong enough for me to see how slick and ready she is for me. Fuck, how I want to sink into her wet heat and claim her.

"Stop staring," she says a bit shyly. When I glance up and smile at her, she gains some gumption. "And get to work."

"Yes, ma'am!" I slide my finger over her slick labia and up to her engorged clit. She hisses and moans with my light touch. So soft, so delicate. But pussies are magical and no matter how fragile they seem, they're able to stretch and take a pounding. I can't wait to test that out with my beast's barbed cock.

I move lower so I can taste her. I plant kisses along her inner thigh, working closer until I reach her creamy center. I stare right into her eyes over her mound, and give her my first lick. Magnificent.

She freezes and whimpers. "Yes. More."

At first I'm tentative, but as I find the spots that send her quivering, I lap at her, wishing I could live here forever, servicing my woman.

"Use your fingers, Conrad."

I slide one finger in and her tight pussy grips me like it wants to suck me in whole. And I'm ready to go. After a few strokes, I add another finger, and that seems to rile her up. She's grunting and fucking herself on my hand. I suck at her needy nub and find the fleshy pad inside her that makes her quake.

"So close," she whimpers.

I shift my tongue to create rough ridges, and I lick over her entire sex from rosebud to clit. She screams out to the heavens, seemingly to call the stars down from the sky.

My fangs ache to descend, sink into her thick thigh, and claim her.

Her pussy contracts even tighter around my thick fingers and my only thought is how I want to feel her milk my cock. I pump my hand to keep the orgasm going, and I'm overcome with the idea that I gave her this pleasure. *Me*.

"Conrad!" she shouts my name as she crests again.

My balls tighten and the telltale sign of my release hits me.

"I'm going to…" I gasp.

"On my tits," she orders, reaching for my cock.

Holy shit. If I wasn't already in love, I am now. And I'm already coming as I straighten my body so I can aim my seed to cover her gorgeous breasts.

She gives my dick a few strokes, and I watch in awe as I paint her with white ropes.

I don't know how I managed it, but my hand is still massaging her through her bliss.

Finally, she clamps her thighs, trapping my hand. "Too much. Oh, fuck…" She gulps air down, and pride fills me that my first experience has been this good for both of us.

I flop down next to her and grab a blanket to wipe her clean, but before I do, she stops me. Her finger swirls through the mess I've made, and she gathers a pearly sample onto her fingertip, then brings it to her mouth. She licks it clean and hums. "You taste good, Conrad."

"So do you. Like ambrosia."

She smiles and pulls me in for a kiss.

Life is good.

OceanofPDF.com

34
CHOAD STALKERS

DARLENE

I've been completely redesigning our client interface system at work, and it hasn't been easygoing.

"You coming?" Clover asks as she packs up her stuff.

"Nah, I want to get this bit done. I only have about an hour left to go, hopefully."

"Okay, be careful," Clover warns. She's been worried about me since I told her about Chad showing up at my house.

When I'm finally at a good stopping point, almost everyone in the building has gone home. There are two other diehards in the other office and the building's security, but that's about it.

Thankfully, I haven't seen or heard anything from Chad since game night. It probably helps that I changed my phone number. Otherwise, he would have bombarded me with texts after discovering me with three guys outside my place.

I had hoped he wouldn't be able to track me down since everything at the new house is under my aunt's name, but I suspect he's much sneakier and more connected than I thought.

I've even ditched all my social media because of him.

It’s been quiet since that night, so maybe he’s realized I have three protective guys in my life and buggered off.

My car is the only one in the lot, and I’m glad it isn’t completely dark out here. Just as I reach my car door, an SUV pulls up behind me, blocking me in.

I know who’s driving even before he jumps out.

My hand instinctively slips into my purse, and I grab one of my battle potions. It’s strong enough to knock out a powerful supe, and I idly wonder if it could be potent enough to kill a human. If he attacks me, I won’t hesitate or regret it. If he crosses the line now, then I could end up dead.

“Darlene,” he says in the voice he uses to sound reasonable when he’s trying to win an argument. “We need to talk.”

“No. You need to leave me alone.”

“I get it. You’re upset, but we can work this out.”

“We can’t. You don’t even want me. You want what you *believe* I can give you.”

He sighs, exasperated. Like I’m being difficult for fun.

“Go away.”

“Tell me this,” he demands. “You moved here because of the *sightings*, didn’t you?”

“*Sightings?*” I ask, confusion clear in my voice. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“You know exactly what I’m saying,” he sneers.

“You’re crazy.”

“I’m not, and you’re coming with me.” Chad lunges forward, his arm outstretched to grab my upper arm.

I’m just about to pull a potion from my purse to fight him off, and a body appears between us, slamming Chad’s arm away from me.

I step back and gawk.

“Back off,” Conrad roars. His already tall frame seems even larger, wider. Puffed out like an alley cat in a fight.

“Fuck you, man,” Chad bleats out. I can hear he’s nervous, which is rare, because he’s six foot three and packed with muscles. “This isn’t about you.”

“You’re right, *Choad*. It’s about Darlene.” Conrad projects his voice over his shoulder. “Do you want him here?”

“I don’t want him in the same country as me.” I step out from behind Conrad and glare at Chad. “Don’t bother me ever again.”

His eyes are dark and murderous. “This will never be over.”

This isn’t about me. He just doesn’t like losing, and he lost what he thought was his answer when I ran away.

Storming to his SUV, Chad slams his door shut, and screeches his tires on the way out of the parking lot.

“Ms. Darlene?” a male voice rings out. “Is everything okay?”

I turn to look at our security guard, Joe. He glances at Chad’s retreat and then warily at Conrad. My usually chill guy is radiating masculine aggression right now.

I slide my hand into Conrad’s so the guard doesn’t see him as a threat.

Joe steps closer and flicks his chin where Chad’s vehicle was blocking my car. “Was that man bothering you?”

“Yes. He’s my ex.”

“If I see him harassing you again, I’m going to call the police.”

I worry that my bosses might think I’m more drama than I’m worth if they find out I’ve brought a violent jerk to their door. “I don’t want to be a problem.”

“Nonsense.” Joe waves me off. “Ms. Bev knows how women are often targeted by assholes. Besides, I won’t report it to her directly unless he comes back and causes trouble.”

“Okay, thanks.” My shoulders relax and fall back in place. I hate the idea of being a victim since I was one for so long in the supernatural world. I had hoped things would be different in the mortal realm. How naïve.

When Joe is out of earshot, I release Conrad's hand and turn to him. “Were you stalking me? Should I be worried?”

“I just happened to be dropping by to see if you wanted to hang out and saw him trying to grab you.”

I look for his truck or van, but don’t see it. “Where’s your ride?”

“Uh, Zeke dropped me off. We figured you’d give me a ride back to the house.”

I’m not sure if I completely believe his answer, but they are oddballs, and it would be something they’d do. Besides, I didn’t mind the assist with Chad.

I’m a bit of a mess on the drive home. I keep checking my rearview mirror and scanning for Chad’s SUV around me. Conrad tries to calm me by placing his warm hand on my leg and giving me a comforting squeeze. It helps, but doesn’t erase my worries.

It isn’t until I pull into my driveway without being accosted that I relax. I don’t think Chad is dumb enough to approach me at my house again, but who knows.

As if he’s psychically tuned into my moods, Silas hurries over to my car and opens the door for me. “What happened?”

I try my best to settle my shaking hands and grab my purse and plaster on a smile.

It doesn’t work. Silas narrows his eyes and asks again, “Was it Chad?”

At my nod, he pulls me into his arms, and his hands slide up and down my body, as if he’s checking for injuries.

“What did he do?” Zeke strides over to us.

“He blocked my car in the lot at work and insisted I talk to him, but Conrad showed up and scared him off.”

“I know you don’t want to be a problem, but we aren’t going to let him get near you again,” Conrad promises as he steps closer and runs his hand down my back.

“You can’t watch me twenty-four-seven,” I argue as all three crowd around me.

“We can.” Zeke winks and strokes his fingers over my cheek. “I’ll take the first shift… in your bed.”

I chuckle, because I might just cry if I don’t. I never had someone care so much for my safety except for my aunt. And it feels a lot different coming from them, men I just met.

I guess if he needs to stay with me to keep an eye out, then it makes sense to do it in my comfortable bed.

“Seriously, will that be okay?” Zeke pleads.

I hate that I feel so vulnerable when Chad is around. I don’t know what lengths he’s willing to go to get what he wants from me. Why can’t I allow them to help me? Why can’t I lean on them? It would only make them feel better knowing I was safe. And with the guys around at night, I doubt Chad will bother me. I’ll be able to get some rest. That is, if I don’t stay up all night enjoying my time with a hot guy in my bed. Which isn’t a horrible reason not to get sleep.

I want to protect them from my past, but it seems they don’t intend to walk away.

OceanofPDF.com

35
THE NEVERENDING SLEEPOVER

ZEKE

"Yeah, I think I would like that."

"Awesome!" I turn and run toward my house.

"Hey, where are you going?" Darlene crinkles her eyebrows. "My house is this way." She points at her place.

"I need to get my jammies!" I say playfully, in the way Conrad jokes around, trying to release some of Darlene's anxiety.

Darlene chuckles. Good, it's working. She doesn't outwardly show it, but I can sense she's worried and scared.

Even though I'm trying to defuse the tension, I'm not taking this Chad business lightly. I'm not concerned for myself, but if he lays a hand on even one gorgeous hair on her head, I don't think I could contain my beast, and my wrath would rival Silas'.

Silas is barely containing his basilisk seething just below the surface of his skin. He's already the most untamed, monstrous out of the three of us. Emotions trigger him at a primal, core level.

That's why he got into gardening, to calm and tame himself. So far it has worked.

But with his intense feelings for Darlene, I'm worried he might lose control completely. I don't want to even entertain that thought.

We need to deal with this *Choad* problem.

In under ten minutes, I return to Darlene's wearing my robe after doing my nightly bedtime routine in the privacy of my own bathroom. I'm just starting to get her to like me, no sense in making her think twice because she was exposed to my quirky habits.

I find Silas and Conrad standing guard in the kitchen watching Darlene make a cup of tea.

"You do realize it's not even eight yet? I'm not going to bed for a few hours." She eyes me up and down in my bathrobe.

"Okay, what do you do until then?" I ask.

"Well, I check my e-mails, plan my next work day, and then I usually read or watch something." She pours a bit of honey in her tea while looking at my brothers in arms.

Conrad and Silas flank the kitchen at the entrance points, standing solemnly at attention like the royal guard. I get it, Darlene is our queen. I am on edge with the imminent threat to our mate, too.

But guys, come on, you're freaking her out.

Darlene walks to her dining room table and opens up her laptop. We follow her single file as if waiting for our marching orders. She glances up at us and shakes her head.

"Hey, how about we watch a movie?" I suggest, trying to cut through the palpable tension hovering heavily in the room. I walk over to her entertainment center and peruse a stack of DVDs.

"How about one of these?" I hold up a copy of *The Princess Bride* and *The Neverending Story* in each hand.

"Either sounds good. They're both my favorites." She closes her laptop. "I won't be able to concentrate on anything else anyway with you all being helicopter daddies."

We give each other confused looks.

She rolls her eyes and blushes. "It means hovering over me, watching my every move."

"*Ohhhh*," we say in unison.

"How about you guys pick," she suggests.

"*The Neverending Story* looks interesting." Silas studies the cover of the DVD case.

Conrad and I nod our agreement.

She sets up the movie on her TV, and we sit on her large couch. The three of us barely fit, with me in the middle and Conrad and Silas on either side.

Darlene turns around and sees us all cozy, so she scooches the armchair in view of the TV.

“No!” I say with more intensity than I intended.

“Well, where am I supposed to sit?” She places her hands on her hips.

“On my lap.” I pat my knee.

She shrugs and climbs into my lap. Silas and Conrad each place a hand respectively on one of her knees as the opening credits of the movie roll by.

Within the first fifteen minutes of the film, we lighten up and relax our rigid posture. By the midpoint of the film, we’re all in the kitchen making popcorn, getting drinks, and debating what will happen next in the story.

When the film ends, I hear more than one sniffle, but none of us dare look at each other for fear of showing our weepy eyes.

“Sleeping time.” Darlene yawns and stretches, rubbing her luscious ass against my crotch. She slides off my lap and puts away the movie.

Conrad and Silas become somber and reluctantly stand up to head for the door. “Night, Darlene.”

She rushes over and gives them each a peck on the cheek.

I follow them outside and put my hand on each of their shoulders. In a serious tone, I reassure them, “Hey, I got this. I got *her*.”

“She’s trying to downplay this, but Chad was about to abduct her,” Conrad snarls. “It took everything in me to not tear him apart and probably scare her to death.”

“Fuck.” I rub my fist, wishing I could destroy that man.

“Don’t take advantage of her. She’s probably afraid and vulnerable,” Silas warns.

I narrow my eyes at him. “Really? You think I would do that?”

“I don’t know. She’s as tempting as a siren,” Conrad says. “But after tonight, realizing that Chad is really a threat, I don’t think we should take things further right now.”

“And we need to tell her about what we are,” Silas adds.

We all grunt our agreement.

Darlene calls from inside, “Zeke?”

They nod their farewells, and *finally* leave me alone with her.

I go back inside to find Darlene at the stairs' landing. "I'm going to get ready for bed." She turns to head upstairs.

I sit back down on the couch, and she stops to look at me.

"The bedroom's up here." She gestures.

"I can sleep on the couch. Don't you want some privacy?"

"Oh, please. Stop being weird." She waves for me to follow.

While Darlene gets ready for bed in her ensuite, I take off my robe and sweatpants, leaving me in my boxer briefs and a T-shirt. I normally sleep in the buff, but I don't want to be presumptuous. I fold my clothes and when I set them on a chair by a small desk, I can't help noticing numerous sketches and drawings spread across it, some of them feature me, Conrad, and Silas.

"Those are ideas I get in the middle of the night," Darlene says, coming out of the bathroom.

She appears to be wearing nothing but an oversized T-shirt with a picture of a man in a trench coat flashing a nude female statue with the caption, "*Expose yourself to art*."

I chuckle.

"I make a rough sketch so I don't forget my ideas."

"Are these ideas from dreams?" I ask, curiously.

"Sometimes." She shrugs.

"These are outstanding. For being just rough sketches, these drawings look like finished pieces." I examine them more closely. "You're so talented."

"Thanks." She blushes and looks away.

"Beddy-bye time?" *Oh my goddess*, I can't believe I just said that out loud. But I'll blame it on not getting enough sleep this past week since we've been watching for *Choad's* return. I yawn and stretch my arms over my head.

"Zeke!" She cries out, sounding panicked enough to make me think Chad just entered the room.

"You have a rash on your stomach." She points to the skin that was exposed while I was stretching.

"Oh, it's nothing." I quickly pull my shirt down.

"The hell it is." She pulls my shirt up to discover it runs all the way to my neck and gasps. "Turn around."

She inspects my back only to see that it's completely covered as well.

“I think you’re having an allergic reaction. We need to get you to a hospital,” she says in a panic.

She grabs a pair of jeans, jumps backward onto the bed, kicks her legs in the air, and slides them on in a swift motion. In the process, I see she’s wearing teal-colored underwear. I grin to myself that she’s once again wearing *my* color.

“Darlene, I’m fine.” I put my hands on her upper arms. “It’ll be gone by tomorrow. It was on my legs and arms earlier, and it’s already cleared up.”

“My goodness, how’d you get that?”

“Swimming. But really, I’m fine.”

“Swimming? Where? In a toxic waste dump?” She looks at me, narrowing her eyes.

“No, at the community pool.”

“Well, that’s a serious health hazard.” She furrows her brow and looks ready to storm city hall.

“No, it’s nothing like that.”

“Wait. Why were you swimming there when you have an awesome pool here at home?”

“Uhhh…” She’s not letting this go.

“Go on.”

“I volunteer at the community center pool as a lifeguard, and I teach underprivileged kids how to swim.” I take a deep breath. “The chlorine in the pool irritates my skin, and today I had to fill in for another instructor’s classes, plus my own. So I was exposed more than usual.”

My skin absorbs much more than a normal human, so I’m more susceptible to chemicals in the water.

“So, it’s like eczema?”

“Something like that.”

“Does it make you have a rash every time?”

“Maybe a little.”

“You poor thing. It looks painful.” Darlene approaches to hug me, but stops short for fear of hurting me.

“It doesn’t hurt. Silas made me a salve.” I pull her into an embrace.

“I really admire what you do for the kids, but maybe you need to find something else to do as a volunteer.” She pulls her head away from my chest to look into my eyes and cups my cheek.

“It’s not a problem. I’m used to it. And I don’t know what else I have to offer.” I kiss her forehead. “I’m just a water guy.”

“You’re far more than that.”

We crawl into bed, and Darlene is extra careful around me.

“Really, it doesn’t hurt.” I pull her to my side so she can cuddle up to me.

“You’re not lying to me?” She looks into my eyes and takes my hand into hers.

“I wouldn’t dare.”

Fuck, but I am lying…

“Who’s the big, strong man, being a hero for the kids?” She kisses my hand.

I need to tell her…

“A mentor, teaching them how to swim.” She leaves a trail of kisses up my arm and to my cheeks.

But how? When am I—when are we—going to tell her?

“Who’s the hot and sexy lifeguard in my bed?” She straddles my thighs and reaches for my cock.

We let this go too far…

I gently take her arms, flip her around, and spoon her on the bed. She wiggles her ass, pushing up against my growing erection. Instead of taking advantage of her vulnerable emotional state, I hold her tight and stroke her hair.

“Oh, this is nice,” she hums. “I don’t think I’ve ever had someone snuggle with me in bed.”

What? How is that possible? None of her crappy exes held her? I want to kick Chad’s ass even more now. That said, I don’t like the idea of him ever touching her.

“Then let me be your first,” I whisper, and she falls fast asleep.

Her nearness, her intoxicating scent, and her soft curves are pure torture. It’s all I can do to keep my beast at bay. Keep my tentacles to myself. Stop myself from claiming her.

I must maintain my restraint.

I can’t believe what Conrad has already done, even shy Silas. Hell, who am I to point tentacles? I got seven more pointing back at me as I’m the worst offender. I fucked her with my tentacles for goddess’ sake.

What were we thinking? Getting romantically involved, living some fantasy that everything will just work out, with a human under false pretenses?

She doesn't deserve this. Especially a human as delightful and caring as Darlene. She doesn't deserve what we are.

She's bound to find out, sooner or later. One of us is going to slip up and let our emotions get the best of us, revealing the monster lingering just below the surface. Even if we manage to keep this charade up, and somehow she doesn't discover our secret, we are putting her in danger whether she knows about us or not.

We are dangerous. None of us would ever intentionally cause her harm, but in a fit of passion, we could hurt her.

We're dangerous to be around. Mythics are hunted, imprisoned, even killed, because in fae, we're the boogeymen, the mythical creatures that go bump in the dark night. It's not unheard of fae crossing over to the mortal realm to pursue us.

There are also mortal hunters—cryptid hunters, as they're called here—that could pose a threat. Not to us, of course. No mortal hunter has ever captured or even seriously injured a supe, let alone a Mythic because of our superior abilities. But Darlene is not a Mythic or even a supe, she's a human who could get caught up in the crossfire.

We would never forgive ourselves if something were to happen to her because of us.

And I can't lose another person that I care about because of me.

If I were to lose Darlene because of who and what I am, I would throw myself into the deep abyss, never to return to the light of day.

We have to tell her what we are, and soon. *Monsters.* I fear it may already be too late. How could she ever trust us again when we have been living a lie for so long with our mate?

And what if she can't handle the truth about what we are and that monsters actually exist. Are we prepared for what must be done?

Will Silas be able to go through with it? Erasing someone's memory, especially a human's, is not an easy matter without consequences. We don't know what could happen. He could end up scrambling her brain permanently.

And if that happened, it would be his undoing. It would be for all of us. I fear Silas would lose himself to his monster, forever unable to shift back

to human form. He'd be a *perma-monster*.

We didn't think of that, did we? We're just selfish pricks, wanting her for our monstrous selves, refusing to see the potential repercussions of our careless actions.

OceanofPDF.com

36
SNAKE IN THE GARDEN

DARLENE

The weekend came and went in the blink of an eye. It's Monday, and I'm back to the grind, when I really wish I was home on my back, grinding on my guys, or at the very least, hanging out with them.

Goddess, it sounds like I loathe my job already. Don't get me wrong, I love my job. Well, at least the company I work for. But I need something to sink my teeth into creatively.

Wait a minute, I said *my guys*. Are they really all *mine?*

Darlene, you need to get a hold of yourself, you're beginning to sound like a character in a why choose romance novel.

Nevertheless, I'm still in shock over the whole thing. How'd I get so lucky to have not just one, but *three* thoughtful, caring, sexy, and fun guys? Goddess only knows.

And we do have fun together. I smile at the thought of what special things we're going to do with each other, both in and out of bed. I look forward to what attentive, creative, and exciting dates they'll come up with next.

But what I really love most is just being with them, even if all we're doing is watching a movie I've seen a hundred times and eating popcorn

together.

They also inspire me. Our monster cookie exchange ritual is rewarding, not just because we're baking from scratch fun, thoughtful, and tasty delights for each other, but it provides me with a creative outlet. It also provided me with a few extra pounds, but they don't seem to have noticed or minded.

Ever since Zeke and the guys put the idea into my head that I could sell my artsy monster cookies, I've caught myself pondering what it would actually be like to have my own business.

I find myself doodling cookie designs on pieces of scrap paper throughout the day, researching baking techniques at random times when I should be focused on what I'm supposed to be doing, and strategizing logistics of running a business when I should be sleeping.

Every time I think of an insurmountable obstacle or a roadblock as a reason why I shouldn't even be entertaining the idea, my subconscious mind pops out a perfect solution a couple of days later.

After lunch, I'm killing time by scrolling on my phone as I wait for the massive file of the completed client interface system project to upload to the company's mainframe.

I come across a cute meme of the Cookie Monster shoveling cookies into his mouth with the caption 'Me want all your cookies!' I go to forward it to the guys and realize I don't actually have any of their cell numbers. That's funny, I guess since they're always around I didn't have the need to get them. All I have is their business line from their work van.

I check the progress of the upload, and I should be able to check for any glitches before my shift ends. Good. Ever since Chad showed up to harass me at work, I make a point to leave by quitting time with everyone else.

I hate to admit this, but I'm rattled that Chad hunted me down and showed up to stalk me from several states away, now with a gun.

I don't let the guys know what I'm feeling because I don't want them to worry even more. They're already overachievers with their protection of me. At least one of them is always over at my place now.

I can only imagine what they'd do if I showed any sign of distress. If I didn't know they weren't tech-heads, I would think they'd have put cameras all over my house.

Don’t get me wrong, I appreciate everything they’re doing for me, including standing guard with a watchful eye, but I can’t even pee without one of them hovering.

Sigh, first-world dating problems.

Ironically, just a few months ago, I would’ve been ecstatic with just a drop of the attention the guys give me. But now, I wonder if there’s too much of a good thing. A girl needs a little downtime, right? Or am I crazy?

The most frustrating thing about this is they’re not taking advantage of sleeping with me, a willing and able woman with sexual needs. Ugh. I guess they're just hyper-focused on keeping me safe.

I turn onto my street, and see a swath of bright colors down at the end of the road. What in all of fae is that? As I get closer to my house, I realize it’s my front yard.

Pulling into the driveway, I find Silas leaning on a shovel in the middle of the yard with a wide grin, as if he was waiting for me to return home.

I jump out of my car and stare at the flower-packed yard in awe. “Oh my goodness, Silas, this is amazing.”

After picking my jaw off the ground, I ask, “But how? When I left this morning, you were still working on the irrigation system.” I narrow my eyes on him. “Did the guys help you? Hell, do you have a crew of people working for your business I don’t know about?”

I look around, expecting to see Conrad, Zeke, and a team of sweaty, burly men tossing back a few beers.

Silas shrugs.

“A bit much, don’t you think?” Betty chimes in as she approaches us on the sidewalk, walking Lil’ Bit.

“I think it’s amazing!” I defend Silas’ wonderful design and hard work.

“Eh.” She waves us off as she passes by.

“This must have cost a fortune. I know I didn’t give you enough money for all this.” I set my hands on my hips. “How much more do I owe you?”

“We’ll work it out later,” Silas says while shaking his head. He changes the subject with his eyes wide, seeking my approval. “Do you like it? I picked every flower and plant you liked and arranged it in the most aesthetic way possible.”

“Do I *like* it?” I throw my arms around his neck for a great big hug, kissing his cheek. “I absolutely love it!”

I pull out of our embrace to look him closely in the eye. “I just don’t know how you did *all* of this in only one day.” I sweep my hand wide, gesturing to my yard.

“It was nothing.” He shrugs it off. “The design took the longest. Once I knew what to do, executing the plan went pretty fast.”

“I should say so.” I’m still flabbergasted and baffled by how he created something so beautiful in such a short amount of time.

Zeke and Conrad walk up to us, and I give them a questioning look. They shake their heads and gesture toward Silas, knowing what I was about to ask.

“Well, I know it’s your turn to babysit me tonight, so you’re going to get a *special* treat for your hard work,” I say to Silas, who’s beaming with pride.

“Hey, we want special treats too!” Conrad sets his hand on Zeke’s shoulder.

“Maybe if you are good, you’ll get special treats on your sleepovers,” I tease.

Then I remember the oddity from earlier. “I was going to text you something, but I realized I never got your numbers.”

Zeke bites his lip and casts his eyes down to the ground. “Uh, we don’t have cell phones, just the landline that’s on the van.”

That’s odd for humans. “Why not?”

“I guess it’s a throwback to our island days. We’ve never liked being tied to a device. And people told us how it spies on you.”

They have a point on both accounts. Phones are spying on us. And another thing I don’t like is the expectation for an immediate response when someone texts.

“Silas, I almost forgot, I won’t need dinner tonight, I had a late lunch today. See you at the usual time?”

He nods. “Of course.”

About an hour later, I’m getting ready for Silas to show up for his turn of the nightly chaperoning. Even though it rankles a bit, I understand why the guys think I can’t take care of myself.

And Chad is dangerous. It’s why I fled here to Midville, but since he followed me here, I know I’m in more danger than I thought. Chad mentioned sightings. Are there supes here?

I’m very grateful that the guys are watching over me. I also appreciate the alone time with each of them. They take care of me, but more importantly, I really enjoy their company.

Each evening, we share a meal together that the guys bring me. They’re good cooks and always make things I like. I don’t have the best eating habits, often skipping meals because I forget to eat, so it’s one thing off of my plate—pun intended—that I have to think about.

The best part is we have the chance to get to know each other better, sharing stories, funny or deep.

I would come to appreciate them even more if they were up for sexy times. Tonight, I’m going to change that.

I love what Silas and I did on our picnic. I have a mind-blowing orgasm and the soaked panties to prove it, but I want more. I need to feel his body pressed up against mine, pinning me down. I need him to tell me what wicked things he wants me to do to him in his sexy, dom voice. Then I need him to fill any hole he desires with his stiff, hard cock, fucking me until I shatter.

Oh my goddess, Darlene. Down, girl. I’m going to come just thinking about what he’s going to do to me.

Right on cue, at the top of the hour, Silas rings the doorbell. I open the door, wearing nothing but a silk nightie.

“Come on in.” I walk away, swinging my hips. “Would you like something to drink?”

“Sure. I’ll have something if you are.” Silas stares at the bottom of my bare posterior peeking out from underneath my nightie. Good, it’s working.

I pour each of us a generous portion of wine and hand him one.

“Cheers.” I clink his glass.

“What’s the special occasion?” he asks with raised eyebrows.

“Oh nothing. I’m just showing my appreciation for the hard work you have been doing for me.” I brush my hand across his chest and lead him to the living room that I’ve filled with lit candles. A small wisp of one of my favorite incenses, cedar and pine, rises to fill the room.

“Unattended open flames are dangerous.” He looks as if he’s going to snuff them out to save me from a disaster.

“Sit,” I curtly order my dom and point to the couch. I hope he’ll take the bait, triggering him to assert himself over me sexually.

Silas sits while narrowing his eyes at the candles then at me, trying to figure out what I'm up to.

"And now for your special treat." I try for a husky voice and sit next to him. "Turn around."

He complies.

"You worked so hard today, you must be sore." I massage his shoulders.

"No. I'm okay."

Ugh. He's not getting the hint yet.

"Let me *rub* out your tense muscles," I whisper in his ear as my hands work their way down his arms. He lets out a little hum of approval.

Damn, he's solid, it's like I'm massaging ironwood. Silas is much more muscular than he looks. My core tingles in anticipation of him taking control of the situation, and then taking control of my pleasure.

My hands focus their attention on his back for a bit before I make my move and reach around to his crotch. He tenses slightly, straightens his back, and jumps up from his seat.

After blowing out all the candles, Silas gently, but firmly grasps my hands. "Let's go to bed."

Got 'em. That's exactly where I want to go.

OceanofPDF.com

37
WORKING MAN HANDS

DARLENE

Dammit.

The next morning, I wake up surly and even more frustrated. Well, that didn't work out as planned. I hear Silas downstairs, rattling around in the kitchen, probably making me breakfast. *I want a different kind of sausage*.

Ugh, I scream into my pillow.

They're probably trying not to take advantage of me because of Chad showing up.

But dammit, take advantage already!

After finishing another work day, I pull into my driveway to find Conrad waiting for me, holding a large, covered casserole dish with what I presume he made for us for dinner.

How do the guys know the exact moment that I will be home? It's not like I come home at the same time each night. If I didn't know them, I

would think they have a tracker on my car like Chad did. Or are they like those dogs that know minutes before their owner is coming home? I shrug.

“Greetings, m’lady! Your supper awaits thee.” He bows so low his forehead almost touches his knees while keeping the casserole dish perfectly level.

Well *fuck me*, and I wish he would already, Conrad is extremely flexible.

“M’lort.” I chuckle and reach to take the dish from him.

“No, it’s too hot for your hands.” He quickly pulls it away from my reach.

“Then how are you holding it?”

“Calouses.” He holds up his free hand. “I’m a working man.” He puffs out his chest and stares proudly off into the distance, his head held high.

That’s funny, I don’t remember his hands being rough.

“You may serve me now.” I unlock my front door.

We finish another tasty meal Conrad has lovingly made for us.

“Thanks. That was yummy as always.” I stand up and kiss his cheek as I take the plates to the kitchen sink.

“What would you like to do tonight?” Conrad picks up a towel to dry the dishes while I wash.

“Um, I’m kind of tired. I didn’t sleep well last night.”

Conrad sets his dish down, places his hand on my shoulder, and looks me in the eyes to see what’s wrong.

“No. It’s nothing like that. There’s nothing wrong. I just didn’t sleep is all.” I don’t bother to tell him the real reason was that I was pent up sexually with no release. And I don’t even have a moment alone to relieve myself.

“Anyway, I think we can take a hot bubble bath and then go to bed,” I suggest.

Conrad laughs nervously and resumes drying the dishes as I head upstairs with pleading eyes for him to follow me. Damn it, thwarted again.

You can’t blame a girl for trying, but I knew he probably wasn’t going to bite at my feeble attempt at seduction.

Instead of taking a solitary, long hot bubble bath, I opt for a quick cold shower. The cold water stings my hot skin, and I come to my senses a bit. I guess I need to stop pushing and let them move at their own pace.

After finishing my shower, I put on my least sexy oversized T-shirt and flannel shorts. I crawl into bed and eye the new book on my nightstand that I've been wanting to get back to reading.

Conrad quietly enters the bedroom.

"You ready for bed?" He kisses my forehead. "I'll let you get your rest." He turns to leave.

"No, please stay." I grab his hand before he escapes my *horny* clutches.

He stretches out next to me and on top of the covers, leaning against the headboard. "Sure, anything for you."

If that were only true…

Noticing my book, he picks it up off the nightstand. "What's this?" He thumbs through the pages of the large paperback.

"Bewitching Monsters, by Juniper Jade. Hmm, *interesting*." He examines the cover of a woman in a sexy red dress with several monsters standing behind her. "You want a bedtime story?" He smirks.

"You sure? It's *very*, let's say, *descriptive*," I warn.

Conrad nods and grins like the Cheshire cat.

He opens to my bookmark, and puts his nose to the pages and inhales deeply. Aw, he's a weirdo like me. I love the smell of ink on paper of a new book.

"Let's see where you left off." He puts his arm around me, and I snuggle up to him for storytime.

He reads aloud in his stage voice I heard at the comedy club. *"'I need to be inside you.' He rips off my jacket and shirt, yanking them over my head and revealing my breasts."*

Conrad raises his eyebrows and looks at me. "Oh my *goodness*, what *is* this book?'

I cover my face with the blanket and giggle.

He pulls the cover off my face. "Now, now, no sense in hiding, I can hear you giggling under there."

He continues reading: *"I try to cover my chest, but he won't let me. 'Mine.' He's now in his half-beast form, so when he circles his massive arm around my waist to pull me closer, his claws dig into my flesh."*

Conrad dramatically gasps. "That sounds *paainnnful*. He's hurting her."

He clears his throat. *"My whimper causes his enormous cock to inflate, and he presses it against my stomach."*

I see a bulge in Conrad's pants emerge, and my core heats up. He's into this as much as I am.

"Go on," I coax. "You're getting to the good part."

"You've read this before?" His voice rises in pitch.

I shrug, closing my eyes.

He picks up where he left off. *"He sweeps my legs from under me, and I fall backward. But his large hand catches me and sets me on my back gently. The rough stone floor scratches my back, so I try not to squirm as Goliath rips my pants off and spreads me open for his viewing pleasure."*

"What I want to know is why you stopped reading the book at *this* point*?*" Conrad questions.

"I had other things to focus on and take *care* of." I hide my blushing face with my hands.

"Oh, I see."

He pauses for a moment, and I see his gears click into place.

"*Ohhhhh*." He grins.

Conrad softens his voice to a low hum. *"His long tongue sweeps out, taking his first taste of my slick center. He groans with approval and strokes his hardening dick."*

I press my crotch against Conrad's muscular thigh and slowly start to grind. I feel his gravely voice reverberate through his chest, sending pleasing vibrations down to my clit.

Conrad reads with gusto. *"'You can't claim me,' I protest.*

'I have won you in combat. And you want me. Don't you?' he argues.

'But—'"

"'No. You are mine. And I am yours… finally.' His eyes glint with mischief."

Conrad slides his free hand under my panties and his fingers explore my wet folds. My breath catches when his thumb finds my clit. He zeros in on it like a cat taunting its prey, rubbing my swollen nub in the most delicious way.

"'Do I need to make you ready for my cock? Is that it, my treasure?'" I can't say anything as I stare at the threat to my vagina's health and well-being."

Conrad's fingers tease the opening of my channel, threatening to dive in. I taunt him by pinching my nipples over the thin fabric of my shirt.

Talk about a one-handed read. Does this count as a three-handed read?

“That thing will destroy me… maybe even with proper preparation. I nod my consent. I might as well get a couple of orgasms out of this before it’s death by dick.”

“Conrad,” I moan, feeling the tension in my core building. “I need *your* dick inside me.”

Conrad reads faster, building anticipation, *“He feasts on my cunt. His long, thick tongue slides through my folds and plunges into my channel.”*

Then Conrad slips a finger inside my slick pussy, all the way to my sensitive fleshy pad.

“*Fuuccckkk,*” I mutter to the heavens.

“My body quakes with an impending orgasm.”

And so does mine.

“He shoves two giant fingers into me, and I scream.”

Conrad slides a second finger into my clenching pussy and pumps, hitting the sensitive spot inside me all while still working my clit.

“Conrad!” I scream.

“When I stop trembling, he lines up the baseball bat-sized appendage that he calls a cock, and I…”

And I explode. The guys have inadvertently edged me for days, and this is the culmination. The seismic eruption sends wave after wave of quakes throughout my entire body. I wrap my arms around Conrad and hang on for dear life as I ride this earth-shattering climax.

When it finally subsides, I look up at him and watch him lick his fingers clean of my juices. That sight alone triggers a massive aftershock, and I rub against his thigh. I bury my face into his chest and bear down, squeezing his waist harder.

Conrad holds me tight and strokes my temple for a long while, until my shattered pieces come back together.

“That was so amazing.” I kiss his hand. “Thank you. I really needed that.”

Hearing that I’m reassembled enough to speak, Conrad smirks. “You're welcome. No trouble at all.”

“Is there anything you need?” I eye his groin.

“I’m happy with making you happy.” Then he asks innocently. “You like giant cocks?”

“They’re fun to read about. You know, it’s fantasy.” I bite my lip.

I flash back to an argument I had with micro-penis Chad about this very topic.

“Yeah, sure, but you find them hot?” he inquires.

He doesn’t seem insecure, but I take a moment before answering. I sit up and look him in the eye, taking his hand into mine, so he hears what I have to say.

“You’re perfect for me. You’re going to fill me up the way I need, the way I want.” I caress his cheek. “And what’s really hot about this is that you read this to me and *you* got me off.”

Conrad smiles and nods. He runs his fingers through my hair to the back of my head and gently clenches it while his other hand tenderly cups my cheek.

“Beautiful.” Leaning in, he presses his lips to mine for a sweet kiss.

Another tremor of a mini-orgasm pulsates through me as I taste myself on his lips.

I didn’t think it was possible to be more attracted to Conrad. I’m so relieved and impressed that he isn’t threatened or jealous about the size thing. I admire his confidence in knowing who he is. His comfortableness in his own skin makes him a real man. And that makes him sexy and hot as hell.

It’s a busy Saturday at Darlene manor. The guys are here working on tasks from my repair to-do list for the house. Although they would happily do these chores for me, I know the real reason is they want to keep me safe from Chad.

I’m trying to create some new designs for my portfolio so when a position opens up on the design team at Tenth Muse Agency I can put my best foot forward.

But I’m distracted. All three of them are wearing working man clothes. Conrad in his creamed colored painter’s pants with a matching form fitting T-shirt and a well-worn herringbone twill newspaper boy cap, Zeke with his faded jeans and comfy blue-green plaid flannel shirt, and Silas with his charcoal gray bib overalls and black long sleeve T-shirt are making it really hard to concentrate. I never knew I had a working man kink.

How in all of fae do I have three hot boyfriends, and I'm still not getting any dick? I have needs, my pussy has needs. They're always around me in protector mode, taunting me and stimulating my libido. The least they could do is to satiate my hunger, and I'm not talking about *food*.

Chad needs to bugger off. It's been over a year, and he's still messing up my life and fucking up my sex life, and *not* in a good way.

The distraction is more than sexual frustration, though. I'm grateful for the guys helping me with the repairs, but with all the noise I can't hear myself think.

Every time I find an empty room they're not working in, one of them shows up to work on something that seemingly must be done right now, in that very room. After moving around several times, I finally give up and head for the kitchen for a snack.

Sure enough, Silas is there, leaning on the counter and reading the manual for some new tool they just bought.

"Excuse me," I say more politely than I'm feeling and point to the cabinet he's blocking that I need to get into to get a plate.

"Oh, sorry." Silas smiles and slides a couple of feet over.

"I need to get some silverware." I point again that he's blocking me.

He moves across the room and stands in front of the pantry, still reading the manual.

"*Uh-um*." I clear my throat with raised eyebrows.

He looks up and gets out of my way so I can get some bread and peanut butter. I turn around to find Silas leaning against the refrigerator.

"I need to get in there," I say with a bit of an edge.

Silas scurries out of the way, only to relocate himself back where he started, in front of the plate I just pulled out. I let out a loud sigh.

"Sorry." He looks up and heads for where I want to go next.

"Don't even think of standing in front of the toaster oven." I narrow my eyes.

He catches my not-so-subtle hint and sits down at the table in the breakfast nook.

I finish making my peanut butter and jelly toast and join him at the table.

Silas looks at my plate. "Oh, I didn't know you were making something to eat. I could've done that for you."

I roll my eyes and take a bite of my toast, shaking my head.

“Are you done in the guest bedroom yet?” I raise my toast for a second bite.

“Yes, but Conrad just started painting in there.”

My hand freezes midair with my mouth agape.

That’s it. I’ve had it.

This is all too much. At game night, I said I wanted to try *dating*, then immediately I was overrun with them at my house at all hours. Zero to a hundred in a heart beat.

I get it, they were rattled by Chad showing up, but I don’t feel like I have a moment to process that either.

“How is it humanly possible that you guys are everywhere doing everything all at once?" I raise my voice.

Silas goes stock-still, shocked by my outburst. I drop my toast and storm out of the kitchen to confront Conrad.

Before I even make it to the room, I begin my tirade, “Conrad! I *specifically* told you that when Silas was done in here I was going to use this–”

I trip on a paint tray filled to the top, right smack dab in the middle of the doorway. Paint flies everywhere, and so do I. As the ground rushes toward me in my chaotic fall, I close my eyes, anticipating the sting of landing face first.

But an inch from a broken nose, I stop.

OceanofPDF.com

38
TRIPPING POINT

ZEKE

It happens so fast, I almost don't see it in time. Darlene falls to the ground, her face set to smash into the open paint can. Shit!

Without a conscious thought, my tentacles shoot out from my sides and catch her a fraction of an inch before she crashes onto the mess on the floor. I rush forward to make up the difference I couldn't have humanly traveled without supernatural abilities. My hands replace my tentacles and wrap around her chest and waist.

She gasps as I pull her upright and against my body. "What the…?" She leans back into me for a moment then turns, staring at me with suspicion.

"How did you reach me that fast?" Her mouth hangs open, and she takes a step away from me, tracking the spilt paint on the drop cloth. "I thought you were in the bathroom."

"I was just coming out when you tripped." I do my best to sound truthful.

Darlene shakes her head and blinks. "Yeah, okay, um." Then she looks around at the mess Conrad left in the doorway. Her gaze veers over to the toolbox I have by the guest bath. Then at the project Silas left behind as he did a quick perimeter check.

Just then, he comes in from the kitchen and senses the tense scene. “What happened?”

“Darlene tripped on my paint tray,” Conrad grumbles, obviously feeling like an ass.

Silas begins to storm at him, but Darlene calls out, “Stop!”

He freezes and turns to her.

“Uh, guys, I need some space.”

All three of us take a step back, then she looks like she’s about to chuckle. We misunderstood her… *again*. I don’t think I will like what she’s really asking for.

“No. I need a break.”

A break? Does that mean she’s breaking up with us because we’re too much?

“I appreciate everything you have done for me, but I need some space to breathe.” She wrings her hands, and the action feels like she’s twisting my heart. “I know you just want to protect me, but Chad hasn’t been around in weeks.”

“Being here isn’t just about Chad,” Silas states.

She softens at his sad expression. “I know. But please wrap up what you have here, and you can focus on your work and your own stuff for a bit.”

“No,” I say firmly.

“*No?*” Her eyes widen with disbelief.

“I can’t do that.”

“Why not?” She places her hands on her hips, looking beautifully defiant.

I glance over at Silas and Conrad and find them shocked I’m being this adamant. But they know *why* I’m behaving this way. Conrad flicks his chin in an indication to tell her what I can.

“I wasn’t there for my sister. And…”

Darlene covers her mouth in horror, sensing the weight of what I’m about to confess.

“She was killed. Men, not from the island, found her when she was exploring.”

What I can’t say is that she was open-ocean swimming in her kraken form and supernatural hunters found her.

“I was supposed to be with her, but I was angry at my parents and had selfishly ran away that morning. I didn’t consider that she might explore

without me. I didn’t think of her safety.”

“Zeke, I’m so sorry.” Darlene steps up to me and offers her open arms.

I fall into her embrace and my waters leak from my soul. Not that I deserve it, but her presence soothes the pain just a bit. Perhaps I’m not cursed by the Fates, if I found my mate match.

“What those horrible men did isn’t your fault.” She rubs my wide back with her tiny hands. “I don’t want you to think anything that might happen to me would be your fault either.”

There’s no point in arguing. I can’t let my sister’s death go, and I would never forgive myself if I allowed Darlene to get hurt.

I straighten, reluctantly breaking away from her hug. “I didn’t tell you this to manipulate you. I just wanted you to know why I am the way I am.”

“I know. I can sense your intention. If you ever need to talk more about her and what happened, I’m here for you.” She squeezes my arms. “And I’m glad you feel comfortable enough to confide in me. You can tell me anything.”

But I can’t tell her everything.

I take another step back with that unsettling thought. “I understand you need some space, but we’ll be keeping an eye on you. And I hope you understand that I can’t just drop the Chad threat.”

“Thank you. I appreciate all you’re doing for me, I really do, but this attention is a lot.”

I give her a short nod and calmly pick up my things as Conrad and Silas follow suit.

The three of us head over to our yard, tossing our tools in our van for now, and stare at Darlene’s place. I don’t like leaving her alone, but she’s right, we’ve been obsessive. And not all of it is about the threat of Chad. Our beastly sides are riding us to tell her she’s meant for us, to claim her. I shudder at the thought of her rejection. No, I can’t think about that.

“We aren’t leaving here alone,” Silas grumbles.

“No, we aren’t. We’ll keep watch over her at all times,” I agree. “And if we’re not underfoot at her house, it’ll be a bit easier to fake being on handyman jobs.”

“It’s a lot of work, pretending to work.” Conrad smirks at the joke.

I shake my head at our antics. We’ve been parking the van in the garage to make her think we’ve been busy. We could’ve been since we’ve actually been getting calls on our landline, but we’ve ignored them for several reasons. Mostly, because we want to protect her.

“We’ll just have to keep an eye out from more of a distance, at least until she gets the bit of space she needs.” I rub my chin, wondering how long that will be.

“Why doesn’t she feel the matebond pull?” Silas asks, his shoulders drooping.

“She isn’t a supe or a witch, so from what I’ve read, she wouldn’t feel the intensity like we do,” I explain.

Silas nods, but he isn’t happy about the answer.

I spin to confront Conrad. “And why did you smell like her release the other day?” I growl at him. “I thought we said we weren’t going to take advantage of her vulnerability.”

“She was suffering! In *pain*!” he argues, indignant. “She had blue ovaries and *could have died*.”

“What?” Silas snaps.

I huff and shove Conrad. “Stop it, you’re getting him worked up.” I turn to Silas, “He’s just joking around.”

Silas sneers at Conrad, his fangs glinting, ready to attack. “Don’t you *ever* joke about her dying.”

Conrad throws his hands up in the air in surrender. “I’m sorry. You’re right. That wasn’t cool.”

Appeased, Silas simmers down, and I stare longingly at her house as we try to recover from, *essentially*, being rejected by our mate.

“Hey, I have great news.” Conrad practically bounces with excitement.

I have no idea how he can manage that when the rug has been pulled out from us. “What could be so exciting?”

“She likes monster cock!”

Silas spins and stares him down. “How did you find *that* out?” he snarls.

I *also* want to know how the fuck he knows.

“She reads books about monsters,” he whisper-shouts. “She’s perfect for us. We should just tell her what we are.”

“You want us to reveal our most important secret because she reads *books*?” I inhale deeply to keep my cool.

“Not just any books. The women in these books have sex and mate with monsters. Like legit monsters with claws and huge dicks. She was turned on by it.”

Silas moves closer, intrigued. “Really?”

“Guys, no. It’s one thing to read and enjoy a fantasy, but that isn’t necessarily what she wants. She’s going to panic and run when she discovers the supernatural world is real and the three men she’s dating are the supe’s boogie monsters.”

Conrad’s excitement plummets. I hate that I burst his bubble, but he can’t tell her until she’s ready… *if* she’s ever ready.

“Hey, did you notice–” he begins timidly, then shakes his head. “Never mind.”

“What?” I demand, going on alert. If something is off, I need to know.

“Well, all of sudden, Darlene smells like a hint of magic. Since Chad showed up.”

“You’re right.” Silas confirms and drags his long fingers through his black hair. “She didn’t used to smell like magic.”

I scratch my chin. “Then why now?”

“It could be something she’s wearing and doesn’t know it?” Silas suggests.

“Could it be her time of the month?” Conrad asks.

“*What?!*” I bark out with a laugh. “It doesn’t work like that.”

“I don’t know, women *are* magical!” Conrad throws his hands up in the air.

We let out a sigh in unison, thinking about it. “Yes, they are.”

After a long pause, I wonder aloud, “Could it be something to do with Chad? Could he be a supe?”

“I sure hope not.” Conrad paces, appearing more worried than I’ve seen him since we’ve left the island. “If he is, he could be hunting us.”

Silas hisses and his eyes flare with an eerie glow.

“Nah. I didn’t pick up a supe scent from him,” Conrad says to calm Silas down before he loses his shit and shifts in our front yard, likely with nosy Betty watching from her kitchen window.

Silas paces the invisible line between our property and Darlene’s, looking like the agitated beast he is.

Conrad gives me a worried glance. If his basilisk bursts out and scares her, we’ll never have a chance.

OceanofPDF.com

39
SPELUNKING FOR TROUBLE

DARLENE

The guys warned me they'd be watching out for Chad, and I'm pretty sure they have been keeping an eye on me when I'm at work this week. I'd be mad at them for overstepping, but I don't mind the extra protection.

Silas has been doing some maintenance in the front yard when I'm at work. He sulks off when I get home every day. I feel like a complete ass for wanting a bit of breathing room when I see his sad expression.

I shut my car door and call out to him. "Hey, Silas?"

He immediately rushes over, eager to attend to me. "Yes? What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong." I sigh and fiddle with my purse. "That's not true. I still want to see you and the guys. It was just a lot all at once, you know?"

Silas nudges a rock with his booted toe. "We didn't mean to come on so strong."

I hum an acknowledgement. "So, I was thinking maybe we could do something fun, like a real date, not just fixing stuff at my place."

"Really?" The hope shining in his eyes nearly undoes me and makes me want to weep. He's such a sweetheart.

“Got any ideas?” I ask.

“Yes,” he says with more enthusiasm than I’ve seen since he found the clematis at the nursery. “There’s some ice caves nearby. Would you like to explore them on Saturday?”

I think about the steamy romance that Conrad read to me. Maybe Silas would like to explore my caverns. Could he be a nature dom? Is that a thing? I’m sure it’s a thing. Rule 34 and all.

“That sounds amazing.” I give him a quick peck on the cheek.

Dressed in a broken-in pair of jeans, boots, a light jacket, and topped off with a cap, I’m ready for my spelunking adventure.

I have two flashlights with new batteries. I even checked them with my gizmo to see if they were actually good. I also purchased a headlamp flashlight to strap to my head for just this sort of adventure. I toss the flashlights, travel first aid kit, a long sleeve shirt, and a couple of water bottles into my small backpack.

I beat Silas to the van in the morning, and he gives me a big smile when he sees the excitement on my face. He opens the door for me and off we go.

We fill the drive with conversation, talking about how I’ve been doing at work and how their new sign and website have gotten them several calls for jobs. I’m happy I was able to do that for them. They deserve something for being so generous with me.

The beautiful drive is in an area I haven’t seen before. There are gorgeous wildflowers and lush grasses on the side of the road.

I’m excited to see how things unfold now that I’ve set some boundaries with the guys. Damn, life feels really good.

“So where are these ice caves? I couldn’t find anything online about them.”

“They are located in a remote area outside of town. I discovered them one day while I was exploring.”

“Cool. Sounds like a fun secret place with no one around.” My mind wanders back to the idea of him being turned on by nature, and I hope my theory is proven correct.

Silas pulls over and parks at the side of a dirt trail. “It’s just a short hike up the hill.”

Thankfully, the hike is pretty easy, and we soon come around a boulder to find the entrance. It’s a tall enough opening that Silas doesn’t have to bend down to enter. I hesitate, wondering if I will have a bad reaction to being underground.

Silas reaches out and takes my hand. An electric shock ripples up my arm. Whoa. He gives my hand a squeeze, and I relax, knowing he wouldn’t let anything happen to me.

Fifteen feet into the cave and the temperature drops several degrees. Another dozen feet, and I’m happy that I brought a light jacket. It’s actually cold.

The light from the entrance is gone so I click on my flashlight, and Silas does the same with his. We step cautiously as the ground is rough with crevices and huge rocks.

The cavern is about twenty feet across, and the far end looks like an endless void. Then our light catches on the ice formation on the side of the cavern. The crystals glitter and sparkle in the light as we examine the intricate mosaic of ice. It reminds me of my life in the fae realm.

We decide to go a bit further back to explore, and I begin to feel the energy of the earth overhead. My steps become unsure.

“What’s wrong?” Silas asks.

“Uh, I think this is as far as I want to go.”

“I’m sorry, I should have realized you wouldn’t like this.” He sounds stressed and anxious.

“No. I do. I’m just not used to this sort of thing yet, going deep under the ground.”

We turn around, and suddenly my flashlight dims. Huh. Then my headlamp flickers.

Silas’ goes completely out.

I take a deep breath and try not to panic. I open my pack and find that my backup flashlight is dead too. Weird. It’s as if magic is draining them.

The one in my hand barely illuminates a few feet ahead. “Get behind me, I can guide us back.”

Silas gives me a questioning answer, “Okaay.” It sounds nothing like him. He’s obviously wondering why I assume I can see at all, or at least better than him.

I move slowly ahead, and he has a firm grip on my shoulder. A few times, he seems to be correcting my path, but that can't be right.

We finally see the light from the entrance, and I blow out a breath in relief. I can just now make out Silas' face as he moves to my side. When we reach about twenty feet from the opening, I freeze in my tracks. There's a man's silhouette standing in our path. Who the fuck is that? And why do I sense he doesn't have good intentions.

A rumbling, clicking sound echoes around me and the ground vibrates under my feet. I taste magic in the air. My gaze flicks to Silas.

It's *him* making the sound. His eyes flash glowing chartreuse yellow. Like a fucking supe.

Holy shit.

"*Chad*," Silas hisses and steps in front of me protectively.

The villain in question flashes a *kazillion* watt flashlight right at us. Fortunately, I look away and cover my eyes as he does.

Silas lets out an inhuman screech. Maybe he's been blinded. Goddess, I hope not permanently.

With a roar, he rushes directly at Chad.

The asshole screams and runs as if his life depends on it, and it probably does.

I rush after them, but find Silas has stopped at the mouth of the cave and turns around, covering his eyes. There's no sign of Chad.

"Are you okay?" Silas asks.

I don't answer. I don't know what I am. Or what he is.

"Are *you* okay?" I ask instead.

"I don't think I can drive right now. But I should heal soon." He curses under his breath. "Are you going to be able to find our way back?"

"Uh, yeah."

Even though he's a supe, I don't think he'd hurt me… physically.

But I don't want to get in the van with Silas. He's lied to me. They've kept this from me. Yet I won't leave him out here to be hurt either.

Carefully, I lead him back to the van by holding onto his wrist. We're both quiet. The easy silence we usually enjoy has become uncomfortable.

I get behind the wheel, and he begins to explain, "Darlene? I didn't mean to–"

I cut him off. "I'm not ready to talk."

He nods without pressing for more. He probably thinks I'm scared out of my mind, but I'm not. I'm mad.

My mind whirls for the rest of the drive.

Oh. My. Fucking. Goddess! How did I not see all the signs that they were supes? Did I see them and ignore them? Writing them off as nothing?

Yes, I did. So many signs: ignorance of cultural references, catching me from hitting the ground, ability to see in the darkness, growls, avoiding electronics, getting an entire yard planted in a day, old cars, handling oven-hot dishes, and the list goes on way too long.

Am I too stupid to live? Or are they just too good at covering up their lies? Did I just want the dream so badly I was willing to sweep all of this under the rug?

When I get to their house, I see Zeke and Conrad sitting on their porch.

Those jerks lied to me, too!

I haphazardly pull the van in their driveway. Throw it into park, fling open the door and leave the thing running and storm toward my house.

Zeke and Conrad call out to me, and demand Silas tell them what happened.

I don't have the spoons to deal with this. Or any cutlery, for that matter.

I jump in my car and fly down the street before they have the bright idea to follow me.

But where do I go…

OceanofPDF.com

40
SPILT TEA TIME

DARLENE

Clover pours both of us another glass of red wine, then sits back in her chair. “Let me know when you’re ready to talk about what happened.”

Without much thought, I ended up at Clover’s house. I’ve already had two glasses and haven’t said why I’m here yet. Thankfully, my friend took one look at my expression and has been patiently waiting for me to spill the tea.

I take a large, fortifying swig of wine and curl back up on her comfy sofa. After a long sigh, I whine, “The guys kept something from me. Something big.”

She calmly raises an eyebrow. “What sort of thing?”

“The kind of secret they should have disclosed before hooking up with me.”

“And this *secret* changes how you feel about them?” she probes, like a skilled surgeon, getting to the heart of the matter.

“Yes. No.” I take another gulp of my wine, set it down, and flop backwards dramatically. “I don’t know.”

“At least you’re sure,” she teases.

“I think it’s a dealbreaker,” I admit, my stomach churning with the idea that it’s over.

“Surely, they must have thought they couldn’t tell you this secret until now.”

“I discovered it accidentally.”

“But don’t you have secrets of your own?” she asks, sounding very sure that I do. Of course, I do, but it makes me stop spinning out to wonder what she means. Perhaps that’s her intention, to make me reconsider.

“Yeah, I guess everyone has some secrets. But this is *huge*,” I defend myself.

“And you’re willing to throw away what you are building?”

I jump up from my seat to pace her small living room. “I had a plan for my life, and it doesn’t include…” I stumble, looking for the right word to tell a human. “To include *them*.”

“Them?” she asks, leaning forward, very interested in my answer. “Or their secret?”

“You wouldn’t understand.” I hedge. “It’s a cultural thing.”

“I’d say so,” she chuckles.

The hairs on the back of my neck rise. “What are *you* saying?”

“What are you thinking?” she counters.

Does she know about supes? “What do you know about… *different cultures*?”

“That it can seem like they are from completely different *realms*.” She emphasizes the word.

“You know?”

Clover nods slowly. “More than that…” She pauses and takes a sip of her wine. “I have something to confess. I hope you won’t be angry with me too.”

I drop backward into my chair and wait for the dreaded confession.

“I’m a supe.”

“What the fuck?” I get up and storm toward the door. “Unbelievable.”

“Darlene, please don’t leave like this. I never meant to hurt you.” She jumps up and chases me. “I didn’t want to keep this from you, but you know the rules. I *had* to because I wasn’t certain if you were actually from fae.”

I stop before reaching the door.

Shit, does she know I'm a null? And she isn't wrong about the rules. It's a tricky dance to figure out if someone is in the know. I've never had to deal with it myself before now.

I turn to face her. "But I didn't sense any magic on you either." I gape at her, inspecting her up and down, seeing her with new eyes.

"I don't have a ton of mage magic, and I wear a charm so I don't blow out the computers at work when I get riled up."

"A shifter?" I ask.

"Yeah."

"But you're so nice."

She laughs hard at that, and some of my anger dissipates. "Was your experience that bad that you think every shifter is a jerk? Are the guys mean to you?"

"No. They've been good to me. But they don't know that I'm a null yet." I search her eyes to see her reaction to the news of my status. She doesn't blink, so she must have suspected. "They won't want to be with me once they do."

"Sure, there's a lot of snobs, but not every supe cares about that." She looks me in the eyes to make it clear. "I don't."

"You aren't dating me." I grumble. "I had two shifter boyfriends leave me because I'm a null. The first dumped me because someone discovered I was his dirty, secret hookup. The second guy tossed me aside because he found a 'proper' mate with power. I gave up on supe men after that. And then when I dated a human, Chad was only obsessed with the supernatural, not me. Shit, my own family doesn't want anything to do with me because of what I am. Magic and magical people have always ruined my life."

Clover shakes her head. "I'm sorry for that, but it doesn't have to be all bad. I only want the best for you."

Maybe she does, but she kept things from me as well. "Did you know about me this whole time?"

"I remembered there was a null born in a family with your name. I figured it *could* be you."

I want to believe she doesn't think I'm a pathetic loser, but she knew what I was and still kept what she was from me. Lied to me. I'm upset with her, but not as much as I am with the guys. They were hooking up with me.

Do they know my secret as well?

I should have listened to my little pings of intuition, all the little questions, and alarm bells. Why don't I trust myself more? I suppose because I was taught from a young age to believe I’m worthless. Without realizing I internalized that belief, I often dismiss my thoughts and worries.

“This whole time, my friend and boyfriends have been supes. I feel like an idiot.” I shake my head and palm my face. “Is everyone in this damned town a supe?”

“No, not everyone, but our friend group is.” Clover winces.

“Goddess! You all must think I’m a stupid null.” I hear the echoes of my past bullies chanting their insults at me again.

“Darlene, stop that,” Clover admonishes and slowly approaches me. When I don’t react negatively, she rubs my shoulder to give me some comfort. “We never thought less of you or wanted to trick you. We really like you, but you aren’t the only one in this realm trying to get away from someone or something. We like being *mostly* human here and being a supe isn’t our whole identity. I figured when you were ready to talk about your background, I would tell you everything. And here we are.”

“I get it. I wanted to get away from my family and the prejudice I faced. I suppose I shouldn’t be upset about you following the biggest rule for supes.”

“Exactly. I couldn’t say anything without being certain you knew. And the guys have to follow the same laws.” She shrugs. “They are lucky that you were the one who accidentally discovered their secret.”

I shiver. If I had been a human, I could be having my mind wiped by a mage right now instead of getting tipsy.

She’s also making some good points about the rules to protect the secret of supe’s existence.

“Maybe I can forgive them for keeping a secret, but how can I still date them? There can be no real future, because I don’t want to be dragged into the supe world. It’s only ever caused me pain.”

“Is our friendship over too?”

Taking a moment, I ask myself that same question and shrug.

Clover inhales deeply. “It does you no favors to hold on to pain from your past with supes or your family. I had to face the hurt of being a reject, and I suggest you do too.”

“*You* were rejected?” I blink, surprised. “What could anyone say bad about you?”

“I could ask the same of you,” she diverts, but she’s made her point.

I did nothing wrong except to be born without magic in a magic family and realm that values power.

“And I say you should take a chance with your guys.” She smiles sadly. “Whether or not you choose to forgive me, I hope you give love a chance.”

Tears well in my eyes. She’s shattering my blanket assumption that supes are a bunch of assholes, and now I wonder how many missed opportunities there were to find people like her among the fae.

“I don’t want this to be the end of our friendship.” I confess, and she relaxes in her seat. “But having a supe friend isn’t the same intensity as a potential mate bond with one of the guys.”

“Or with all of them,” she suggests.

If I do forgive them, will they want me when they discover I’m a worthless null? It’s one thing to be a human, they aren’t meant to have magic, but as my family likes to remind me, I’m defective.

And where was our relationship going before I found out?

They probably thought I was a human, and it’s extremely rare for a fae to commit to a mortal. Perhaps they only wanted a sexy romp, and they’d be *all-in* until they had to quit me and find their fated. It makes more sense now why all three would be up for dating the neighbor. In their eyes, I’m just a bit of fun until they have potentially a hundred years or more with their true mate.

There’s nothing for it then. I’ll tell them I’m a null, they’ll reject me, and we’ll go our separate ways. Why does that thought tear my insides to shreds?

When I arrive home the following morning, my hangover puts me in an untalkative mood. Besides that, I have to set us free with a breakup.

I pull into my driveway, and the three supernatural stooges are out in their driveway, ready for me. I note Silas stands behind them with his head held low.

It makes more sense now that they knew when I was coming home. They could probably hear my car a half mile out.

“Darlene?” Zeke calls out softly.

“Not now.” I don’t even look as I focus on reaching my door.

“Let us explain,” Conrad begs.

“Later.” Goddess, it’s harder than I expected to blow them off. Showing mercy, I pause before I let myself in my house. “Tonight at six? Here.”

“Thank you,” Zeke breathes in relief. “We’ll be there.”

OceanofPDF.com

41
OCTOPUS, LION, & SNAKE, OH NULL

SILAS

We watch Darlene enter her house and hear the click of her front door lock. Is that meant to keep me out? Us? Chad? Or all of us?

My stomach drops, and the sliver of hope that she might forgive me vanishes with her cold return. I'm horrified at how I frightened her. I screwed up by letting my protective basilisk take over.

"Inside," Zeke orders, falling back into place as our mother hen when shit goes wrong.

I plan to follow his order, because what else am I to do? Let these roiling emotions take over and shift in the front yard? If any of us have a chance with her again, it'll be gone after that. We'd have to be *gone*, too. Supernatural or mortal hunters would hear about it and descend to slaughter us.

If I can't be with my mate, maybe I should let them kill me and end the centuries-long suffering I will have to endure because I lost her.

But if they come, Darlene could get hurt if she got in the way.

My throat clicks with anger at the thought of them harming her.

Holding the door open, Zeke snaps, "Silas! Now!"

I hurry inside and collapse on the couch.

“She’s willing to talk. That’s good.” Conrad tries to convince himself it will be okay, but I don’t see how.

“I wasn’t expecting her back so soon, or ever,” Zeke mutters.

“Maybe she’s okay with it?” Conrad argues. “Like I said, she’s into monster romance.”

“Stop talking,” I growl. His upbeat attitude is grating on my fragile hold of sanity. Until I hear how Darlene is truly taking this revelation, I can’t give in to hope.

When we arrive sharply at six at Darlene’s front door, she opens it without us even having to knock. Stepping aside, she welcomes us inside and toward the living room.

I dare to look at her face to see how she’s handling my presence, and instead of fear or trepidation, I only sense somberness. That’s odd. Why would she be feeling that way?

We sit, lined up on the long couch, and Darlene perches on the edge of the armchair, looking apprehensive. When Zeke begins to speak, she holds up a hand to stop him, and he instantly snaps his mouth shut.

“What kind of supes are you?” she asks calmly like it’s a simple question about the weather.

Supes. She knows about the supernatural realm, at least enough to know the commonly used term. I guess that negates our whole explanation. And puts me on alert since she shouldn’t know about that.

“You know?” Conrad asks.

She nods, but doesn’t elaborate.

Zeke looks at me, then Conrad, then gives her the answer we prepared long ago if anyone should ask what we really were. “Octopus, lion, and snake.”

A fucking simplified version of what we truly are. They’re extremely uncommon in the supe world, but they’re allowed to exist unlike Mythics.

“All shifters.” She sighs, rubbing her temples as if this answer gives her a headache. “I should have guessed.”

It seems she’s okay with this reveal. Mildly irritated, but okay with us being supes. She must be one of the few humans who have discovered the

magic that exists outside of the mortal world's knowledge. That would explain the magic we scented on her recently. She likely has some protection talisman.

"So I take it that Zeke's an octopus, Conrad's a lion," she deduces with eerily accuracy. When they nod, she looks at me. "I didn't think a snake would make such an unusual noise. That clicking."

"It's something only my family seems to have." I give her a shrug with the twisting of the truth. She seems appeased by that explanation, so I ask what's on our minds. "How did you find out about supes?"

She squirms, and her shoulders curl inward. My basilisk stirs with unease.

"I'm not *exactly* human," she says without looking at us. "I'm a null."

All three of us freeze in shock at her confession. She's fae, a magicless one, but she's from a world even we couldn't live in.

When we don't make a sound, she gazes up at us. "I get why you'd be upset with me as well. We all kept secrets. Although, I still feel like your secret is a bigger deal since you decided to pursue something intimate with someone you thought was a human."

She doesn't understand that we aren't upset that she's a null, per se. We're freaking out that she's connected to the supernatural world. Her presence is a risk to us. If her friends or relatives discover what we really are, we're dead or running for our lives.

"Yeah, I expected this reaction," she goes on when we don't speak. "It was one thing when you were having a fun fling with the human. And don't get me wrong, I was up for that too, but now that it's all out in the open, it's for the best that we just go back to being neighbors." She says the last bit and swallows hard. Her usual sweet scent becomes burnt.

When her words finally register in our brains, we jump up, but stop ourselves from rushing toward her.

"It wasn't a fling," I say.

"You're more than that," Conrad adds.

Zeke motions for us to sit back down. "You have every right to be upset with us for keeping this from you. For lying."

She shakes her head. "Once the shock wore off, I realized you couldn't have told me. I gave no indication I knew about supes either."

"We smelled magic on you after Chad showed up though," Conrad mentions.

She points to her wrist, and I see something appear. “A protection bracelet with a look-away spell. A gift from Auntie.”

Well, that explains the mystery.

“I came to Earth to get away from supes,” she says. “I never intended to date another one.”

“Another one?” Zeke asks. “Chad isn’t a *supe*, is he?”

“No. I was talking about you three.”

“Uh, yeah, we’re supes,” Zeke murmurs. Idiot already forgot our cover story.

She sighs, slumping back into her chair and looking exhausted. “Chad was only really interested in me for one thing… my art. Specifically, the artwork that featured the fae realm. I had painted some pieces with supes hidden in the landscape in college, and he became obsessed. I thought he loved my work, but he really wanted any knowledge I had about the paranormal. That’s when…”

“What happened?” I ask when she stops.

“I stopped painting and refused to talk about it anymore. He became violent when I didn’t reveal more about how I was inspired to paint what I did. He pinned me down and told me about how he saw a monster when he was on a camping trip. No one believed him. He’s even part of some online forums that share information. It seems most of it’s bogus, but there are real stories on there as well from what he rambled on about.”

Conrad leans forward, getting to the heart of our concern, and asks, “Is he a supe hunter?”

“I wouldn’t have thought so, but I didn’t know he owned a gun either. He doesn’t seem to be connected though or know enough. Or at least he didn’t when I knew him. And as evident when Silas chased him, he’s a coward.”

“We all need to be careful,” Zeke warns.

Darlene doesn’t argue about this point.

“If you want to take a break from dating, that’s understandable, but can we still be friends?” Zeke asks.

I know what he’s doing and *why* he’s doing it, but I don’t like it. We need to move forward and confess everything. Tell her that we’re Mythics. That she’s our true mate. But we also need to talk to each other alone and assess how to handle the threat she poses.

I’m willing to take the risk, but are they?

And once she knows our deadly secret, will she be willing to accept that risk too?

OceanofPDF.com

42
FORKED (TONGUES) IN THE ROAD

DARLENE

I didn’t sleep much last night, and by morning, I feel and look like crap. I’m glad we cleared the air, but I kept replaying everything that has happened over and over in my head all night long.

I was evasive about my answer if we could continue being friends. I don’t think I can just switch off my feelings for them.

How could I have missed the signs? I was blinded by what I feel for them, that's how. I now understand what the old saying, *blinded by love*, means because I feel like I’m living it.

Am I actually falling in love with *all* of them? I must be, if I’m going against my core belief of *no supes*. Nevertheless, I can’t handle being thrust right back into the supe world when I finally escaped it.

My old self would never even entertain the idea of hearing them out after they kept the truth from me, *especially* since they’re supes. I suppose they’ve changed me. But can I ever trust them again?

The work day is crawling by. All I want to do is go home and sleep so I can turn off my brain. With my luck, I would probably just dream about them, and *not* the sexy kind of dreams.

At lunch, I fill Clover in on the conversation with the guys. She really is a good friend and has been nothing but kind and supportive, helping me see my way through this mess.

She listens without judgement and lets me vent the heavy steam that's built up in my chest, only occasionally interjecting with her usual insightful, poignant points when I get stuck and spin out in an emotional loop.

Even though she turned out to be a supe, and I was initially miffed she didn't reveal that fact to me until now, I understand why she didn't. Sigh. I should extend that consideration with the guys.

The guys give me my space for a week to process everything. It was weird not spending every moment together, both awake and asleep. I confessed to them that I missed their company, and by the weekend, we're hanging out again.

We've met up at their place for low-key dinners and board games a couple of times. We continue our cookie exchange ritual which still brings a smile to my face. At least that hasn't changed. Although everyone, including myself, is awkwardly much more reserved.

I can't help this nagging feeling in the pit of my stomach that something is still… *off*. My intuition, weak as it is, is telling me the guys still aren't being completely honest with me, and that they're holding something back. Goddess, I hope I'm wrong, and it's just me being gun-shy from the assholes I've dated in my life.

By Friday, we've fallen into a groove of neither all in, *but* not all out either. I suspect they're more in than me at the moment.

I'm looking forward to the weekend while I'm finishing up my workday. Maybe with a couple of days off, with no commitments, I can gain some clarity on what I should do.

4:30 pm finally rolls around, and a half hour to go.

My boss, Meg, approaches my desk. "Darlene, may I have a word with you?" She gestures for me to follow her.

Shit, shit, shit.

This is it.

I'm getting fired.

I know I’ve been slacking a bit since things have been heating up with the guys, but dammit, I didn’t think it would come to this. I follow Meg, but she passes her office and heads straight toward Bev Doormeinhouser’s office.

That’s odd, I wouldn’t think someone as busy and important as Bev would deal with firing some entry-level employee.

Bev is waiting for us, sitting on a plush leather couch in the sitting nook of her space. Meg sits next to Bev and motions for me to take a seat on an identical couch across from her.

“Mrs. Doormeinhouser has some news!” Meg jumps right in, her usual chipper self.

Odd. She seems happy that she’s about to can me. I didn’t peg her as sadistic. Then again, my judgement of people has been completely off as of late.

“I’m finally retiring,” Bev says. “My partner finally convinced me to buy the chateau we’ve been eyeing in southern France and travel the world with her like we always talked about doing.” Bev smiles widely.

I know for the workaholic Bev, her business is everything, but she seems genuinely happy with her decision. I know she met her partner late in life, just a few years ago, but at least she found hers.

That makes me wonder if…

“But…” She pauses. There’s always a but. “... that means this office will be downsized to a skeleton crew to maintain the accounts of a few of the larger clients in this area, like the Cage Brothers Corporation.”

“I see.” I bite my lip.

“And…”

Here it comes, there’s always an and.

“...which means we won’t need such a large IT department.”

“Which means my position is no longer needed,” I nervously blurt out.

“Right.”

“Is Clover losing her job too?” I ask out of concern for my friend.

“No. She’s staying on. It just came down to seniority, and Clover has been here for a few years.”

The corners of my mouth drop. I'm happy that my friend still has a job, but my career path with the company has just ended.

Seeing my long face, Bev adds, “Darlene, please don’t think this is because you weren’t a good employee. In fact, you’ve been exemplary. So

much so that I noticed your initiative in your current IT job, especially with your redesign of the company's websites." She pauses and pulls out an art portfolio binder, *my* binder.

"I'm very impressed with your portfolio of your design work."

"How'd you get that?" I ask in a high pitch, absolutely floored Bev would find anything that I've done as noteworthy.

"Oh, a little birdie of a co-worker made sure it found its way to my desk." She grins.

Clover.

That little shifter. I don't know if I should smack or smooch her.

"And I know your heart really lies with design. So, I'm offering you a position on the design team in the NYC office."

My jaw must hit the floor, because Bev and Meg chuckle.

"Congratulations!" She stands from the sofa and comes toward me with her hand extended.

I go to shake her hand, but she pulls me into a hug. Oh my fucking goddess, I was just offered my dream job, everything I have been working toward since I started college.

"When would I start?" I ask after we break our embrace and my mind catches up to my emotions.

"In the beginning of December. I know it's not much notice, and that you'll have to relocate again right after you just moved here, but that's the nature of this business. Things move fast," Bev says.

"Can I have some time to think it over?"

Meg gives me a pointed look and crinkles her brow slightly, as if I'm crazy for not jumping at this opportunity and accepting the job she's offering. But I need to sit with this for a minute.

I like this town, and I've made some real friends for the first time in, well, ever really. And of course there are the guys and what we started together. I would be throwing a lot away. Am I crazy for wanting to think this through?

Bev considers it for a moment and replies, "Sure, sure. Take some time to decide, but I'll need an answer within two weeks. That position in New York needs to be filled quickly as it's a busy office branch. And there are several other candidates for the position that would be jumping at the opportunity."

I walk out of Bev’s office toward my desk in a daze, floating on cloud nine.

“Is everything okay?” Clover asks, concerned by my dumbfounded look.

“I need a drink. And we need to talk.” I boot down my computer, grab my bag, and gesture for her to come along.

Clover and I go to our usual haunt and order her favorite drink, a negroni, for each of us.

“So, somehow Bev got hold of my portfolio.” I start in a serious tone.

“I hope that was okay. It’s just that you’re really talented and should be designing for the company, and not just working in IT, like me,” she explains.

“And did you know that our office was being downsized, and that I was getting the boot?”

“Well…” She winces and bites her lip.

“Well, your covert operation worked. I was offered a job on the design team." I squee.

“Oh my goddess, Darlene, that’s wonderful news!” She mirrors my excitement. “I’m so proud of you! You landed your dream job!”

We both scream in excitement and rapidly stomp our feet, scaring half the patrons in the bar.

“Thank you so much, Clover. You’ve been a great friend, with all of it.” I pat her hand on the table. “But…”

Like I said, there's always a *but*. She freezes a nervous, anxious expression on her face, waiting for me to drop the other shoe.

“The position is in New York City,” I add.

Clover slumps in her seat and the corners of her mouth fall. I can tell at this moment she considers me a close friend as much as I do her.

“Well, we can still see each other whenever we want,” she says positively. “Because Ruby has the ability to portal us there.”

I nod. “I would like that.”

“But what are you going to do about the guys?” She studies my face.

I plop back into my seat. “I don’t have a damn clue.”

Clover and I chat for a couple of hours and munch on bar food to sober up before I head home. I pull into my driveway at dusk to see, like the low-grade stalkers they are, the guys doing maintenance on their front yard.

"Are you okay?" Zeke approaches me with Conrad and Silas in tow as I get out of my car.

I tense a bit, not wanting to deal with my feelings for them in lieu of the news of my recent job offer.

"You seem stressed," Conrad adds.

"Sad," Silas chimes in.

Aw, the guys are really tuned in with me emotionally.

"Just work stuff," I answer their queries.

"You work too hard. You need to have some fun." Conrad takes a few steps closer.

"As a matter of fact, you're right." I drop my guard. "Do you want to go to the Harvest Festival tomorrow with me?" I ask and stare at my feet, feeling shy.

"Do we?" Zeke almost shouts, with Silas and Conrad nodding excitedly.

"Great! Should we leave at 8 am?" I ask.

"Anytime with you is the perfect time," Silas answers.

After I change out of my work clothes into my comfy sweatpants and oversized T-shirt, I call Auntie.

"Auntie! I was just offered a position on the design team in New York!"

"Aw, Darlene, that's amazing! I knew you would get the job you wanted. I'm so proud of you," she cheers.

Of course she knew, she *is* a seer. Still, it makes me feel warm and fuzzy to hear her say that she's proud of me.

"When do you leave for New York?" she asks.

"Soon, the position starts in December."

Then it hits me. "Auntie, if I take the job, then I won't be able to finish your house," I say apologetically.

"Oh, don't worry about that." She tries to reassure me that it's no big deal. "The house will take care of itself. Things always have a way of working out. But what do you mean *if* you take the job?"

"Well, I like it here and I made some friends. I think I could be really happy and have a good life here. And…" I hesitate, telling her the rest.

"And?" Auntie coaxes.

“And…” I pause and take in a deep breath. “I’ve kind of been seeing the neighbor guys… All of them.” I wince and bite my lip. “And I know it goes against what I always said, but they're supes,” I uncomfortably reveal.

“I see.”

“I think they’re really good for me. They’re kind, thoughtful, and fun.”

“You don’t have to convince me, sweetie,” she adds, supporting me.

The pace of my words quickens. “Plus, they inspire me. We have this cute tradition of making monster cookies for each other when we have dinner together.”

“Aw,” Auntie coos.

“And I have kind of become obsessed. I’ve researched and tried all kinds of recipes. Then I paint monsters on them with icing.” I find myself getting excited just talking about it. “I’ll send you a batch.”

“I would love that.” I can hear her smile through the phone. “Passion has always run deep in you for things you care about.”

“I researched what it takes to run a cookie business and ran the numbers. I think I’ll be able to successfully sell them.” I exhale. “Am I crazy for even thinking about this?”

“You’re not crazy. We *know* crazy,” she says, referring to our family.

“But now I get offered my dream job, everything I always wanted and worked for… So I don’t know what to do.” I sigh.

“You’ve always loved to create,” she reminds me. “Especially when you were free to let your imagination run wild.”

She’s right, that’s true. I would paint late into the night until I couldn't keep my eyes open. Prying myself away from my easel to get sleep out of the way, I couldn’t wait to jump back in first thing in the morning. That is until Chad killed it for me.

“The cookie idea sounds like it could be a great outlet as well for that creative urge inside you that wants to come out. And ever since you were little, you always liked doing things for yourself.”

I’m silent, letting her words sink into the logic part of my brain.

“I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that you’ll thrive no matter which path you take. But the question is, do you want your dream job or your dream life?” she asks, nudging me toward the answer that’s right in front of my face.

Wow. What she said just hit me like a ton of bricks, yet I somehow feel lighter. But why am I so hesitant? Am I so fucked up that I fear being

happy?

I'm silent for a while, and Auntie finally says, "It seems like you're in your processing mode. I'm going to let you go."

I nod, and she continues as if she saw it, but she probably actually has. "You have a lot to think about. Try not to dwell on it too hard. It will all work out. Remember, trying to force an answer only pushes it away. Let go and let the universe flow, otherwise what you resist will persist. The answer will come to you. I'm proud of you, and I love you."

"I love you too, Auntie. Thank you for talking things out with me." I wipe a tear from my cheek.

"Anytime, sweetie."

I'm so very fortunate to have Auntie in my life. She never uses her seer ability to influence me, and she always has a way of letting me make decisions on my own without giving me the answers I think I'm looking for.

It used to drive me nuts as a kid, but now I understand why she didn't just give me the solutions. Of course, it would've been easier if she just told me what she saw, especially with me being a null in the supe world with my crappy family, but in the long run I wouldn't have learned to be self-sufficient and stand on my own two feet.

Auntie is right, I need to let it go. There's no sense staying up all night fretting about everything in a circular logic loop. I won't be able to solve everything tonight and if I don't get some rest, I won't be able to think clearly about things tomorrow.

I head upstairs to relax in a long, hot bath, and Auntie texts:

> If you decide to make a cookie business, remember you know someone who backs startups *heart emoji

That Auntie, I love her so.

I curl up in my bed and hear the guys having one of their singalongs through an open window in my bedroom. I haven't heard them sing since I found out they're supes. It's nice to hear their captivating voices serenading me again in the dark of night.

They sing an ancient song in archaic fae I haven't heard since I was kid back at home with my parents. I can't pick out every word, but I know it's about separated fated mates:

My love, my fated

So near, yet so far
Will you join with me
For eternity
Is but tomorrow…

As their song wafts in with the cool breeze, I fall fast asleep, smiling ear to ear.

OceanofPDF.com

43
SUPED UP DAY OFF

DARLENE

The next morning, I wake up bright and early, feeling refreshed. It feels great to get an undisturbed, full night's sleep. Now I'm ready to tackle a day of fun.

After a cup of joe and an everything bagel, I put on my best chic farmer girl outfit of faded blue jeans, an open plaid flannel shirt over a fitted T-shirt, and cowgirl boots complete with tassels.

I walk over to the guys' house to find the van has a flatbed utility trailer hooked up to it. They're standing around Conrad's *suped* up, pun intended, vintage truck. Silas wears a charcoal and green plaid flannel and a new pair of black jeans. The scents of pine and electric energy radiate off him as I give him a quick hug hello. Conrad's burnt-orange henley-clad arms wrap around me next, bringing his campfire and bergamot scent with him. Then with his navy blue cardigan, khakis, and a whiff of crisp ocean breeze, Zeke gives me a squeeze.

"Your carriage awaits, m'lady," Conrad says with a thick British accent, bowing low.

"M'lort." I take his hand, and he helps me into the truck.

Conrad climbs into the driver's seat as Zeke and Silas pile into the van.

“What’s all this?” I gesture to the truck and the van with the trailer.

“We need to get a bunch of hay bales.” Conrad answers and sees my confused expression. “We’re building a labyrinth for the neighborhood kids for Halloween.”

“Well, aren’t you guys just the sweetest things ever.” I pat his knee as he starts his engine.

It’s great that they help out kids in the community. Knowing they had a crappy childhood, I understand wanting others to have a better start. I volunteered before, giving free art classes when I was in college before Chad insisted I stop. Maybe I should do it again here.

He wraps his fingers around the top of my hand and smiles. As we drive down the road, his scent fills the small cab of the truck. Sunshine filters through shimmering leaves of passing trees and warms my skin.

We pull into the county fairgrounds halfway between Midville and Perfect Valley and the parking lot is jam packed. Everyone from all three towns must be here, but the grounds are so vast that it doesn’t feel overcrowded. It’s the perfect amount of people to make it seem like something is happening but without feeling overwhelmed. It’s just perfectly *whelmed*.

It’s a beautiful fall day, not too cool and not too warm, with puffy clouds floating by on a gentle breeze.

After Silas explains everything to see and do and how things are laid out, the guys defer to me for our first stop. I appreciate Silas’ strategic mind and that he recognizes I tend to like a plan of action before jumping into things.

“What do you guys want to do first? I’m just going with the flow today.”

The guys nod, and Zeke suggests, “How about we meander through the vendor section to start?”

At a natural, relaxed pace, sometimes together and other times by ourselves, we explore the booths of artists and artisans selling their wonderful handmade wares of arts, crafts, and household gizmos. There are even booths where you can hand-dip your own candles or make your own fall wreaths.

Zeke is particularly attracted to colorful windchimes made from sea glass and seashells.

“These make you think of home?” I ask as I approach the booth.

Zeke nods and smiles with his lips pressed thin.

“It must be hard for you being this far away from the ocean.” I rub his back. “We’ll have to take a trip to the coast.”

“Really?” Zeke perks up and smiles wide at my suggestion.

I slide my arm around his. “Let’s go see what the guys are up to.”

We find Conrad at a garden sculpture vendor.

“Hey, check out these cool copper pipe pyramids,” he says with a glint in his eye. “You can stand up in them.” He steps into a nine foot tall one with a wide smile stretched across his face, like he just entered his long-lost home. With his arms outstretched, he reaches for a large pyramid shaped crystal that sits on top.

My naughty mind drifts to a fantasy of me spying on him from my bedroom window while he’s doing his morning nude yoga inside the pyramid.

Silas paces out the pyramid’s width. “It’ll fit.”

“Eh, maybe next year.” Conrad shrugs.

As we leave the vendors, I make a mental note of which ones I would like to visit again before we go home.

In the center arena, we catch a show of cowgirls and cowboys on beautiful Quarter Horses. The guys and I are impressed by the amazing speed and power of the horses, as well as the superb skill of the riders performing dazzling rope tricks and death-defying acrobatics.

For the finale of the show, the riders stand on two horses, with one leg on each horse, blazing around the arena. I grab Conrad’s arm as my breath hitches out of fright for the riders.

“That was incredible!” I exclaim.

As we file out of the bleachers, we share our excitement for the riveting performance.

“Would you like to get something to eat or drink?” Silas asks me and points to one of the food court areas.

“Yeah, I could go for something.” I inhale the tantalizing aromas of fair treats tempting me.

“Hey, look. We can press our own apple cider.” Zeke points to the stand. “Let’s do it!”

We buy a large bin of apples and the guys each man a cider press. As I feed the hopper of each press with apples, the guys get to work and hand

crank the flywheel of the grinder. Seeing who's the fastest, they crank faster and faster and I have a hard time keeping up with loading them with apples.

With the last few apples I put into Zeke's grinder, he kicks it into high gear, and a glob of apple pulp flies out and splatters me across my face and shirt. My mouth drops open in shock and the guys freeze, nervous about what my reaction is going to be.

I burst out in laughter while I wipe the apple mush off. The color returns to their faces, and they join in the hysterics.

I take a particularly gooey chunk and throw it at Zeke. "Jerk!" I say playfully.

The ever-ready-for-anything Silas cleans the mess off me with a towelette, trying to suppress his laughter.

To make up for it, Zeke asks, "Would you like a caramel apple or a cinnamon apple donut?"

"Both!" I pout with my hands on my hips.

As I finish cleaning myself off, Zeke returns with a round of caramel apples and donuts for all of us. We finish pressing our cider and each fill a mason jar. Silas pours the rest of the cider into a large glass jug and stows it in his pack, while Zeke finds a shady spot in the grass under a willow tree for us to enjoy our treats.

With our bellies full, we head off for our next adventure. I wrap an arm around Conrad's and Silas' waist and stick my tongue out over my shoulder at Zeke. He feigns insult and returns the favor.

Cresting a small hill, we come across the games area. Oh boy, if I thought they were being overzealous with the apple grinding, I can hardly imagine how competitive they'll be with their favorite pastime.

"I call shotgun with Darlene on the three-legged race!" Conrad blurts out and runs to the line to sign us up.

The festival has an added spin on the traditional race. It's a mash-up of a three-legged race, *and* a sack-race on an obstacle course.

I sense Conrad's pulse quicken as I put my left leg next to his right in a burlap bag. I laugh at Zeke and Silas bickering, like Bert and Ernie, about who gets to have their dominant leg outside of the bag.

We lumber up to the starting line with the other participants and anxiously wait for the attendant to shoot his cap gun for the start of the race.

This is going to be fun, as the guys and I are highly competitive when it comes to games.

Pop!

The cap sounds, and we're off. Anticipating the start of the race, Silas and Zeke get the jump on us and are a couple of steps ahead out of the gate. After a few seconds, Conrad and I synchronize our stride and we pass the guys slaloming through our first barrel.

In an uncoordinated attempt to catch up with us, they trip over their own feet and fall to the grass. Laughing, I look back to see them still bickering as they try to stand up.

Conrad and I easily make it across a small bridge over a pool of water. And the see-saw ramp doesn't present any challenges for us either. But Zeke and Silas are on our heels.

When we round the last barrel to head back to the starting point, Zeke and Silas take the turn too fast and tumble to the ground again. Conrad and I pull far ahead as they struggle to get going again.

"I think we've got this game in the *bag*," I joke.

Conrad groans. "You're so *punny*."

On the last stretch of barrels, Zeke picks up Silas and runs full speed toward the finish line, but not in time. Conrad and I are victorious.

"That's it, we're making one of these in the backyard!" Conrad high-fives me and brings me into a hug, as Zeke and Silas grumble at each other.

"My turn to race with Darlene!" Zeke says.

"Are you guys going to make me race *three* times so that each of you have a chance to be with me?" I pant, hands on my knees.

Zeke and Silas both grin and nod quickly.

"You guys are going to wear me out!"

I win again, this time with Zeke. And sure enough, again when it's Silas' turn. *Hmmm…*

"Funny, there's no way a null like me can compete with, let alone win a race against, two supes." I crinkle my brow at them. "That's interesting, don't you think?"

They feign innocence, looking at each other as if asking, *did you throw the race? I didn't throw the race.*

"Don't sell yourself short. You inspire whoever is with you to excel." Conrad grins.

"Yeah, right." I chuckle and roll my eyes.

On the far side of the grounds, we come across a stage with a band playing lively, foot-tapping grooves. I start to sway my hips and the guys

join in.

Encouraged by their participation, I let loose and dance like no one is watching. But my three hotties are eyeing me up and down, taking in my seductive moves. Licking their lips, they mirror my enthusiasm. And these boys can *dance*.

I'm impressed, and not to mention turned on by their uniquely sexy moves. Conrad prances around with his sensual, cat-like agility. Zeke's limbs are everywhere. His fast spins and smooth moves are enticing to watch. Silas' sleek undulations, tantalize and hypnotize me as he glides over the grass.

I've always wanted a partner who loved to dance as much as I do. Now I have *three* perfect partners. How in all of fae am I going to be able to leave them and move to New York?

I push that spiral-inducing, invasive thought down. Not today. Today I'm just enjoying my time with the guys, having fun.

After our dance-a-thon, we fuel up on some hand-squeezed, ice-cold lemonade and caramel kettle corn.

"There's horsedrawn hay rides. Would you want to roll in the hay with the three of us?" Silas excitedly, but innocently, suggests.

"*Boy*, would I." I smirk.

I exchange knowing glances with Conrad and Zeke as we chuckle at Silas' naivety of what the innuendo implies.

We pile into the back of an empty wagon filled with hay after Zeke chats with the driver. We're either lucky or Zeke tipped him because we have the wagon all to ourselves.

I sit between Conrad's legs and lean back on his chest. Silas and Zeke sit beside us with either a hand or foot touching me the entire time as we take our leisurely hayride. The wagon slowly makes its way down a tree-lined dirt path that wraps around the fairgrounds' small pond.

I'm so relaxed by the end of our ride, I don't want it to end, or this day to end. The four of us fall back into an easy comfortableness. I know it's corny to say, but we really are four complex puzzle pieces that fit together. But what will the picture look like?

With a couple of hours left before closing time, we make our way back to the vendor area.

I casually stroll up to the vendor *Best Baking Products*, and eye the high-quality equipment I would need to start a cookie business. They sell

everything from utensils, marble rolling pins, roller mats and boards, to mixers, mixing bowls, baking sheets, and ovens. I peruse a catalog for their bulkier equipment.

Mentally tallying up everything I will need, the cost is adding up quickly. A commercial-grade convection oven can cost ten grand alone.

Seeing the guys approaching the aisle I'm on, I quickly pop into the next booth and nonchalantly check out the stemware they're selling. Zeke addresses me with a nod to see if I'm doing okay. I smile and nod back as they continue to walk down the aisle.

A warm sensation shimmers through my body from my head to my toes. It's a nice feeling to have three hot guys checking in on me. I pop back into the bakery booth to continue with my wish list.

After finishing my fantasy about my dream bakery, I'm on to my next mission. Knowing that the guys rarely buy things for themselves, I'm going to purchase all the things they like.

Even with them checking in on me every so often, I secretly manage to buy Zeke the windchimes he had his eye on, and the copper pyramid I know Conrad wanted. To keep their presents a surprise, I have the vendors ship the items to my house. But I still need to find something for Silas.

Speaking of the serpent, Silas runs up to me. "Darlene! You have to see this incredible pumpkin." He takes my hand and rushes me to the farmers' market booths.

"Look!" Silas points with a twinkle in his eyes.

"Wow, that is amazing." I stare at a carved pumpkin the likes I've never seen before.

Its skin is marbled and striated with colors of eggplant purple mixed with pumpkin orange. An image of the towns and tree-clad hills of our area is intricately hand-carved into the hollowed-out pumpkin.

"They're grown right here at *Perfect Pumpkin Patch*," Silas adds.

"Cool, but what kind of pumpkins are they?" I inquire.

"It's a new hybrid they've cultivated. They call it *Purple Haze*." He smiles. "I think it's beautiful."

"I do, too. Do you want one?" I ask.

"They said they sold out. This display is the last one and isn't for sale." Silas looks down at the ground, hiding his sad eyes.

"Oh, I'm sorry." Now I feel bad that we didn't get here in time to get my snakey his pumpkin.

“That’s okay.” He looks at the pumpkin longingly. “It’s enough to know that something this amazing…” He takes my hand into his and looks, for the first time, deeply into my eyes. “...this beautiful, exists.”

I look at his handsome face, admiring his beauty both inside and out. “Hey, you have a pretty purple iridescent feather in your hair.” I pull the feather out. “Are there peacocks around here?”

“I’m not sure.” He has an odd look on his face, like he’s embarrassed for receiving a compliment.

Silas takes the feather out of my hand and pockets it.

Together, we make the last round through the farmers’ tables to purchase all the fresh produce, butter, cheese, and eggs we can carry. Back in the parking lot, Conrad and I secure our goods in the back of the van. Zeke and Silas load and tie down the hay bales they bought for the labyrinth. We’re ready for our drive home. *Home…*

After unloading our purchases, we sit in the backyard of the guy’s house and snack on a charcuterie board loaded with the guy's handmade sausages and the goodies we got at the festival.

We casually dine, talk and laugh, and then eat some more for hours, and finally as the evening winds down, we reminisce about our day over a night cap. Near midnight, the guys escort me back to my place. On my porch, we embrace in a group hug.

“Thank you for the *perfect* day.” I squeeze each of them harder.

Each gives me a chaste peck on my cheek.

“Goodnight. Sleep well,” I say as I close my door.

I lean my back on the door and slowly slide down to the floor.

How am I going to leave them?

OceanofPDF.com

44
OBLIGATORY UNTRUTHS

CONRAD

The Harvest Festival was exactly what we needed to get our relationship back on track. Darlene seems to have shed most of her reservations about us now. Goddess, I hope she can forgive us entirely.

It felt so natural for all of us to be together, just enjoying each other's company. The easy way she's slid into our misfit family boggles my mind. She gives us a sense of purpose, and a reason to get up each morning, and shower her with the affection she deserves. Frankly, I don't know how we had the strength to go on before she came into our lives.

Darlene makes us better men. Except we're not just men. We need to come clean. She needs to know what we really are, monsters, if we're to have any hope of claiming her as our mate.

It riles me that Darlene thought we wouldn't want her because she's a null. Her spirit was crushed growing up in a realm that's so prejudiced that even her own family shuns her. Their abuse has beaten her down to the point she can't even fathom the possibility that she's desirable to magical beings. It saddens my heart that her own flesh and blood don't see her for who she is, like we do—a wonderful, intelligent, and beautiful soul.

Such a shame how the supe community treats its members, whether they be Mythics or nulls, or any other sort that doesn't fit in with what some asshole deemed was an acceptable form.

I wish everyone could be more open-minded.

From what I read in my sphinx history books, Mythics weren't a danger to other supes, but when dragons and full-blooded elven mages judged us to be too volatile to exist, we became just that. The fallout was horrific. They exterminated entire bloodlines such as alicorns, griffons, and creatures no one remembers. Then there are those in hiding, such as kraken, sphinx, basilisk, shapeshifters, primordial dragons, and so many more. Some found sanctuary in secluded locations like our secret island, while others are trying to blend in on earth in plain sight like we are.

Zeke, Silas, and I have convened in the backyard. The moon illuminates our faces as we pitch our ears to hear anyone lurking in the neighborhood. With Darlene sound asleep, the three of us can talk about how well the day went.

"We need to tell her before this goes too far," Silas warns, before I have the chance to say the same thing.

We're both right, of course, but doing so endangers her and us. And she might not be as forgiving of us for not being completely honest about what we really are.

"We won't go too far." Zeke glares at me, like *I'm* the one who stuffed his monster bits inside the poor woman. "We'll take it slow. She's just starting to trust us again." I know he's scared of the fallout of confessing everything.

"But if we wait much longer, we'll be destroying her trust once again," I argue, knowing we need to be smart about this. But love isn't smart, and I'm tired of hiding who we are from our mate. My sphinx side is about to throw a full tantrum, and no one wants to see that.

"And she needs to know the risks involved in being with our kind before making her decision," Silas adds. His eyes flash a green glow.

He's afraid he'll have to wipe the memory of us from her mind if she rejects our beasts.

I'm worried all four of us are in danger. What if Chad realizes what Silas is? What if he comes after all of us? Including Darlene? What if when she knows the truth, she rejects us and breaks our souls? What if she

accepts us, but her vicious family discovers what we are and ends our lives? And goddess forbid, what if our parents find out about her?

“Fine,” Zeke gives in. “We’ll tell her soon. Let’s give us some time to make it up to her.”

“But I’ll need to molt in a day or two. I can feel the itch,” Silas grumbles. “She’ll notice I’m missing.”

“Let me handle it,” I say.

He doesn’t need any other stress with a molt coming up. His beast will likely be out of his mind with worry for our mate.

OceanofPDF.com

45
PUMPKIN TOSSING

DARLENE

The following morning, I call around to find out if any stores carry the same rare variety of pumpkin we discovered at the harvest festival. Thankfully, Bernie's Market has a few hidden in their backstock. I race down and buy the biggest one they have, but I ask for it to be delivered in a large box so the guys don't spot me carrying it in.

I dig through my art boxes and locate my fine carving tools I bought for a college printmaking class.

Setting up my office as a secret carving station, I hollow the huge thing out and save the seeds, certain Silas will want to cultivate them in the future.

Over the gourd's surface, I sketch out an intricate design that's been formulating in my mind all night. It'll have representations of special moments with the guys: cookies, Heaven Lake, Pyramid Mountain, Silas' and my favorite flowers and blackberries, and Zeke's pool. And interwoven throughout, I'll hide octopuses, lions, and snakes.

The guys have been a lot more low-key the last few days. Instead of Silas tending to my flowers, I catch Conrad there when I come home.

Then it dawns on me that I haven't seen Silas since the festival. I'd worry he was sick, but supes don't contract colds. It would have to be something much graver if he was bedridden.

"Hi," I greet Conrad as I hop out of my car. "Not that I'm not happy to see you, but why isn't Silas doing this? Is he okay?"

Oh no, has he changed his mind about me and is avoiding me?

"He's alright. He had to deal with some stuff to do with his family."

"But he's good?" I ask, knowing how tough dealing with family can be.

"He'll be back soon and better for it," Conrad says cheerily.

Hmm, maybe I'm making a bigger deal of his absence than necessary.

I nod toward their backyard. "How's the maze coming along?"

"Great. We'll have to show it to you when it's done." He wipes his hands off and gives me a wide grin.

"You sure you don't want some help?" I ask again. "It's the least I can do for all the work you've done for me."

"Nope! But thanks for the offer." He gives me a nod goodbye and saunters back to his house.

It's taken me a week to get the pumpkin carving completed, but I'm finally done. I've used the time to think about what I want to do with my life.

The idea of starting my own cookie company and staying here with the guys and my new friends is too appealing. And I have a wonderful aunt who will loan me the start-up capital. It would be hard work, but I'd be building something that's all mine, and that's my ultimate goal. I can start small and work my way up to as big as I want to take it. Maybe one day I'll shoot for national distribution or franchising. Who knows?

I take several pictures of my carved pumpkin since the item itself is temporary. Once I'm satisfied with the shots, I wrap up my present in a sheet to hide it from prying eyes. Then I watch and wait for the guys to be distracted so I can place my gift at the entrance of the maze.

Finally, Zeke gives my house a curious glance, then hops into the van and backs out of the driveway, while Conrad wanders over to the garage on the other side of their house. They mentioned Silas is returning tomorrow, so this is the perfect time to sneak over.

The damned thing is heavy and awkward, but at least it's lighter than it was when it was full of meat and seeds. My arms barely wrap around its girth, but I manage as I tiptoe into their yard.

I'm so excited, and I love the thrill of the stealthy surprise. I'll have to sneak back again to deliver Zeke's and Conrad's gifts too. It's a bit of a bummer I won't see their expressions when they discover them, but maybe I can ask to see the maze tomorrow morning when Silas arrives home.

Of course, I've tried to see what they're doing back there from my bedroom window, but they've built a tent-like cover over the whole thing to keep the rain out while they work.

When I get closer, the entrance feels more like a cave than a maze with how dark it is inside. I hear a rustling. Shit, did some wild animal get in there?

Would wildlife be dumb enough to encroach on a lion's territory? Perhaps it's just a bird nosing around.

I need to put this pumpkin down just inside the opening so Zeke or Conrad don't investigate before Silas returns.

Just as I step into the opening, something massive appears.

What the fuck?

A feathered serpent rears its giant head, and two glowing chartreuse eyes stare me down. Its head alone is the size of a golf cart.

I'm not going to lie, I might have peed a little. Feathered wings with talon-like appendages at the top bend to reach for me.

I scream, throw the pumpkin at it, and run for my life.

Conrad appears, racing to the backyard, ready for battle.

"What is *that*? Oh my fuckin' goddess… Silas is a Basilisk?" I shout. "That's not possible!"

"Darlene–" Conrad stretches his arms out as if to capture me.

"What are *you* really?!"

He drops his gaze.

"A damned Mythic too?" I throw my hands in the air.

"Darlene, please–"

"Are you all Mythics?" I yell, hoping I'm fucking wrong.

Conrad presses his lips thin, knowing I won't like his answer.

"You lied to me! How could you?" My blood boils.

"Darlene–" Conrad reaches for my arm.

“Get the hell away from me!” I dodge his grasp and storm out of their yard.

They lied.

Twice.

OceanofPDF.com

46
MYTHICALLY SCREWED

DARLENE

I can't believe they're not only supes, they're fucking Mythics.

My heart is pounding out of my chest as I run and jump in my car. Conrad shouts for me to wait, and it sounds as if he's underwater.

Even my vision is blurry. Oh, I'm crying… of course I am.

Driving aimlessly, I end up turning onto the road that leads into the mountains. Dark storm clouds are cresting the peaks, rushing toward me.

I can't go to anyone about what I just saw, and I need to think this out. The guys wouldn't be safe if their secret gets out. I wouldn't be either. I can't be reckless and draw attention to them.

Silas almost scared the shit out of me, literally. I'm shaking from the shock of seeing him in that form. Damn, he's fucking huge and scary. A true monster in the monstrous world of supes. Or at least Silas is. But it's likely all three are, and that's why they stick together.

I don't know a damned thing about Mythics, other than what I was taught at Shadowcraft Prep, but that was probably a lot of bullshit. Centuries ago, Mythics were hunted down and exterminated, or so the Supe Council claimed.

Did the Mythics deserve that devastating treatment? I don't know, and that worries me.

The guys lied to me about everything, and while I know that they sort of had to, what is real?

Are Mythics as bad as we've been taught? Or did supes kill them off just because they were jealous or for some other reason I can't fathom?

They have been nothing but kind and protective of me. But maybe like they've mentioned, they are the odd ones out in their families. What if their home island is filled with violent assholes?

I take a deep breath and realize I shouldn't be driving while this distracted. I pull over to the side of the country road, grip the steering wheel, and gaze out over the serene forest next to me, wishing I was as calm right now.

I fling my head back against the headrest and let the tears flow.

I loved them. I accepted them as supes. We were building something amazing together, but what other secrets could they be keeping from me?

Goddess, I'm such a fucking sad sack of doubt and turmoil.

I take a deep breath and remember the breathing exercise Zeke taught me. Ironic, I know.

Once I'm no longer shaking, I try to *pros-and-cons* this shit with a rational mind.

I think about how I feel about them. My gut says I can trust them, even if my head is questioning that logic.

I imagine what it will be like if I accept this new reality and move forward with our relationship. It worries me since I'm still loosely connected to the supe world. My family isn't completely out of the picture. What if they somehow sense what the guys truly are and kill them? Or what if the guys have to kill them to survive?

Perhaps I'm a threat to their existence. What if right now they're packing their things and leaving me?

My stomach knots at the thought, and I want to vomit.

Okay. So I've established my need to have them in my life is greater than my anger that they kept this from me.

But they *had* to keep this from me especially after they learned I was from the fae realm.

When I think back on the things they said and did, or the tortured expressions I misinterpreted, I realize they wanted to confess *everything*,

but couldn’t.

Then a thought smacks me in the face. Does my aunt know? She’s a seer, and knew there were three hot guys next door. Did she know what they were when she sent me to live here?

A wave of anger for her betrayal rages through my body like a firestorm.

She must have known.

I pound on my horn and the sound jerks me back to my surroundings.

The problem is, I’ve already fallen in love…

Light rain begins to fall. I take a moment to allow my tear-stained face to dry and for the blotchy red to dissipate. I should talk to them about all this.

A ping of intuition rings in my soul. Something’s wrong. Are they leaving me right now? Or is it something else? I have to get home and find out. I’ve ignored my instincts for too long.

As I head back, I already feel silly for reacting the way I did. I was just so surprised by Silas’ gigantic form. Hell, I can startle when the guys come around a corner in their human form when I wasn’t expecting it.

Thinking back on what happened, I saw Silas’ gentle eyes. He was terrified of me seeing him as an actual monster of old.

A short time later, I pull up to my house and half expect to see the guys waiting on my porch.

Their van is in the driveway, so Zeke is back from wherever he went off to.

The house feels eerily quiet with no lights on. I knock anyway. No answer. I knock again. I try the door handle, and the door swings open.

Rain begins to come down in earnest.

Did they flee when I discovered them? Did they think I would expose their secrets to the supe hunters? Fuck, maybe they did.

No. They know me well enough to realize I wouldn’t do that.

I’m about to go around to the back to see if they are with Silas in the maze, when I see Betty and Lil’ Shit walking down the street.

Betty huffs and calls out, “They aren’t home.”

Confusion fills me. How does she know that?

“Some other men showed up, and they all ran into the woods behind our properties.” She gestures to a moving truck parked on the empty lot on the other side of the guys’ house, mostly obscured by the tall fence and trees.

I was so focused on talking to the guys, I didn't notice it.

Men? Could it be Chad and his supernatural forum bros?

"They had what looked like paintball guns and lugged a bunch of large bags. I like the boys well enough, but you need to tell them that isn't allowed. We don't need paint washing down into our yards."

Plastering on a calm expression, I agree, "Will do!"

Betty waddles off, and I pull my phone from my pocket. Who do I call? I don't trust the supes I've left behind in my life, not even my family can find out. My old acquaintance, Quade, might not even be cool with Mythics. Besides, even if I could think of someone from the fae realm, I couldn't reach them by phone.

I'm shaking, because I can sense deep in my bones that the guys need help. Sure, they're Mythics, but that doesn't mean they're invincible.

My finger commits to a decision.

"Hey, girl," Clover answers.

"Hey, the guys are in trouble. I think Chad and his buddies are hunting them right now. In the forest behind my house."

Clover curses. "I'm on my way," she says like it's the most natural thing to risk herself for the guys, for me, without question.

"I need to tell you something before you do, and you may not want to help when you know." When she tells me to spit it out, I reveal their secret. "They're Mythics."

"Stars and stones," she breathes out. "Okay. Welp, then we better go rescue your endangered hotties! See you in a second."

Goddess, if she were here, I'd hug the hell out of her.

I hear the line go dead, but then she appears with Ruby and Felicity on the lawn a few moments later. And I hug the hell out of her.

Ruby closes the portal and rushes over to hand me a huge knife. They're all geared up, and I briefly wonder if they're secretly superheroines.

"I have some protection charms and battle potions, if you need them." I pull the small stash from my pockets.

"Nah, we're good. You hold on to those." Ruby waves off my offer.

"Can we poke our noses in their house for their scents?" Felicity asks. When I push open the door, the three of them sniff the air. "Got it."

Clover orders, "Let's split up to cover more ground. Darlene, you come with me. Ruby and Felicity, good luck."

Then we charge toward the forest, ready for battle.

OceanofPDF.com

47
THE EX FACTOR

ZEKE

Several Minutes Earlier…

Just as I return from a quick grocery run, storm clouds roll in and it starts to drizzle. I turn onto our street and see that Darlene's car is gone.

In our driveway, Conrad is pulling on his long hair, looking as if his entire world has come crashing down. Dread like nothing I've experienced before plows into my chest.

What in the deep waters happened while I was gone for a few minutes?

I park the van and run over to Conrad. "What's going on?"

"Silas. She saw *him*. She ran." He paces and yanks on his hair some more. "It's over. She's done with us."

"She said that?"

He jerks to a stop and shouts. "No! But she knows we're…" he whisper-hisses the last word, "*Mythics."*

Maybe he's overreacting, but she has run off. I knew we should have let Silas molt in the woods, but we didn't want him far away with Chad sniffing around. Every one of our instincts tells us he's bad news, and not just for Darlene.

It’s those very instincts that have kept our kind alive for centuries.

I glance toward the backyard. “And Silas? Is he okay?”

Conrad gives me an exasperated glower. “What do you think? He raced off into the forest, in a complete meltdown.”

Goddess dammit.

My survival mode makes me briefly wonder if Darlene might turn us in, but I instantly dismiss that notion. She’s too kind to ever consider that as an option, even if she would never want to see us again.

“There’s something else,” Conrad adds. “I heard one of those flying drone things just before Darlene found Silas.”

I hear one in the distance now.

“When did all this happen?”

“Ten minutes ago?”

Out of nowhere, a huge moving truck appears and turns down our dead-end street, and a shiver races through my body.

Chad’s driving. The guys with him are wearing camouflage and tactical gear, holding huge tranq rifles.

They know.

“Hunters, run!” I grab Conrad, dragging him with me.

A faint screech reaches my keen ears. It’s Silas. He’s in trouble.

The van races up onto the side lot, and men pour out, chasing us.

This is my worst nightmare. At least Darlene is safe. Unless they grabbed her when she ran off. I pray to the goddess that isn’t the case.

“We know what you are,” Chad shouts. “My guys have your bitch in the woods! Go sniff her out if you think you can save her.”

Shit. I know this is a trap, but she might *actually* be out there.

Conrad shifts into his sphinx, immediately turning invisible as he does. Then he jumps over the back fence. I fling myself as high as I can, and my tentacle helps me over the top.

Two of Chad’s men slam into the gate, but quickly figure out the latch.

“Let’s split up. Find Darlene and Silas,” I order.

There’s another roar. Silas. He’s in pain.

The sky decides rain is exactly what I need. The water feels good, feeding my magic, but it won’t help Silas or Conrad. And it will only make it easier for the hunters to track us.

I hear Conrad’s heavy steps racing to the right, and I veer to the left. I’m deep into the woods when I hear his roar. Did he find something or is he

hurt?

I can’t focus on that now. I use my sense of smell to sniff out Darlene. It isn’t easy with the rain, but then I catch a note of her sweet buttercream in the air. I follow the trail to the creek. I run for a bit along the edge, then see it. *Her*.

In the middle of the creek, she’s floating face down in the current, inside a cage. Goddess, her fears come true, dying in the water.

Chad wasn’t lying after all. What a piece of shit.

Water splashes as I charge in to rescue her. I want to call out to her, but I don’t want the men to hear that I’ve found her. I wonder where they are. I hear Silas’ screeches in the distance, and I suspect they have their hands full with him.

I come around the cage and when my arm brushes up against the metal, it burns. *Fuck. Iron*—a faeborn’s and Mythics’ worst enemy.

The opening is narrow, but I shove my way inside to grab hold of her to pull her out. I’d use my tentacles to help, but the iron-tainted water is screwing with my ability to shift. Her face is hidden under wet hair. I hope I’m not too late to revive her.

My hand catches hold of her sweater, but it pulls away, revealing a mannequin.

The cage door slams shut behind me, trapping me inside with a dummy.

In my desperation to save my mate, I’ve fallen for a stupid trap. The rain pours down, and the creek’s waters rise. I try to shift, but can’t. Without my magic, I won’t be able to breathe underwater.

Fuck, a kraken is going to die by drowning… How ironically embarrassing.

OceanofPDF.com

48
IRON-WILLED WOMEN WARRIORS

DARLENE

We pile through the guys' opened back gate and run up the trail ascending into the forest that Silas and I took for our picnic. Man, these lady supes are fast. I'm having a hard time keeping up with them. I wish I kept up my physical training after I left Shadowcraft Prep.

Felicity and Ruby easily pull ahead, but Clover is holding back so she doesn't lose me. As if they picked up on something, the wonder duo veers off the trail to the left into the dense woods and heads for the bluff that overlooks the town.

Buzzing drones approach us overhead from the ridge Felicity and Ruby are headed toward. Fortunately, we're shrouded by the cover of the forest. I didn't know those damn things could fly in the rain. At least the drones shouldn't be able to get a clear image of the supes even if it was sunny weather.

"I'm locked onto Conrad's scent." Clover looks over her shoulder at me. "He's not too far."

I'm impressed. Clover has a good sniffer. It's difficult to pick up scents in the rain.

Before we make it to the ridge, she suddenly turns off the trail to the right. The trees and brush are thicker here, but Clover pulls ahead. What I assume is Conrad's beast roars out in pain, dead ahead.

I hear men's footfalls and shouts coming after us from behind.

Fuck. I try to dig in and move my short legs faster, but the men are gaining on us.

Out of nowhere, I see Ruby and Felicity charging toward Clover and me. Ruby shifts into *something.* All I see is a lightning-fast red blur streak past me.

"We got this." Felicity launches after Ruby.

I hear the snapping of tree limbs behind me, well, I *think* that's tree limbs. Then men scream from the seats of their souls in horror for their survival.

Guess it wasn't the trees.

Thank the goddess I called Clover. Without them I would have been caught, or worse, by now.

Clover and I come to a small clearing and find Conrad in his shifted form with his hind leg caught in a giant bear trap. He's a lion of sorts, but with huge wings. A sphinx?

A favorite sweater of mine that I haven't seen in a year lies on the ground, ripped up next to the trap. That fucking Chad, he stole it when we were dating. Did he have enough foresight back then to know he would need it for something like this? Or is he just a fucking sick-o?

Conrad lets out a roar in agony, snapping me out of my trip down shitty memory lane.

Oh my stars, he's magnificent.

Golden tan fur ripples across his large body as he bellows. Massive bronze eagle-like wings, twenty feet across, are outstretched and flapping, trying to take flight. His long tail, as thick as a giant rope used to moor ships, desperately swats Clover away as she tries to approach his hind leg in the trap. The power in his tail alone could likely crush a mortal man.

"The trap, it's iron!" Clover growls. "Chad and his men know what they're doing. Even if I could get past his skull-cracking tail, I can't touch it. You're going to have to release it."

The magic-killing iron is preventing Conrad from shifting back to his human form. A bulky chain with thick links tethers the trap to a huge pine, and he can't fly away.

His snarred beast feels cornered, thrashing against the restraints of the iron trap to escape or kill us, or both.

“Conrad. It’s me, Darlene.” I slowly approach Conrad’s head with open arms.

His amber eyes dilate and his chaotic movements ease, recognizing my voice.

“May I touch you?” I hover my hand a few feet from his face.

He nods with a whimper.

I gently run my fingers over his snout. His fur is softer than it appears, and Conrad coos his approval.

His face twitches when I accidentally brush against his whiskers. “Oh, I’m sorry!” I cringe, feeling bad about triggering his sensitive feelers.

Conrad nuzzles his snout into my hand.

“I’m going to get you out of this trap, okay?” I walk around to his hindquarters, running my fingers through the thick fur of his flank, hoping to keep his beast calm.

His fur ruffles just ahead of the movement of my hand in anticipation of my soothing touch. Once I reach his trapped back leg, I stoop to examine the damage.

The six-inch, sharp iron teeth of the giant bear trap dig into his flesh and bone. His restrained, serving-platter-sized paw dangles on the ground, and his bean pads armed with long, razor-sharp claws wiggle, trying to grasp onto something.

Blood pours from the punctures and sizzles as it flows across the iron teeth. Steam with the smell of his burning blood plume to my nostrils. This is bad.

“This bear trap was modified to break bones.” Clover sneers in disgust. “Traps were used to immobilize the animal, not break its leg.”

Clover grabs a log that is thicker than Conrad's ankle. “To release it, we need to stand on the wings of the trap.” She points to two long, spring-loaded metal bars extending outward on either side of the trigger.

“Now, the tricky part. As we do that, you’re going to pull the jaws apart, and I’ll shove this log in between them so they don’t snap shut again,” she explains.

We stand on the wings, and they don’t budge. After a few jumps on the stiff metal, we hear a click, and we’re able to push them down with our feet.

I grab each side of the jaws, and with all my strength, I pull them apart enough for Clover to shove the log in next to Conrad's leg.

Conrad pulls his leg out and shifts back to his human form.

"Thank you." He pants and collapses to the ground, fully naked.

I cover his modesty with my jacket.

"Come here often?" Conrad, the ever-comedian, jokes with a raspy voice.

I hug and kiss my funny guy as Clover applies pressure on his wounds to slow the bleeding.

"Where are Zeke and Silas?" I ask, not wanting to waste time.

"Zeke headed toward the creek, and Silas is somewhere beyond that." He points up the mountain. "They both seem to be stationary and howling in pain."

Shit. That means they're probably in a trap as well. I stand to go after them, but Conrad grabs my ankle and tries to get up. "I'm coming with you."

I look at Clover, and she shakes her head, indicating his injuries are severe. Not to mention, his energy is drained from the iron poisoning. I'm surprised he could even shift back at all.

"They're my brothers, I have to–" Conrad raises onto one foot, but falls back down to the ground.

"You guys aren't dying. Not on my watch. Not when I was about to forgive you."

"I'll go." Clover stands.

"No." My limited senses tell me that it has to be me and Clover needs to stay with Conrad. "They're probably trapped in iron, and I'm the only one that can touch it." I plant my feet firmly on the ground and stare down Clover so she knows I'm not backing down on this.

She nods, and I turn to bolt up the mountain.

Finding my second wind, I'm surprised I can still run, let alone walk. But what choice do I have? My guys' lives are at stake.

Fortunately, I remember the lay of the land from my picnic with Silas, so I know where I'm headed. As I get closer, I can hear the once babbling creek is now roaring from the torrents of rain. Zeke screams out in pain. Fuck. He's hurt.

I try to pick up my pace, but I'm already running at full speed. The rain is coming down in buckets, and the terrain is slick with thick mud. This is the one of the few times I wish I was a supe with superior speed and strength.

After what feels like forever, I finally crest the last small hill before the creek that's now a raging river. I see Zeke underneath what looks like the top of a cage in the middle of the stream. He's trapped.

The rising floodwaters are mere inches from completely submerging Zeke. He tilts his head back to catch a breath in between swells of the rushing current, only to be thrown against the metal bars of the cage's roof. He screams as steam rises from his face. The cage is iron, and it's burning him.

Shoving my fears aside, I jump into the deluge, trying to get to him in time without being swept away in the torrent. The roaring water is deafening.

Slamming against the cage, I find the door and yank on it. It doesn't budge.

Zeke catches sight of me. "No, Darlene… It's too dangerous… Get out of the water. Now." He gasps for air.

"Not until you're out with me." Ignoring his insistence for me to save myself, I quickly deduce that the latch to open it is underwater. With a deep breath, I plunge under the surface to search for the latch.

The water is black with mud and full of debris, smashing against me. My eyes clenched tight, I have to hunt for it by touch alone.

I feel around for as long as my breath holds out, only resurfacing for a quick breath, then dive again.

After three attempts, I find the latch, but it's jammed.

Out of breath, I come up for air to find Zeke completely underwater. Am I too late?

I dive to the bottom and find a large rock to smash the latch. After a couple of hits, it breaks free.

I rush into the cage and grab Zeke by the collar and pull with all my might to get him through the small opening. Once out of the cage, I try to get us to the surface, but the raging current is too much for me, and we are swept away.

Pushing Zeke to the surface as best as I can, I'm rolled over and my back slams against boulders as we rush downstream. I clamp my arms

around his calves like a vice. For the life of me, I'm *not* letting go.

Suddenly, Zeke's arm reaches down and pulls me to the surface.

He's conscious.

I gasp for air and see us fast approaching the waterfall I remember from my picnic hike with Silas.

Shit.

OceanofPDF.com

49
THE CHOAD INCIDENT

DARLENE

Free from the toxic iron suppressing his magic, Zeke musters enough strength to shift one tentacle and lassoes it around a tree. He pulls us out of the rapids and to the muddy shore. We collapse on the ground, exhausted.

As we catch our breath on the creek's bank, I turn my head to see color returning to Zeke's exhausted face. The rain slows to barely a drizzle. A bit too late for my water adventure, but I'll take it since we still need to get Conrad and Silas to safety.

Then Silas' screech fills the air with an eerie energy.

"Is he in pain?" I ask, but I sense the answer.

"Sounds like it." Zeke rallies and gets to his feet, and helps me up. "I'm going after him. You stay here."

"Screw that. I'm coming with you."

Zeke's eyes glow a vibrant teal, his lips pressed thin. "I'm not putting you in danger."

"I'm in more danger if you leave me out here by myself," I argue. "I'm going to rescue Silas, and you can come with *me*."

He must see it’s no use to fight my stubbornness and that I’m right, because he gives me a curt nod and clutches my hand in his. “Let’s go get our boy.”

Another ear-piercing cry rends the air.

I hate hearing the sound, but it helps us locate him. Just over another ridge, we see him in his gigantic basilisk form trapped under a huge metal net made of thin iron. His scales sizzle from the contact, smoke from the burns rising from his body. In some places, the iron has cut into his flesh.

“He’s hurt,” I whisper, overcome by the horrific sight of my sweet love being tortured this way.

“There’s at least two men down there, hiding,” Zeke warns, gripping my hand harder so I don’t just race forward to help Silas. “I can smell them.”

“We can’t leave Silas like that.”

Zeke grits his teeth, torn between putting me in danger and getting his brother out of it.

“You distract the men,” I order. “I’ll get the iron net off him.”

“It should be clear that way.” He points along a faint trail to follow.

“Be careful of bear traps,” I tell him.

The one Conrad stepped in can’t be the only one out here.

“Oh, and if you see three women supes running around here displaying their *badassery,* they’re on Team Mythics,” I add.

He acknowledges my warnings, then gives me a kiss. “For luck.” Before we break apart, his eyes quickly scan my face as if he’s worried this will be the last time.

I trigger a temporary *lookaway* charm, then race down the narrow path, doing my damnedest to be quiet. Zeke, on the other hand, like a true supe, is moving without a sound.

Silas thrashes his huge head and wings around, but doesn’t make any progress removing the net.

I approach Silas from the direction he’s facing so he can hopefully scent it’s me and not a threat. It’s no good if he accidentally attacks.

Once he senses a presence, he freezes and lets out a low rumble. Instinctively, I know he’s recognized me. I run up to him, grab the iron net, and try to pull it off his head. But it gets caught in his purple, iridescent feathers. If it wasn’t for the fact he’s in danger, I would be in awe of his mesmerizing beauty.

Silas writhes, anxiously trying to help, but his erratic movements only entangle the net further.

“Easy there, big boy.” To calm him, I stroke his scales.

He plops his head to the ground and stops moving, and I’m able to get the net clear of his snout.

Someone grabs me from behind and jerks me backward a few paces. Dammit, my *lookaway* charm wore out.

It’s fucking Chad.

Silas tries to rear up, the net barely holding him back.

Chad places a gun to my temple and threatens, “I’ll fucking shoot her in the head if you don’t settle the fuck down, *Silas.”*

Dammit. Chad probably knows *everything* about the guys.

Silas lets out a booming bellow that shakes the earth and ends it with an ear-splitting screech.

“I told you to calm the fuck down!” Chad yells and shoots Silas in the neck.

Oh my goddess, Silas!

Distracted by his anger, Chad loosens his hold, and without letting my overthinking brain stop me, I quickly react.

I slip out of his clutches by dropping to the ground. Spinning around, I punch him in the balls, and he doubles over.

Zeke’s tentacles appear around my waist, then yank me backward and clear of Chad’s reach.

Chad curses, then straightens, and lifts his arm to point his gun at me.

Desperate to stop him, Silas rears up, breaks free from the net as it cuts into his scales. With a roar, he chomps down on Chad and swallows him whole, *Jurassic Park* style.

Oh my…

My new boyfriend just ate my ex.

Welp, that’s a first…

“Are you okay?” Zeke runs his hands all over my body, checking for injuries.

He pulls me into a tight embrace. “I thought I was going to lo–” He cuts his words short, unable to even entertain the thought.

“I’m fine,” I assure him.

Silas rears his head and convulses. His long, sleek body contorts as though he's about to throw up. With a grunt, he spits out Chad's pack and gun.

I break Zeke's hold and hurry over to check on Silas. He convulses again and Chad's hat lands at my feet, and a rising acrid steam greets my senses.

Silas coils up and puts his head on his tail. Blood oozes from his neck where Chad shot him.

"Oh, Silas, I'm sorry!" I reach out to touch him. "It's my fault you got shot. I led Chad right to you. All of you." With tears streaming down my cheeks, I look into Silas' eyes, then Zeke's.

Silas grumbles, shaking his head. I quickly retract my hand.

"He means it's not your fault what Chad did." Zeke puts his hand on my shoulder.

"May I touch you?" I ask Silas.

He dips his massive head in a nod.

I put my hands on the sides of his handsome face. "Thank you for saving me. You're my hero." I kiss the top of his head, and he lets out a soft clicking that sounds almost like a purr.

"You too." I reach for Zeke's hand.

With one of his large fangs, Silas pulls out an old denim jacket of mine from under his belly, as if he was keeping it safe.

Goddess dammit! How much of my stuff did Chad take?

I pick the jacket up.

My attention shifts to Silas' gunshot wound. Thick, iridescent purple blood runs down his neck, and I press the jacket over the wound to stop the bleeding.

"He'll be fine," Zeke assures me. "Normally, his scales are impervious. But Chad got lucky and hit a soft spot since he's mid-molt."

"Hence, the maze for his safety." I put it together. "And I'm sure the iron poison isn't helping any of you."

Zeke gently takes my hands and pulls them away from the wound. "It's best not to cover it. His body will expel the bullet, and the wound will heal in a couple of hours."

He suddenly turns around and half-shifts. His tentacles dart out and he runs toward the trees behind us. There must be more of Chad's men lurking about.

A few gut-wrenching minutes go by and Zeke finally emerges from the trees carrying a man on each shoulder, along with their large backpacks, tranq rifles, and drones. Damn, he's strong.

Felicity and Ruby are following him, dragging two limp men with a couple of their limbs pointing the wrong way.

Zeke drops the men he's carrying in front of me. "These are the two who were hiding around Silas."

"This one tried to fuckin' bite me." Felicity tosses her prisoner onto the other two and hisses at him.

"That makes six." Ruby drops her prisoner onto the growing pile. "The other two who were chasing you and Clover are hogtied and gagged back down the trail."

"There's two more out there somewhere," Felicity adds.

How'd Chad round up a squad of douchebags?

"Are they dead?" I ask.

"No, just unconscious," Ruby answers.

She bends over to pick up Chad's molten pack, and Zeke warns, "Don't touch that. It has Basilisk acid all over it."

"Meh. It's not going to bother me." She picks it up and opens it without a problem.

Zeke and I exchange looks of surprise.

"Shit. This dumbass had a lot on you and… everything." Ruby hands Zeke a map with locations circled.

"Most of the supe cities are on his list," Felicity says, looking over Ruby's shoulder as she thumbs through a notebook.

Zeke folds up the map and puts it in his back pocket. "And he was getting awfully close to the Mythic safe-havens."

"There's a laptop in the pack, too. We'll let Clover work her hacker skills on it." Ruby hands me a thick stack of papers. "Look at this."

It's a contract between Chad and The Historian Channel for a documentary. The title page reads: *Ancient Civilizations and their Mythical Beasts.*

Oh my fucking goddess. Chad wasn't just a danger to me and my guys, but to all of us, my friends and every supe and Mythic hiding here in the mortal realm. He was on the verge of exposing everything, especially if he captured my guys.

"I need to check on Conrad and Clover." I step in that direction.

“I can portal you to them,” Ruby offers.

“Are you going to be okay watching after Silas and these men?” I ask Zeke.

“Nothing to worry about. Go check on my brother.”

Ruby opens up a portal and Felicity and I follow her through.

Swoosh!

I stand dizzily still for a second, to let my stomach catch up with the rest of my body. I never liked portaling, and this one feels extra weird.

Conrad is lying against a tree, looking dazed and disoriented. Clover checks his leg wound, and I pray to the goddess that the iron poisoning hasn’t permanently affected his brain.

Two completely dismembered bodies lie strewn about the scene. I guess she really *didn’t* need that protection charm.

“Well, now we know where the other two went.” Felicity taps her toe on a discarded boot.

“What… it's all… it’s… *real…*” Conrad babbles, staring at Clover.

I look at Clover for answers.

“They’ll be fine, it’s just a flesh wound.” Clover smirks, glancing at the body parts. “What can I say? The folklore of my kind is true.” She shrugs and continues to dress Conrad’s wound.

My kind?

That’s a topic for another day.

OceanofPDF.com

50
DAZED AND CONFESSED

CONRAD

Darlene is a miracle come to life. She and her friends put themselves in danger to save us. They fill me and Clover in on everything that happened and what they discovered in *Choad's* pack.

He really was a fucker. I don't feel any remorse for his early demise. He deserved what he got because of what he's done to Darlene, but he was also a threat to more than just the four of us. He was a menace who warranted elimination.

I don't know what will happen from this moment on, but I'm happy that everyone on our side survived.

Darlene appears a bit roughed up, but fortunately, there are no major injuries. I don't know what I might have done if she was seriously wounded or killed.

If Silas hadn't eaten Chad, I would have torn that bastard to shreds for putting her in the middle of this.

Another chilling thought hits me in the gut. Now that Darlene has uncovered our monster sides, will she end things?

Then I glance over at Ruby and Clover.

Clover immediately reads my concerned expression. “Don’t worry, we’re not going to say a word about what we know.”

Darlene gives them a nod of thanks, but I can’t be as accepting of the easy promise.

“Why won’t you?”

“Because the Supe Council consists of a bunch of pompous dickheads,” Felicity grumbles. “And let’s face it, most supes are too.”

“From what we’ve heard about you from Darlene, you’re a bunch of kindhearted guys,” Ruby adds. “We don’t want to see you get punished just for being born. Some would say *I* shouldn’t even exist.”

I’m more than curious to ask what she could be, but besides being plain rude, I know it’s often better to be ignorant of this sort of thing. If I were captured and tortured, she might be targeted after what they learn from mind-probing me. That seems like a horrible way to repay her for what she did for us.

My leg is healing now that the iron is no longer draining me, but since the iron teeth of the trap pierced bone, I’m still weak and will need some assistance. As I wonder who might be strong enough to support my weight, Zeke walks up. He seems to be alright.

Darlene looks behind him. “Where’s Silas?”

“He’s resting and keeping an eye on the assholes we dragged over to him.”

“I can mind-wipe those dickheads, maybe a big scramble, too,” Ruby offers.

What is she?

“That’s probably for the best. Thank you,” Zeke says.

She smirks at Clover, and they both get to their feet. “We should dump these fuckers far away from here. Albeit, naked and huddled together in the woods somewhere, so they question what they were all up to after they wake up.”

“I’ll gather up their personal information and wipe any data they have about supes and Mythics on their devices and online accounts,” Clover adds.

Zeke helps me back to the house, but returns to help the crew deal with the hunters. Silas will return to his nest in our backyard under the cover of night. And I wait for my wound to mend.

I wake to Zeke and Darlene coming through the front door.

They both look exhausted, but I can see by the look on her face that we need to have a chat before she can clean up and rest.

She sits down on the edge of the couch I'm on and frowns.

"I want to apologize," all of us say in unison.

Darlene gives us a sweet smile, and my heart does a flip. She wants to apologize? to us? Does she forgive us for keeping this dangerous secret?

She wrings her hands. "Is Silas coming back soon?"

"No. He's in the woods… digesting." Zeke sits on her other side. "And he won't be able to shift back to his human form until he's finished."

"How long will that take?"

"He's never eaten anything that big, so maybe a couple of days?"

"Wow, that's fast. I know a boa constrictor or a python would take weeks for a deer or a goat."

She's taking this pretty damn well.

"As for the apology, I'll have to talk to Silas later then," she says.

"You don't have to–" Zeke begins, but she cuts him off.

"Please, let me say what I need to. I reacted poorly to Silas' Mythic form. Once I calmed down, I knew he was just as scared as I was to see him that way."

I almost chuckle at that, but don't because it's probably true. I can't believe he blew our secret twice over. I just hope it works out in our favor.

Zeke rubs his eyes and frowns. "We should have told you everything before. We wanted to, but I was worried it was too dangerous for all of us, you included."

"I understand that. I'm disappointed you didn't trust me to accept you, but I get why you needed to keep your secret." She sighs, the weight of everything hitting her. "But if you still want to be with me, then I need to know the truth now. Are Mythics as dangerous as I was taught growing up?"

Zeke looks at me, and I take this one. "Yes, and no. As a whole, we are more powerful than most fae. Usually our magic runs deeper, more innately connected to our particular elements than the fae mages. From what we were taught, we weren't inherently more aggressive before the extermination began, but our ancestors and some of the longer-lived had to

become more violent to survive. Ironically, dragons are just as powerful, but they were the ones leading the cause against us, likely to gain all the control."

Darlene nods and sits back, more at ease in our presence. "Dragons do sit at the top of the pecking order now with supes, so it makes sense they created that narrative to be rid of their competition."

"Yeah, but to be honest about the state of things, our parents are hostile about anyone or any realm outside our island," I explain. "The three of us didn't share that opinion, so we made a pact to leave one day, and when I was about to be forced to mate with a sphinx priestess, we fled."

"When I saw you in the trap, I thought you might be a sphinx," she says softly, then studies Zeke. "What are you, really?"

"A kraken." He rounds his shoulders, trying to look smaller and less threatening.

Darlene offers a sweet smile. "I'm not scared of you guys. Some might think I'm stupid, but through all of this, I don't believe you'd ever hurt me."

"We would never," I agree, throwing my legs off the edge of the couch. I'm almost healed, but the sting of the iron wounds deep inside make me wince.

"Be careful!" she chides, and drops down to check on my leg.

I should tell her I'll be okay, but I love her attention and touch too much. "Does this mean you forgive us?"

She gazes up at me from where she's kneeling at my feet. I want to scoop her up and settle her on my lap and kiss the ever-loving shit out of her until we're both breathless and needy.

"Yes, I want to see where this goes."

If I was in my sphinx form, I'd be flying with her words. Then I wonder if we should confess the last thing we've kept from her… that we're her mate matches.

My eyes find Zeke's, and he gives a tiny shake of his head. We agreed, she needs to feel the pull of the bond before we say a thing.

It's killing me to hold back. I want to give her my mating bite at this very moment.

But I think that might be too forward.

OceanofPDF.com

51
DUH MOMENT

DARLENE

Things feel settled and calm with Zeke and Conrad, but I need to explain to Silas that I'm not upset with him. He's a sensitive soul, and I'm sure he's still beating himself up about scaring me.

"I want to talk with Silas." I head to their back door to hunt down my monster boyfriend.

Zeke catches my hand, and energy zips up my arm with the contact. His eyes go wide, like he felt it too.

"Wait," he warns. "Chad's scent still clings to you and… Your appearance might trigger his beast."

"My appearance?" I glance down and see my torn and filthy clothes from the battle we just won. "Oh, but if I clean up, will he be okay seeing me?"

"It might be what he needs. I'm a bit worried about him."

"What do you mean?"

"Tonight was his worst fear come true. He rejected his parents' more primitive and aggressive side. But then he… killed someone. It doesn't matter that the asshole deserved it."

What does that say about me that I don’t even care that Chad was killed? I suppose the more violent aspect of my fae DNA runs hotter than I’d like to believe.

Poor Silas.

“He might not want to ever shift back to his human form,” Zeke confides.

After I wash up in my own bathroom and rest a few hours to rid myself of the bags under my eyes, I get dressed to visit Silas in the middle of the night.

I feel like an idiot. I was trying to protect them by keeping them in the dark about how dangerous Chad might be, but it almost caused their demise. I need to be honest from now on, and not live in the shadows like I was taught to in the fae world.

That is one thing supes and humans have in common: never fully being honest. It’s something I thought I shook off, but apparently not.

Dawn is only a few hours away, and I hope I didn’t wait too long to talk to him.

I find him curled up in the hay maze. Before I step inside, I announce my presence. “Silas? It’s Darlene. I want to apologize.”

His whole body shudders. Is he unsettled that I’m here? “Is it okay if I come inside your… nest?”

A massive plumed head slowly lifts, turning to look in my direction. His eyes are more green than yellow than the first time I saw him, but he doesn’t look directly into my eyes. I wonder if the myths are true and he could put a spell on me with a mere glance. No, Zeke or Conrad would have warned me.

His head dips, giving me a nod of approval.

Now that I’m expecting this form, I can see the beauty of it. His iridescent purple plumes flare around his head and down his back to a tufted tail. His scales shimmer in the waning moonlight. He’s coiled up and has a belly bump. It would look cute if I didn’t know what was inside.

“You’re beautiful… inside and out, in any form.” He jerks his head in surprise at my words, but I continue. “I’m sorry I screamed like I did and ran off.”

Silas shakes his head in an attempt to argue.

“And I want to thank you for saving me.” He grunts, and I know what he’s saying somehow, so I continue, “Yes, I helped all of you first, but Chad would have killed me to get what he wanted… you three, as a trophy.”

I don’t want to rile Silas up, so I stop there. I shiver with the horrible thoughts of what could have happened to my guys if Choad and his cohorts had won.

Tears well up in my eyes, and Silas whines.

I hold out my arms, wishing I could hug him. My basilisk dips his head, and I capture him in an embrace. We stay like that for a long moment, feeling each other. Somehow I sense the turmoil he’s going through, wondering if he should remain the beast. Yet, I know my acceptance is bringing him back to me.

He nudges me to a coil, far from where his dinner is processing, and I nestle into my guy.

All the stress falls away with his nearness. Feeling safe in his hold, my body lets go of any residual adrenaline. In this moment of rest, the gravity of what I just went through settles in my mind. I can see my actions for what they are… and what they imply.

I risked my life for my guys without question. Without hesitation.

It didn't matter if they were human, supes, or Mythics.

I *love* them. More than that, they’re mine.

Mine.

Then the unbelievable truth smacks me in the face. And I feel the inescapable pull I’ve only heard about…

They are my mates.

Zeke finds me in the morning at twilight, nuzzled within Silas’ cozy coils and feathers. “Breakfast?” he asks as I blink open my eyes and see he’s standing outside the maze’s entrance. Hmm, probably a monster territory thing.

I give Silas a few loving strokes down his scales and let him know I’ll be back later. Zeke, Conrad, and I share a quiet meal. I stare at them in wonder, seeing them with a new filter.

I take my last bite of omelet, and finally ask, my voice coming out as a whisper, “How long have you known?”

“Known?” Zeke’s forehead crinkles.

“Am I the only one who feels the mate match?” I ping-pong my gaze between them.

“Thank the goddess!” Conrad cheers, pumping the air like he scored a home run.

I chuckle, relieved that I wasn’t hallucinating the whole thing. “I never expected… I’m not a real fae.”

“Shush.” Zeke races around the table to pull me into a hug. He kisses me with such passion that I’m lightheaded by the time he’s done.

Conrad’s warm body presses up against my back, pinning me between him and Zeke. His hands grip my hips, then his soft lips trail up my neck, creating goosebumps along the way.

Hot dang, I’m the meat in a Mythic sandwich. All we need is Silas to make it a triple-*dicker*.

Zeke cups my cheek, and his bright blue eyes glow with his supe magic.

“I haven’t seen your Mythic form yet.” I pout, and he leans down to nip at my lip.

Then he looks over my head at Conrad. “Would it be okay if I take her to my waters to show her?”

Conrad turns me in their arms and smirks at me. “As long as I can show you my Mythic form when I’m not trapped like a rat.”

I stand on my tiptoes and give him a kiss to seal the deal. “I’d like that.”

A calm washes over me. I can have a beautiful bond with my fated mates. I don’t intend to squander this blessing now that I know it exists for me. I’ll finally feel completely safe in a relationship. And ironically, I’ve found it with *super*-supes.

OceanofPDF.com

52
A KRAKEN'S RELEASE

ZEKE

Holding out my hand, my kraken rumbles with pleasure when she easily slides her fingers over mine. *My mate*. And she knows. I didn't pump my fist in the air like Conrad did, but inside I was rejoicing just as much.

I lead her to the backyard and take account of everything that's happened during the last day. I realize now with her and her friends' heroics and Silas snuffing out the threat, that it isn't all on me to protect and save everyone. Yes, I'll always look out for my family, but my family, including Darlene, will be there to save me when I need it. And that's what real family does: love and protect. With how broken my parents were, I never believed I could have that until now. And with how I failed my sister, I didn't feel I deserved to be loved like this. But to deny receiving that love means to deny the love I have for my mate. I cannot do that. I won't harm her that way. Nor should I keep punishing myself for the heinous crime those hunters committed when I was a boy.

My brothers and I have no big secrets left… Well, unless you count the fact we don't actually have to work due to our ample trust funds. Maybe I should tell her. No need to test our luck with more deceptions. She's already

been more than accepting of our failings. The biggest failing? Allowing Chad to lay his disgusting hands on her, even for a second. When I warned her about washing off Chad's scent, I was doing it more than for just Silas' sake.

"There is one last thing for me to tell you. The whole handyman thing was a cover for us to seem more normal."

Her bright, easy laughter eases my worries. "Of course. I thought it was a bit… *fishy*."

We both groan at her corny joke.

I step to the edge of my pool, and pull my T-shirt off and toss it aside. Darlene's stormy gray eyes eat up the sight of me. Never have I felt more attractive, desired. She actually loves my dad bod, which is so different from most supes. It makes me realize how perfect she is for us.

"How does your anchor tattoo move around each time I see it?" Her fingers trace its current location in the center of my chest.

"Part of my kraken magical ink. I can modify it any time I want or make it disappear."

"And this one?" She strokes the circle tattoo over my heart. "All three of you have it."

"It's a protection spell created with my kraken magic, and tattooed with my blood into our skin."

"So you guys are literally *blood* brothers."

"Yes. The basilisk is depicted as an ouroboros for infinity. The kraken sea is for defense. And the pyramids are for sphinx magic of divine protection. It's kept us safe until recently, but in a way, it worked since you and your friends saved us." I kiss her lips softly. "I finally found my badass mate."

She smiles at my admiration, then gazes hungrily at my linen pants. "Do I finally get to see *all* of you in both forms?" She bites her lip and looks up at me.

"Technically, three forms," I confess. "I can half-shift from the waist down."

"*Oh*." Her eyes widen. "Oh, wait. Did you use your tentacles on me when we fooled around?"

I wince, feeling like a perv. "Yes?"

"Well, we're going to have to do that again, sir!" She laughs happily instead of being angry at my forwardness.

Whew. “Sorry. I don’t know what came over me that day, but my kraken side was insistent on claiming our mate.”

Except I know exactly what came over me. With my water affinity, I could sense every luscious inch of her when she was in the water with me. Then her body pressed up against mine sent me over the edge of sanity. And now, I’ll be thrown over the edge again when she joins me in my personal domain.

She whispers repeating the word *mate* and gazes off into the distance. “I never thought I’d have one. It was one of the few things I envied from the supe world.”

I move closer, and we slide our arms around each other. “When I bond with you, you’ll be able to breathe under water.”

“No, really? But I’m a null.”

“When I was young, I found records of two kraken and human matings in our libraries. And from what I read, you’ll enjoy an extended lifespan to match my centuries and an affinity for the water. If humans were able to be gifted, then why not a null?”

Surprise fills her expression as I explain. It’s obvious she hadn’t thought much beyond the loyalty of a mate bond with us.

“I’m sure the other two will bring their own gifts,” I add.

I expect her to be happy, but her eyebrows pull together in frustration. “But you three don’t get anything out of this deal.”

“Sweet Darling.” I fist my hand in her thick hair and tilt her head back to look me in the eye. “We get *you*. That’s all we’ve ever wanted.” I kiss her, and the moment she accepts this truth, her body softens and pulse quickens. “And if it weren’t for you, we’d likely be dead. You saved us, protected us.”

Tears well in her eyes. “I never thought I could provide that for someone.”

“Not all strength or power comes from magic. You proved that with what happened. Being brave, not having magic and being unaffected by iron are your strengths.”

She hugs me tightly, her face buried in my chest, until she finally loosens her hold. We both have struggled with the same internal battle of not being enough for our loved ones.

I slowly break away. “First, I want to show you what I am.”

Four tentacles unleash from my lower half from the edge of my waistband. With them, I slowly unbutton Darlene's top and her pants. I slide them from her body, leaving her in her underwear. My tentacles wrap around her, luxuriating in her soft skin and bringing her closer for a moment. She strokes my tentacle, becoming familiar with the sensation. My body shivers with joy at her acceptance.

After a light brush of my lips over hers, I step backward into my pool. Submerged, I take off my pants and throw them up on the edge.

"No fair." She smirks.

My tentacles grow and reach out again, capturing her easily. "Come with me."

Without hesitation, she leans back into my grip, and I lift her with ease and gently settle her into the water in front of me. "You okay?" I ask, making sure she's comfortable being in the water.

"Yes," she whispers, her nipples pebbling from excitement, and not because my pool is cold, because it isn't.

"Take a deep breath. I'm going to show you something underwater."

Darlene nods and does as I say. Her trust is a heady thing.

With a quick swish of my appendages, we zip down into the water and through a large opening, then pop up into the hidden cave of my underground retreat.

It's pitch black. I touch the rock wall of my lair and my magic charges the microcrystals of the quartzite rock. The blue-green metamorphic rock begins to glow at the tip of my tentacle and spreads around the cavern which is the size of a large house. A warm, soft glow emanates from the walls adorned with seashells, providing mood lighting. Even the walls underwater illuminate and light up the pool. The crystals in the rock sparkle like millions of twinkling stars in a galaxy.

"*Ooo*." Darlene sucks in a breath, mesmerized. "It's so pretty."

Seeing her face light up, I puff out my chest and my tentacles squeeze her gently, ecstatic that my lair pleases her.

At the far end of the cave, I made a white sand beach. A hammock big enough for two is stretched between two tropical trees I fabricated.

"How cute!" Darlene squees happily at the small replica of a beached, shipwrecked three-masted sailing ship from the 18th-century mortal realm.

"I even added small gold coins around the hull in the sand." I place my tentacles on my hips.

“It’s a reminder of my past, *muah-ha-ha*.” I jest, steepling my tentacles and tapping the tips. “Actually, just because grumpy ole’ uncle, aka. *Kruncle*, had an, let’s say, *incident*, with a sailing ship hundreds of years ago, then all krakens get a bad name in perpetuity?”

“Wait a second, is the reason you don’t have to work is because you can just dive down to the ocean floor and gather up treasure?”

I grin, loving that my mate is pretty damn smart. “Yes, whenever we need some cash, I go treasure hunting.”

“Wow. You really are sold on being just average guys because you could be living the fancy high life in some penthouse in New York.”

“I’m happy just where I am… but especially with you.”

I place Darlene on the beach and wade back waist deep in the water. “Ready?”

She gives me a wicked grin and shouts, “Release my kraken!”

No, she didn’t. I narrow my eyes at her and extend a tentacle, pointing at her for effect. “Naughty mate.”

She giggles, and I release *her* kraken. I expand to almost take up the entire lair, my long appendages wrap around her, cradling her, and she squeaks with surprise.

Her eyes take in my teal coloring and huge carapace covering my octopus-like body. “You’re amazing! And the same color as your pretty eyes!”

She reaches out and runs her hands over my skin.

In a flashy display of what I can do, within seconds, I change it from smooth to bumpy to spiky and mimic her skin color as well.

“That’s incredible!” Her sweet eyes gaze into my monstrous ones, and she sighs happily. “*You’re* incredible.”

Keeping some of my tentacles so I can still hold her with them, I shift back to my half form so I can kiss my woman. She meets my kiss with the same passion I have for her.

No longer worried about how she’ll react to my monster limbs, I slide them up and down her body.

Her scent of buttercream and berries becomes more intense and fills my lair, indicating her arousal. I’m lost to the need to be inside her any way I can.

My half-shifted form allows me to have the best of both worlds, kissing my love’s lips *and* touching her everywhere. My tentacles work closer and

closer to her center, finally teasing both her holes. She gasps and grinds against my stomach.

“I love you,” I blurt out, not exactly my usual suave self. I pull back to read her reaction.

She’s smiling at me like I’m a treasure she’s about to hoard for eternity. “I love you, too.”

Our lips crash together again, desperate to consummate our confession. I resist the urge to plunge into her depths and claim her that second, because she isn’t ready for that yet. But with how she’s reacting to my touch, she will be soon.

I want her to willingly take my beastly side while we’re in my domain.

“You feel that tentacle against your pussy?” I ask, when she nods, I go on, “That isn’t a tentacle, it’s my hectocotylus, my kraken cock. I want to fuck you with it.”

“Yes, please. I need you inside me,” she begs, such a pretty sound from my strong woman. “I’ve needed it for so long.”

“Then I’ll give it to you, my love.” I use my human hand to cup her breast to lift it to my mouth as I bend over her.

When I suck on her hardened nipple, she moans my name.

I use a tentacle to wrap around her other breast, and one of its suckers mimics what I’m doing with my mouth.

“Goddess!” she cries out.

Through the waters, I feel her intoxicating desire and the throbbing of her clit. I tease the needy nub and her opening with the tips of my appendages.

My other tentacle locks a suction cup over her entire puckered hole. It undulates and pulses as it sucks and then releases, applying more pressure with each cycle.

“Please, Zeke, don’t make me wait.”

How can I deny her? My thick hectocotylus and a tentacle simultaneously slide into her openings and ever so slowly work themselves in and out, plunging a little deeper with each thrust.

“*Oh*, *oh*… So full!” Her breathing becomes ragged while her body trembles with the sensation of being completely filled and stretched.

She twists and bucks, her eyes rolling back with pleasure. The tips of each tentacle find each other on the other side of her wall and massage her internally.

“Come for me, my mate,” I whisper over the shell of her ear.

And she does. Her velvet pussy grips and milks my hectocotylus, and I can’t hold back, releasing and filling her with my essence.

She cries out again, her orgasm prolonged by mine.

I can already feel the beginnings of our mate bond growing in my chest. I can’t wait until my brothers and I claim her.

Together.

OceanofPDF.com

53
SEA SALT SICK DAY

DARLENE

Zeke leads me to his bedroom suite. “Take your clothes off.”

“Oh my, so soon!” I drop my pants and underwear in one swift swoop and raise my shirt over my head, revealing my bare breasts.

Zeke strides over to me, and my nipples pebble anticipating his touch. Instead, he picks me up, and I squeal as he carries me into the bathroom. He sets me down on the counter and turns on the warm water in the oversized jacuzzi tub.

He pulls out some luxury bath products and adds some pleasant smelling sea salts to the bath. With a tentacle, he stirs the water and tests its temperature while setting some towels and washcloths on a small teak table next to the jacuzzi.

“Perfect!” He picks me up and sets me down in the tub.

“Are you joining me?” My eyes slowly move up from his crotch to his lips.

“I wouldn’t have it any other way.” He grins, and sets the jacuzzi jets to low.

Zeke shucks his clothes off and slips into the tub, facing me.

“You must be sore from what happened yesterday.” He massages my feet. “The sea salts will soothe your tired muscles.”

Zeke massages my legs for a while, then he spins me around and works out all the kinks in my shoulders and back. I melt into his touch like butter in the sun.

After the relaxing full body massage, he adds a few drops of low-foaming bubble bath. As the bubbles begin to form in the whirl of our bath, Zeke washes my hair and body. It’s amazing, and exactly what I needed. To finish, he drys me off and applies a salve that smells like a crisp ocean breeze all over my body from head to toe.

“The healing salve should help accelerate the healing,” he explains. “I would have applied it earlier, but it can drain one’s energy.”

“I’m familiar with healing tonics. Don’t fret.” I stand on my tiptoes and kiss Zeke sweetly on his lips. “And thank you.”

“Feel better?” He kisses my forehead.

“Yes. I’m still a little achy from the raging creek dragging me against the boulders, but with the salve I should be all better in a couple of days.”

I look over my shoulder at the mirror to see the colorful bruises covering my bum and back are already fading.

“Especially if you take care of me like this every day.” I wink and swat his bare ass, making it jiggle.

“As you wish, my love.” He kisses my cheek.

We enter the kitchen and take a seat in a state of bliss to find Conrad grinning from ear to ear with his eyebrows raised.

“A cup of tea or coffee?” he asks.

“Coffee sounds amazing, thanks!”

He pours me a cup and fixes it the way I like. Suddenly, I remember…

“Shit, shit, shit…” I startle the guys.

They run over to me thinking I must have burned myself with the hot coffee.

“What time is it?”

“It’s 8:45.” Conrad looks at the clock on the stove.

“Fuck, I forgot I have to go to work!” I jump up, ready to run to my house.

“No. You’ve been through a lot, I think you deserve a day off.” Zeke rubs my shoulders.

“Yeah, call in sick,” Conrad says, like it’s no big deal.

“I’ve never called in sick a day in my life,” I mutter to myself.

“Well, there’s a first for everything. One sick day is not going to get you fired.”

Then I remember Bev is expecting an answer to my job offer soon. Crap, I feel like I’m letting her down. She’s been so good to me.

I suppose they’re right, though. I have been through a lot and I don’t feel that great. Plus, I’m still worried about Silas. I wouldn’t be of any use if I went in because my mind would be constantly thinking about Silas and the guys. Taking a day off isn’t going to kill anyone, is it?

I decide I just can’t be away from them. I call in to work and rather than saying I’m sick, as I don’t feel good about lying, I tell them I have a family emergency. It’s true, it’s an emergency and they are my *family.*

Conrad, Zeke, and I take it easy the rest of the day. Conrad is still recovering, but he’s getting stronger by the hour. We check in on Silas throughout the day, making sure he doesn’t feel left out because of his current… *state*. He’s still healing and digesting, stuck in Basilisk form.

The three of us have a light dinner, and decide to turn in early as we’re wiped out. We pile into Zeke’s king-size bed. Snug and cozy, feeling the guys against my body is heaven. But it would be heaven supreme if Silas was here pressed up against my body as well.

“Hey, hey.” Conrad nudges me. “Are you sleeping?” he whispers.

“Well, I *was*.” I lift my head and squint at the red numbers of Zeke’s alarm clock, but my eyes must be still dozing as I can’t make out a damn thing.

“What time is it?” I breathe out, trying not to wake Zeke.

“The sun’s first light is just starting to illuminate the sky,” he says excitedly, like a kid on Solstice morning.

“Yeah, but what time is it?”

“It’s a little before six. I want to show you something!”

“Now?’ I lean up and rub my eyes.

“Yes.” Conrad takes my hand and gently pulls me out of bed, trying not to wake Zeke.

“You two have fun,” Zeke mutters into his pillow.

OceanofPDF.com

54
TOE BEANS

DARLENE

On the way out of the bedroom, I throw on my pants and shirt, then slip on my shoes. Conrad tosses his clothes in a pack, proudly strutting in the buff to their back patio, and I enjoy the view. The waning moon hangs low in the western sky, ready to set for the night.

"Where are we going at this *ungoddessly* hour?" I ask as he hands me his pack.

"For being up before dawn, half asleep, you're pretty funny. I'm going to love your input on my comedy material." He gives me a wicked grin. "You're not afraid of heights, are you?"

I shake my head. "But *where* are we going?"

He takes several steps back and shifts.

His sphinx form bursts forth, his wings extending a dozen feet.

I gasp, finally getting a proper look at his beast. "You're magnificent."

He prances around the patio, circling me with his long body so I can admire him from every angle. His long tail brushes against my legs, and I giggle at the sensation.

My eyes are glued to his fluid movements. He flexes his powerful muscles, and his golden fur ripples down his flank. Thankfully, it seems

he’s fully healed. I reach out to touch his mane, and he nuzzles into my palm.

“May I see your paws?”

He holds up his dinner-plate-sized paw, and I take it in my relatively tiny hands.

“Toe beans!” I squeal, bouncing on my feet.

I lightly trail my fingers across his plum-sized toe pads.

“Your touch and approval is glorious. My beast wants to claim you right here on the patio table.”

“Oh my.”

I didn’t realize you could speak in this form. His beast’s voice is pure seduction. I feel the pull of the mate bond tugging on my heart and soul. I don’t know if I can wait much longer to claim my mates either.

Instead, he dips down, his snout nudging between my legs. “Climb on.”

I allow him to scoop me up over his head and onto his back between his wings.

“Hang on tight to my mane.” When I do, he launches into the sky. His powerful thrust of acceleration nearly knocks me off his back. If I wasn’t fully awake before, I sure as hell am now.

“Oops. Guess it would be bad form if I buck my mate before our date even started.” He slows his pace. “Sorry about that. Are you okay?” he asks.

“Yeah, I’m good *now*.” Once my heart is back in its proper place, I laugh.

“I feel like an overzealous schoolboy with his first crush.”

His sphinx voice makes his whole body rumble, sending pleasurable sensations through me. “Your voice vibrates my core.”

He purrs long and hard. I squirm with my arousal against his hide. I could probably come with him doing just that.

“Shit, I better stop and focus on my flying,” he blurts out.

“Oh? Were you getting just as turned on?” I tease, and he lets out another rumble to tease me back.

We enjoy the exhilaration of flight over our town and the surrounding mountains. Then Pyramid Mountain comes into view.

We land on a flat stone terrace at the very peak. He bows to the ground, allowing me to hop off his back.

He shifts and quickly throws on his sweatpants and T-shirt.

I pout, since he’s covering up all that sexy and hiding away that tasty sausage and sweet buns. He smirks, knowing what he’s doing to me by making me wait. I don’t know why he’s putting on clothes. I’m just going to take them off again ASAP.

“What is this place?” I look around, taking a moment to orientate myself.

My attention catches on a sundial, then two tall, granite obelisks that frame an entrance. I pass through the gateway and slowly walk the circumference of stone monoliths of various heights arranged in a circle.

I sense the importance of this space. “It must be some sort of open air temple.” In the center of the circle of stones, I run my hand over the smooth granite of an elevated round altar the size of a large dining table. “Did you build this place?”

He shrugs and nods.

With heightened fascination, I survey the monoliths, noting their different heights, angles, and that some have holes burrowed through them.

“Is this a temple or an observatory?”

“Both.” He walks over to me. “To the Egyptians, and to the sphinx species before that, spirituality and astronomy were intertwined and inseparable. You can’t have one without the other.”

“Kind of like the two strands of a double helix—science and spirituality bonded together forming the DNA of the cosmos,” I add.

“Very insightful.” He raises his eyebrow.

“So these stones map the movement of the sun, moon, and stars,” I say to confirm my guess, continuing my examination.

“Exactly.” His body presses against mine. “It turns me on knowing I have such a smart mate.”

I pull away to peek through a hole in a monolith facing east. As I do, I see the clear outline of his arousal, and I give him a wink. “Does this hole mark the equinox or solstice?”

“Very good. Equinox, actually.” He steps closer again, acting out a slow chase. “All celestial bodies and events, including constellations, eclipses, and even the earth’s axial precession can be tracked here.”

I love him showing me this side. I’ve always had a thirst for learning and studying history and the sciences. Now I have someone to share that with.

And he's such an idiot not to know he's smarter than he thinks he is.

“You know, it turns me on to have such a smart mate, too.” I playfully dance away to take a closer look at the stone carvings of intricate designs and hieroglyphics.

“And you’re observant and able to make quick deductions. You have the mind of a sphinx. If I could introduce you to them, I think my parents would be impressed by you.”

My heart aches for him, knowing how painful it is when family doesn’t accept you. But I don’t want to talk about them right now. I want to focus on him.

I run my fingers over the etchings. “Egyptian?”

“Sort of. Egyptian hieroglyphics is the distant descendent of the archaic written language of my people, the sphinx.”

“Wait.” I tilt my head. “How can that be? Egyptian hieroglyphics go back at least five thousand years. And supes didn’t come around until about one thousand years ago *after* the mortal mage became the Fae queen when she mated with her Elven harem.”

“You know your mortal and fae history. My throbbing cock approves.” He leans against the altar’s edge and dives into the subject. “But it doesn’t sound like you were taught that like other Mythics, the sphinx didn’t come from an Elven-fae lineage. We evolved *separately* from them.”

I suck in a breath. This makes so much more sense now.

“It’s why we were hated, hunted, imprisoned, and killed. Just because we weren’t *them*.”

“So, like always, it’s just about power and control over what’s feared,” I surmise.

He nods with a grimace. “Sure, most Mythics are more powerful and have more magic coursing through them, but, long ago we co-existed equally. A few even mated.” He looks out to the faint glow on the eastern horizon.

“We were never dangerous or a threat to the fae. Our violence was brought on by *their* extermination of us, for our very survival.” He lets out a long, weighty breath.

“Now we must hide in the shadows in seclusion. Many of the remaining Mythics live on the island *Huldu*, my home. But now, you’re my new *home*.”

I step up to his side and rest my head on his upper arm.

“And this is my personal temple,” he says. “Even though I’ve been shunned by my parents and people, I still feel a deep connection, a longing, to my bloodline.”

I stare into his golden eyes, feeling blessed to have him in my life. “Thank you for sharing your special place with me.”

We sit on the edge of the stone altar, gazing up at the stars. He wraps his strong arm around my waist, and I nuzzle against his side.

“Look! A shooting star.” I point excitedly. “It streaked from that bright star near the horizon up to Orion’s belt.”

“That’s Sirius, the brightest star in the night sky. To the ancient Egyptians and the Sphinx people, it’s known as the goddess *Sopdet*.” He gently squeezes me, with affection sparkling in his eyes. “Her name translates to ‘sharp one’ because of the keen rays of light radiating from her celestial body."

“And the father of the gods, *Sah*, the hidden one, is the personification of the stars of Orion.”

We turn our gaze to the sky and take in the beauty of the twinkling stars of *Sopdet* and *Sah*.

Why is it that I’m so aroused when he’s in full hot professor mode?

I want to play the naughty college student, tempting my handsome young teacher.

I’ll be shooting for *straight-Os*.

“*Sopdet* and *Sah* are consorts.” Conrad purrs.

Oh, this just got more interesting.

OceanofPDF.com

55
SACRIFICIAL V-CARDS

CONRAD

"From late spring until the middle of summer, the two gods are hidden at night because they don't rise until after dawn," I continue as Darlene strokes my back, her hand slipping under my shirt.

We hear the first chirps of birds waking from the predawn glow to the east.

"During this time, Sah is devoured by the underworld and lost."

"Oh," Darlene whispers, rubbing her breast over my arm.

Was that intentional?

"But," I say with dramatic flair, "reappearing just before dawn, he rises, lying on his back with his beloved Sopdet rising beneath him."

"*Oh?*" Darlene gaze falls to my lips before she rests her head on my chest.

"Each night, Sah rises earlier and reaches higher into the sky until he stands erect."

Her hand lands on my inner thigh, and my pulse quickens.

"I like the standing erect part," Darlene murmurs underneath her tender kisses on my neck, her hand inching closer to my waking cock.

“Sopdet pushes him upward until Sah is raised from the dead.”

Darlene’s kisses become more fervent, working her way up to my mouth. Her hand takes hold of my stiff length through my pants, and I buck into her touch.

She whispers over the shell of my ear, “Keep going, hot professor.”

Fuck, I almost spill in my pants.

“Sopdet’s return signals the return of the monsoons and the flooding of the river valley…”

I want to flood her valley.

“The flooding, the *inundation*, nourishes the fields…”

I’m dizzy as she weaves her fingers into my long locks at the nape of my neck.

“… with both life-giving water and rich deposits…”

She grips my hair and pulls me closer to her, kissing my lips between words.

“Sopdet heralds fertility and renewal…”

When I try to kiss her back, she demands, “Don’t stop. Finish the story.”

“… and she’s worshipped as a bringer of life, rebirth, and abundance.”

My cock throbs, ready to finally sink into her wet heat, worshiping her body.

“To honor Sopdet and the importance of her bringing the waters back…”

Darlene climbs onto my lap, straddling me, her heat pressed against my rod. She probes her pink tongue into my mouth as if she’s trying to suck the words right out.

“… her reappearance marks the start of a new year.”

I look from Sopdet’s star in the twilight sky to Darlene's eyes as she playfully sucks on my lip.

Darlene is so enraptured by my stories, by *my* words. I never felt smart enough around my haughty parents and kind, but she has cured that. I’m about to explode with her ravenous desire to eat up my knowledge. I have never been this turned on.

“This sounds similar to the story of Isis searching for her lost husband, Osiris,” she astutely points out as she continues her barrage of kisses, undulating her hot body against mine.

If I were to die right now, a death by a thousand kisses, I would leave my mortal coil as the happiest sphinx ever to walk the realms.

“On your back, now, sphinx.” Darlene lifts herself off me.

“Yes, m’lady.” I scoot back to the middle of the altar, then lean back, resting on my elbows, my cock standing at attention and ready for duty. “I’ll be your sacrificial virgin, sapiosexual sub.”

“Yes, you are.” She licks her lips with starving, lust-filled mania in her eyes, crawling up my body. “I like big words and you’re going to lie… down.” She places her hand on my chest and nudges me all the way back onto the altar. “Keep talking.”

“Later, Sopdet and Sah were conflated with their counterparts, Isis and Osiris…”

Darlene rips my shirt off. “Oops. I hope that wasn’t your favorite.”

I shake my head. Even if it was and I could never replace it, I would have her rip it to shreds a thousand times over just to relive this moment.

Darlene leaves a trail of kisses down my throat, over my hard nipples, and down my chest to my tented gray sweatpants.

Her hands clutch the waistband, and she looks at me expectantly.

“Did I say you could stop?” She sits on my hips with her pussy cradling my length.

My canines elongate into fangs. I can barely contain my need to claim her.

“No,” I breathe out, not knowing if my brain works anymore with all my blood in my dick.

Panting, I continue, “Sopdet and Sah are considered the *Ba*, the celestial manifestations of the souls of Isis and Osiris respectively.”

In one swift motion, she pulls off my sweats and my cock springs straight up and points to the north star. I groan when Darlene peels off her sweats and underwear, my back arching in anticipation.

Darlene was enamored by my shape and size, so I’ve fashioned it exactly how it was the last time she saw it.

“Well, hello,” she greets my cock with a wicked grin. “Is my sphinx going to let me play with you?”

Like a big cat herself, Darlene sensually crawls up my body, hypnotizing me. My dick bobs in the cool dawn air, its tip glistening in the morning’s first light.

Darlene swipes her tongue along my shaft from my balls to the head.

“Tastes so fucking good, Conrad.” She swirls her tongue over my tip’s hole, lapping up my cream.

Her eyes lock with mine, and she swallows me all the way down to the root.

“Darlene!” I shout to the heavens as she slowly slides my length out of her mouth.

She takes me to the back of her throat over and over.

What this woman does to me feels illegal.

“I’m going to–” I gasp out, my sphinx fire igniting at the base of my spine.

She slips my pulsing length out of her mouth and blows on it to cool it down. “Not yet.”

My body twitches as she slides her palm over me, milking my precum.

Stroking my shaft a few times, she spreads my fluid, readying me for her.

“So Sopdet and Sah’s story is the original reunion of two star crossed-lovers?” Darlene pulls her shirt off, revealing the most heavenly breasts ever to grace the mortal realms, as another shooting star flies over our heads.

Rendered speechless, admiring her soul’s essence radiating into the star-filled dawn sky, I can only nod my answer.

She’s truly a goddess. I worship this woman in all her glory and beauty, both inside and out.

Before I met her, I was lost. She has brought me out of a hell I didn't even know I was in until I met her. So I’ll spend the rest of my days showering her with all the love and affection she deserves.

I slide my hands up her waist to her ample breasts and cup them.

“Pinch my nipples.” She arches her back, her face to the sky. “Harder.”

I will always obey her every command, so I comply and add a little twist.

Darlene moans, grinding her slick pussy along my shaft. I’m about to empty my balls over my chest from this alone.

She places my hands on her ass, and I squeeze. She then cups her breasts and brings them inches from my mouth.

“Suck them.”

I suck a nipple into my mouth and work it with my tongue. She alternates between her breasts for me to suck to ensure each gets the attention it needs.

“Use your fangs. Drag them across my tits.” Her voice comes out ragged.

I do as I’m told, being careful not to pierce her skin in a fit of passion.

Lost to the pleasure, she bears down on my dick. Grinding harder with each stroke, she almost takes me inside her.

If she does, I won’t be able to hold back the impending *inundation* of release for much longer.

“Yes. Harder!” Darlene growls like a shifter and grabs my head, pushing my face further into her tit.

As a servant to her primal desires, I bite down until my fangs almost break skin.

I want to leave my mark and claim her as mine. Even more than Sah wants Sopdet. My beast is on edge, just the slightest bit more temptation, and it will sink its fangs into her soft flesh where her neck meets her shoulder, making her my mate. But not today, only when she agrees to it.

In an act of defiance to my goddess domme, I pick her up, flip her body around and seat her pussy right in my face. Darlene squeaks at the unexpected display of my physical strength.

“My goddess, what a glorious view.”

She recovers from her surprise quickly. “Be a good sphinx and lick my pussy.”

I take my first swipe at her folds, and she groans her approval.

Exploring her and taunting her clit, and she demands, “Fuck me with your tongue.”

I shift my tongue into a pleasure toy, longer with the rough ridges she loved the first time I was blessed with tasting her. My tongue’s tip finds the sensitive spot deep inside her, stroking her into a frenzy.

My thumb strums her engorged clit. Ripples of impending bliss wash through her entire body from the hyperstimulated dense nerve bundle.

Darlene digs her fingers into my hips, hangs on for dear life as her body trembles and shakes as her orgasm takes her.

While her pussy is still fluttering around my tongue, she leans down and swallows my entire length in one motion, cupping my balls firmly. Her sweet juices are flooding my mouth, and I almost come undone.

Darlene’s slick, luscious lips glide around my shaft, slowly sucking me.

I buck, my body eager to come down her throat.

But she firmly keeps me at bay and releases my tip with a *pop!*

“*Darleeeennnee*,” I groan through gritted teeth, needing to come.

My wicked woman starts the whole process over again.

“I need to be inside you,” I plead. “Please!”

Pop!

And she brings me to the edge again.

“No… I can’t,” I beg. “I need… inside… you.”

“Third time's the charm.” Mischief coats her skillful tongue, mixed with the precum she’s milking out of me.

Or it’s the death of me…

At this point, I really don’t care.

I just need to be released. Somehow.

Each time she performs this tortuous maneuver, she sucks my shaft and squeezes my balls even harder.

Taunting me, she hovers her glistening pussy just out of reach from my mouth.

When I’m about to blow this time, my balls swell and tighten, wrinkling the thin skin covering them. Finally, she’s going to let me come.

But Darlene grasps the base of my length and squeezes hard.

With her vise grip, she prevents my cum from spraying out. It bucks and bobs in her mouth with the most unusual orgasm of my life.

What just happened? Am I both edged and… not?

“Your samples taste good, Conrad. I can’t wait to drink every drop.”

My abused cock, wait, is it abused? I don’t fucking know. All I know is I fucking love this and what she’s doing to me. I fucking love her.

She releases me from her mouth, and it flops to my thigh like a spent dick, confused about what just happened and what it’s supposed to do now.

Darlene grabs my semi-flacid cock and swallows it whole again.

“No, please, not again…” I plead, yet I’m one hundred percent into this.

And she knows it since I’m instantly standing at attention again. She strokes it, spreading my precum for, hopefully, her slick pussy.

The dawning sun nears the horizon of a periwinkle sky, and she flips her body around, placing her cunt above my groin. With a firm hand on my member, she guides the tip to notch at her channel.

She sucks in a long breath as she slowly slides herself down my shaft all the way to the hilt.

OhgoddessOhgoddess… I’ve found the blessings of milk and honey.

We both hold still, revelling in this joining.

“My goddess, my sweet mate!” I shout. “I never imagined this could feel this good.”

“Conrad, you fit so *perfectly*, filling me completely, just the way I need.”

Darlene beams her beautiful smile upon me, warming my mind, body, and soul in this once in a lifetime moment.

It’s my first time entering a woman like this, and it’s with my Darling Darlene. I vow to myself and the stars above, that Darlene will be my first, only, and last, because no matter what the future holds for us, I’ll never touch another woman.

She bounces on my cock, her pussy clamping down and clenching harder each time.

I cup her breasts firmly and squeeze the tight nipples between my fingers.

Darlene’s melodic moans become louder, and I join in with our blissful song to the cosmos.

We find our rhythm together, as she rides her sphinx at dawn.

Wave after wave of shared energy pulses through our bodies with each thrust, like a pulsar star, sending us deeper into the heavens. Our bodies quiver with the impending *inundation*.

The first rays of the glorious star, our sun Ra, crest the horizon.

Its light illuminates Darlene’s hair, flowing freely, glowing like a halo in the cool morning breeze.

A chorus of birds erupt in song, bearing witness and answering to our shared song of eternal love.

At the pivotal moment, the event horizon, we cry out, simultaneously coming together with the rising sun. Our bodies, minds, hearts, and souls go supernova. Our explosion races across the cosmos, spreading our essence throughout the universe just to make it known that our love exists and will always exist.

Then Darlene collapses in my arms. We bask in the morning sun.

I feel as if we’re floating in a papyrus reed boat across the Milky Way, the Nile of the heavens. With our destination unknown, uncertain if we’ll ever return, at least we left the mortal realm in a state of bliss.

The sun is fully above the horizon when all our particles reassemble themselves as us.

I place a soft kiss upon Darlene's lips and caress her cheek. We stand with arms wrapped around each other, facing the rising sun, the rebirth of a new day.

I look into her beautiful, radiant eyes. "I love you, my Darling Darlene."

"I love you, Conrad, my sphinx." She stands on her tiptoes and kisses me.

"I love your body." I place a palm on her hip.

"I love your mind." My hand moves to rest on her crown.

"I love your heart." My palm settles over her heart.

"I love your soul." And finally, my hand rests upon her solar plexus.

Darlene repeats my vows of devotion and follows it with a kiss after each step.

"I love all of you, Darlene." I stroke her beautiful hair.

"And I love all of you, Conrad." She places the most enchanting, sun-warmed kiss I've ever known upon my lips.

OceanofPDF.com

56
PERMA-MONSTER?

SILAS

I hate that I'm stuck in my basilisk form. Darlene says she's not upset at me, but I want to apologize for everything I've done.

Darlene must be home from work, because I hear her light footsteps approaching my hay bale maze. Her sweet scent is mingled with Zeke's and Conrad's. My beast grumbles that our scent should join as well. But how can I assume she'd want me after what I've done?

"Silas?" She peeks into the shadows, instantly finding my gaze. "Is it okay if I come inside?"

Her hesitation makes my protective side sulk. She's still unsure of me. I avert my gaze and tuck my head into my coils in shame.

"Silas?" she huffs. "Why are you ignoring me?"

She believes I'm dismissing her? Fuck. I whip my head up and carefully nudge her into the safe space of my coils.

"*Oof*." Her body slides into place, nestled into my feathers. Her eyes are wide for a second, then she snuggles into my plumage and hums happily.

My eyes glow, and I purr with contentment. My love is with me.

I settle my head so I can watch her nap in my hold and feel like my genetic cousin, primordial dragons, with my treasure.

I must have dozed off in my contentment, and it's now dark outside. I wake up, and find Darlene in my arms. My human arms.

My mate is still asleep and nuzzles her cheek into my chest when I stir. I pivot my hips so I don't shock her with what I have below my waist. I'll have to ease her into that subject.

I must have finished my molting and processed my meal to have shifted in my sleep.

Darlene inhales deeply, waking. I pull the hem of her dress over my lower half and cradle her jaw as her stormy gray eyes open.

Her brilliant smile melts away my worries. She isn't afraid of me. I can see it, but I still need to apologize.

"I'm sorry," she says.

I blink, and my forehead crinkles with confusion. "No. I'm the one who must apologize."

"I understand why you had to keep it a secret." She lightly strokes my forehead, soothing me. "I grew up in the supe world, and your secret about being a Mythic is even more important than being a supe."

"But I scared you."

"Sure, a bit, but I was more startled than anything. And yeah, I was miffed you didn't trust me yet to confess it all when I discovered you were supes."

"But I killed someone. I'm a murderer."

"It was self-defense, and besides, you were protecting me, Zeke, and Conrad. I don't think a human court would convict you."

"Logically, I can see your point, but harming someone is what I've feared my whole life. My parents are ruthless and vicious, even toward me. I don't want to become that."

"You won't," she says, like she's certain in the depths of her soul. Perhaps my heart won't turn dark. I was only trying to protect my mate and my brothers.

"You truly forgive me?"

"Of course." She searches my eyes. "I know what you potentially are to me… my mate match."

Shock courses through me. Did the guys tell her?

"How do you know?" I tense. I didn't want us to coerce her in any way.

She traces hearts on my bare chest. "When I thought all of you were going to be ripped away from me by those hunters, I felt the connection that

some supes describe. I never thought I'd be blessed that way."

"Neither did I, but we might be more of a curse."

Her soft finger brushes my lips to silence my words. "Never. You're a gift."

Goddess, my heart aches with catastrophic joy, the kind that decimates the walls I've built in my life.

"May I show you something?" When she nods yes, I say, "You can ride on my back, bracing your legs around the base of my wings. If you are okay with that."

Her eyes light up with excitement, further bringing me out of the dark haze of my existence. "I'd love to."

I shift, being careful that my massive form doesn't crush her. She squeaks her surprise, but I hear her exhilaration in it, not fear. My brave mate.

She crawls up to sit between my wings, and I'm keenly attuned to her heat pressed against my scales. Stars above, I want to touch her everywhere with my hands, mouth, and *more*.

Overstimulated, I launch forward faster than I mean to, and Darlene lets out a whoop of happiness.

I slither until we enter the dense forest, then beat my wings, lifting us off the ground for a smoother ride. She grips my scales and laughs with delight.

Who knew it would be so much fun allowing my woman to ride me?

I cast my *lookaway* magic to ensure anyone in the area won't see a flying serpent. When I settle back down, we're at the meadow Darlene picked out on our picnic. She gasps, slides down my side, and walks ahead of me.

"What is this?" she says with awe, likely sensing its significance to me, to *us*.

I take the opportunity to shift and capture her hips from behind and lean over her shoulder. "I built us a nest, in case you ever chose me to be your mate."

Blessedly, now that I know she's not human, I no longer need to worry about my mating venom harming her.

"Oh my goddess, this is the spot I picked for our picnic." She spins and looks up at me. "You chose it because of me?"

"I did." I pull her close so she can't look down at my aberration.

She kisses me and my arousal lights up. I must tell her everything now.

“In a nest such as this, basilisks spend their first time together. It’s also for their mating frenzy when they create offspring.”

“Are you expecting babies now?” She studies my face. “Because I’m on a mage’s potion for birth control.”

Even though kids have never been my goal, my heart beats wildly that she would even consider the notion of children with me.

“I don’t expect that. And I should probably tell you about…” I hesitate.

“You can tell me anything,” she promises.

I step back and allow her to see my naked form. With her so close, both of my cocks are standing at attention.

Her eyes widen when she sees them. I wince and turn away, waiting for her to reject me.

She steps closer, her gentle hands guiding my chin to turn so my eyes meet hers. “You’re so damn sexy. Gorgeous.”

Darlene’s arms wrap around me, and the tension I was holding falls away. I bury my face in her soft hair at her shoulder.

“I’ve never… *been* with someone,” I admit. “Because I was made wrong.”

“No. You’re perfect.”

Tears stream down my cheeks. She can’t mean it.

“When you’re ready, I want to see more of your nest.”

I move to search her eyes, careful not to push any of my basilisk magic behind it. “You mean that? You really want me?”

OceanofPDF.com

57
DOUBLE D*CKING IN A NEST

DARLENE

How could he ever wonder if I want him?

"Can't you smell it on me? My need for you?" I ask.

When his tongue pokes out to taste the air, it's forked. Has it always been forked? *Damn*. I've heard that it can be an interesting thing in the bedroom, uh, *nest*.

"Goddess, you just keep getting sexier." I slide my hands down his chest and to his hips.

"You really do want me," he whispers his disbelief.

Then he blurts out. "I, uh, meant to tell you earlier. I'd only be able to impregnate you if I used both cocks in your vagina when I ejaculate."

I cough at his admission. Once I recover from his non-sequitur confession, I ask, "So it's like bondo?"

"Yes, like that," he sighs with relief, as though this news has been weighing on him.

"Anything else you want to tell me before I touch you?" I lick my lips in anticipation.

His eyes narrow in on that small movement, and he shakes his head.

“Good.” I smile and move to claim my *double-headed* prize, but pause. I realize Silas might naturally be a dom, but right now, he’s vulnerable and unsure of my interest.

“Silas, I enjoyed it when you told me what to do before. I’d like to do that again if you enjoyed it as well. But this time, I want you to touch me too. What do you want?”

“Yes, I want to touch you. Everywhere.” Silas runs his fingers through my hair and moans as if this simple caress is the most erotic thing he could do.

He makes me feel like the goddess herself the way he gently trails his fingertips over my shoulder and slips the strap of my dress to dangle loosely.

“I want this dress off.”

A needy shiver races down my spine. I pull the dress over my head and toss it aside, and I’m left in only my panties.

“You are the most breathtaking blossom.” He leans down and takes my mouth. His forked tongue sliding between my lips until I open and tangle mine with his.

His two hard cocks press against my stomach, and I groan happily at the idea of him using them on me. Each one is the perfect size, and I know from what Zeke did to me that having a guy work double duty will be amazing.

I grind my thighs together, needing friction. Still kissing me, Silas takes the clue and lifts me up, wrapping my legs around his hips. His cocks taunt my pussy as he walks me toward his massive nest.

I break the kiss so I can see more of what he built for me.

It’s much like a bird’s nest, but as a sphere instead of a bowl, with an opening that is only just wide enough for his basilisk to pass through.

He carries me inside, and the filtered light of the moon allows me to see the interwoven structure is lined with softer and softer materials. A blanket of cotton covers the width of a king-sized bed in the middle.

“It’s beautiful.”

He gives me one of his precious smiles and sets me down in the middle of the nest.

“But why doesn’t it look like it rained all night?” I ask. “It should be soaked.”

“A Mythic preservation magic.”

I've heard of preservation spells, but it's a rare magic for the fae realm anymore.

Silas moves closer on his knees, still towering over me where I sit. "I want to taste you. Panties off. Open those gorgeous legs and show me your pretty pussy."

Holy shit. I rip off my underwear and crawl onto the bedding, swaying my hips to entice him. I lay back and spread my legs, and my clit begins to pound.

He kneels at my ankles and pulls them apart a bit more, admiring me.

"*Mate*," his basilisk says in a deep rumble.

I shiver with need, then he strikes.

His mouth is at my center faster than I can track.

I call out as the pleasure of his forked tongue latches onto my clit and pinches lightly.

His fingers tease my entrance and along my sensitive flesh.

"Silas! You, *uhn*, wow," I grunt, on the fast track to coming.

He plunges his long tongue inside me and thrusts, fucking me with it.

I take a fistful of his thick locks, keeping his mouth right where it is.

I want more. "I need to feel your cocks inside me, Silas."

He moans, "You will. Soon."

He continues to rock my world with his undulating tongue inside me. His hold on my thighs tightens, and he grinds his hips into the bedding.

I sense he's about to come undone.

The thought of it triggers my climax, and I scream out his name. He continues to work me through the tremors that rack my body. Stars burst behind my eyes. Pleasure pulses outward from my center, making my skin tingle. I'm in a mindless state of bliss.

When I finally still, he lifts himself up and moves to give me a kiss.

I reach for his dicks, needing to feel their heavy weight in my hand.

"You want my cocks, mate?"

I nod eagerly. "And I want to taste you, too."

He rolls onto his back, and his cocks seem to strain for my affection.

I crawl over him and caress both shafts with the same grip. His hips buck and he curses. "I don't know how long I'll last now that I finally have your touch."

"I won't be mad if you come." I lean down, swiping my tongue up both lengths, and he groans with need.

I suck down one then the other, over and over, driving him insane, his head thrashing to hold back his release.

“No. I want to come inside your pussy.” He grips my hair firmly and carefully guides me up along his body.

He holds his lower cock for me. “Take me inside you, love,” he says, more a prayer than an order.

I notch him at my entrance and slide slowly down, watching him watch how I take him inside me.

His eyes widen and glow. “You feel too good.”

His other dick presses against my clit, just like a rabbit vibrator—the damn thing actually quivers. Overcome with sensation, I cry out and begin to fuck him.

He curses and bucks into me, matching my rhythm.

The sensation of his cocks, one outside and one inside, is driving me wild, and his adoring, awestrucked gaze only stokes me higher.

He cups my breasts, tweaking my nipples, just how I like. “My beautiful blossom.”

I ride him hard, my inner muscles beginning to flutter with an impending orgasm.

“Yes,” he moans. “I can’t hold off any longer. Come for me, my love. My mate. Let me feel your pleasure.”

I shatter around his length, and it feels like the only thing keeping me together is the nest surrounding us.

He bucks, fucking me from below. His hot release shoots out and coats my insides. His second dick sprays my chest and stomach.

My pussy flutters again, and we both cry out as he joins me in bliss.

I collapse on his chest, and he wraps his arms around me.

“I love you, Darlene. From the second I saw you, but even more now. I can’t wait to feel that love deepen.”

“Same, Silas, same. I love you too.”

OceanofPDF.com

58
A DREAM LIFE

DARLENE

After the most intense week of my life, filled with every single emotion one could feel, it's finally Friday, and I'm headed to work early.

I asked Meg for a meeting with Bev. She's anticipating my answer to her job offer, so an appointment is set for the first thing after lunch.

Good. Once my mind is made up, I'd rather get things over with right away than having unresolved matters linger for days.

At lunch, I fill in Clover on everything that has happened since the *Choad incident* and what my plans are. Back at our desks, Meg comes to get me for my meeting with Bev.

"*Good luck*," Clover mouths as I get up to follow Meg.

On my drive home after work, I breathe easier with the huge weight lifted off my shoulders, relieved things are finalized.

I swing by Bernie's Market to get some food for dinner tonight. *Who am I kidding*? It's a lot of food because those boys can eat. I haven't asked them

over yet, but I know they'll come, *especially* if I offer them their favorite cookies.

I pull up to our houses, and like clockwork, I see Conrad and Zeke sitting on their front porch as Silas rakes the daily smattering of fall leaves in their yard.

They come to greet me as I get out of my car with one of many large grocery bags in hand.

"Would you guys like to come over for dinner tonight, say seven?" I ask with a tilt of my head.

They smile widely and nod.

"What are we cooking?" Silas gestures to carry the bag for me.

"You guys relax, I got this. It's my treat." I wave them away.

Silas eyes me for a quick second to make sure I really don't need or want help. "Sounds good, we'll see you at seven."

We head to the living room after finishing our scrumptious meal. Well, as scrumptious as I can make, but the guys seem to have enjoyed it. I suspect they would love anything I make, including ramen in a styrofoam cup served with warm tap water.

"I have something I need to say," I announce with way more formality than intended.

The guys straighten their shoulders and stiffen, eyes glued to me. I chuckle to myself. I never thought in a million years that I would have my own little private army of *ride-or-die monsters*.

"Relax, it'll be okay." I sit in one of the armchairs.

The guys relax their postures, but underneath the calm exterior they're ready for anything.

I take a deep breath and begin, "So I was offered a design job with Tenth Muse Agency."

They talk over each other expressing how proud and excited they are for me.

"But it's in New York City," I finish.

"When do we leave?" Zeke asks matter-of-factly, as Conrad and Silas confirm their agreement with nods.

Aw, my heart melts. They all would just pick up stakes and follow me anywhere.

“I turned it down.”

“But it was your dream job.” Confused, Conrad slumps his shoulders. “I hope you didn’t give up your dream because of us.”

“Sure, we built a home here, but our real *home* is anywhere you are,” Zeke adds.

“Yes, we would lead the charge into the gates of *Hell* if that is what you wished,” Silas confirms.

“I know you guys would.” I look at each of my wonderful monster-men, thinking how funny life is. I had to meet actual monsters to find *real* men.

“Yes, it was a dream *job*…” I remember what Auntie said. “But it’s not my dream *life*.”

I turn to Conrad to address his concern. “So, to answer your question, was my decision because of you? Yes and no.” I pause and take a breath. “I turned down the job because it isn’t where my heart is. It’s here, in our lovely little town, building a life with you guys. I’ll always choose the loves of my life over any job.”

The guys jump to their feet, rush toward me, and pick me up for a giant, squishy group hug.

“Wait. There’s more,” I say with a muffled voice underneath their arms with my legs dangling in the air.

They set me down and take their seats again so I can continue.

“Ever since you first brought me your fresh-baked monster cookies–”

“They were *animal* cookies,” Conrad cuts me off as he feigns insult to my description of their cookies.

I chuckle and continue, “Then I made you guys a batch in return. I’ve been obsessed with making cookies, so…”

“I can attest to that. I think I have more cookie dough around my mid-section as of late.” Zeke pats his belly. “They are amazingly good.”

“Stop interrupting her.” Silas glares at Conrad, then Zeke.

“I want to start a monster cookie business.” I bite my lip and look at my hands.

“We think that’s a wonderful idea.” Conrad looks at the guys who concur.

“Funny you should say that. We have a surprise for you.” Zeke quickly heads out the door.

In a couple of minutes, Zeke enters my back door, with all his tentacles unfurled, each carrying a gift-wrapped present. He sets them on the kitchen counter before me.

“Guys! What’s all this?” I squeal.

“Open them.” Silas slides one of the gifts toward me.

I unwrap a long, heavy box, wondering what it could be. “It’s the marble rolling pin I like! How did you know?” I heft the wonderfully heavy baking implement in my hand.

After opening a plethora of gifts, all of them baking equipment and supplies from Best Baking Products, and it dawns on me. “You guys were spying on me at the Harvest Festival!”

They shrug their shoulders as Conrad adds, “We’ll *never* take our eyes off you.”

“Come.” Silas takes my hand and leads me out of the house to their garage with the guys in tow.

“Cover your eyes,” he says before opening the door and ushering me in.

“Tada!” He turns on the lights.

I open my eyes and the garage is filled with professional baking equipment, from the commercial-grade convection oven and industrial stand mixer I was eyeing, to tiered pan racks and stainless steel rolling tables.

I have everything I will need to start my cookie business thanks to the guys. *My* guys.

“My goddess! It’s too much.” Tears stream down my face. “I can’t… I can’t…” I bawl into my hands.

Besides Auntie, no one has ever been this generous with me.

My devoted monsters embrace me, stroking my back.

“You can, because you deserve this, our Darling love,” Zeke whispers.

“We believe in you,” Silas adds softly.

“Like you believe in us,” Conrad purrs.

“Thank you. You’re all the best.” I pepper kisses on each of their cheeks. “But how *did* you know I wanted to start an actual baking business?”

“We happened to… *accidentally*… read your notes,” Zeke admits.

“We spied,” Silas clarifies.

“Okay, *stalkers*. We need to talk about that behavior later. But how did you know I was going to choose to do this?”

“We didn’t know, but we got everything just in case you did,” Conrad says, as if it’s the most rational thing in the world to do.

They’re so over the top. I love it.

“I have a surprise for you as well,” I say once I regain my composure.

Back at my house, I gather my gifts for them.

“I wanted to give these to you the night that everything happened, but…” I hand Zeke a wrapped present.

“I know it’s not much, well, compared to what you guys just gave me.” I fidget with my fingers.

“Anything you give us is a bonus. You’re the gift, Darling.” Zeke takes the present with a broad smile, looking into my eyes.

He opens my gift and unwraps the windchimes from the Harvest Festival he was looking at, and falls silent.

“Do you like it?” I ask with my hand over my mouth.

“Goddess, yes. Thank you so much.” He wipes a tear from his eye. “I know you couldn’t have known this, but the sea shells are from the Faroe Islands near *Huldu*. And the seaglass is found on their beaches.”

He runs his fingers through the glass chimes, making it ring. “The chimes are tuned to the musical scale that only my people use in their songs.”

He rings the chimes again.

“Whoever made this must have heard it from an off-island kraken-shifter or they channeled the musical scale, because no one from fae or the mortal realm knows where the island is exactly.” He kisses my forehead and pulls me in for one of his great big, luscious, comfy hugs—his specialty. “Thank you, Darlene.”

“And now for you, my cub.” I drag a long gift-wrapped box to his feet.

“For *moi*?” He jests and smirks. “What could it possibly be?”

“Open it,” I say.

After opening the box, Conrad pulls out the copper pipes for the pyramid he was admiring at the festival. He takes the large crystal that goes on top and places it on his head, and jokingly twitches like he’s being electrically charged by it.

“Oh, Darlene, it’s perfect.” He kisses my cheek and squeezes me in an embrace. “Now, who was spying on whom?” He pulls back to look at me and winks.

“I thought you would like something personal here at your home, like Zeke with his salt pool, and Silas with his garden.” I cup his face and appreciate his gorgeous smile.

“That’s very thoughtful of you. Thank you so much.” He lands a delightful kiss on my lips.

“Now I want to spy on you from my bedroom window doing naked yoga under this pyramid at dawn.” I waggle my eyebrows wickedly.

I look over to Silas, who has backed himself into the corner of the room with his lips turned down. Aw, the poor guy thinks I forgot about him.

“And for you, Silas.” I hand him a wrapped present with a large green bow on top.

He takes it from my hand, smiles coyly, and carefully removes the paper without ripping it.

“How’d you know I scrapbook?” He raises his eyebrows in surprise.

“I didn’t, sweetie.” I chuckle to myself.

“The carved pumpkin I brought over on the night I discovered your true self, was for you,” I say, as he thumbs through the pages. “It was the Purple Haze pumpkin you loved from the Harvest Festival.”

He looks up at me with glistening, gigantic puppy dog eyes. “And I smashed it. Ruined it.” He looks down at his feet.

I gently guide his chin up so I can look him in his eyes. “It’s okay. It’s kind of like a momentary zen-present anyway—it was going to spoil. So that’s why I took pictures of it.”

“The carvings are so beautiful. You’re so talented.” He sniffs.

“Thank you. And even better, I saved the seeds so you can grow your own.” I point to the pouch on the last page with a packet of seeds in it. “I have loads more than just that packet. It was a really big pumpkin.”

“They were sold out. How’d you find one?” he asks, amazed.

“I have my ways,” I say, in a deep, accented voice, like Conrad did in his comedy show, steepling my hands and tapping my finger tips.

“Thank you. Now I can grow a pumpkin patch for you next year.” He smiles ear to ear.

My heart glows with the idea I have a bright future ahead with my guys.

OceanofPDF.com

59
FANGS AND CLAIMS

DARLENE

After our gift exchange, my heart is overflowing with love. I can't believe I almost didn't have all this happiness because of my prejudice against supes.

"Darlene?" From his seat next to me on the couch, Silas pulls me onto his lap. He teases my lips with gentle kisses. "Would you like to go up to your bedroom, and we can give you another round of gifts?"

"That sounds perfect," I breathe out. Without a warning, he easily lifts me up in his strong arms, and I laugh in surprise.

As he climbs the stairs, I turn to look over Silas' shoulder and find the hungry, glowing stares of Zeke and Conrad. I feel like the prey that wants to be caught.

Oh, shit. This is really happening. All three at the same time. If only the smut-loving why-choose book readers could see me now! Well, not *see me* see me, but I know they'd be gleefully jealous to know I have three monster lovers about to run an orgasmic train on me.

When we get to my bedroom, Silas shoves open the door and gently tosses me in the center of my bed. My long hair fans out around my head like a halo.

I knew I bought a king bed for a reason. Pure manifestation? Or perhaps I have a bit of my aunt's intuition after all. Build it and they will *come*…

Silas leans over and curls one of my locks around his fingers. "Your waves remind me of a serpent's seductive undulations."

"More like the hypnotic waves of the open sea." Zeke moves to where my head is and strokes his fingers through my hair.

Conrad slides to my side, opposite of Silas. "No. It's like the beauty of the uninterrupted sand dunes at sunset."

"Guys, stop being so wonderful." My eyes fill with happy tears.

"Never." Zeke leans over my head and kisses me upside down. The odd sensation turns me on.

I bite my lip and twist my legs back and forth, feeling shy. "Um, so do you all have half-shifted forms?"

"I don't." Silas frowns, like he's disappointed me. "I have two cocks in both of my forms. Nothing other than that."

Oh no. I roll to press myself against him. "That is literally a dream scenario for me. I can't wait to explore more ways to enjoy you."

"Yeah, stop whining," Conrad teases. "I only got this one amazing cock and you and Zeke can pleasure her with two things at once, or more, in Zeke's case."

I see the tension spill out of Silas, and he grins shyly.

"Are you going to show me your half-shift then?" I ask Conrad.

"I'll show you what I can do with my cock." He jumps up and strips down.

Zeke joins him, and they stand proudly in front of me.

Silas and I sit up to watch the show.

At first, their penises are perfectly average *Goldicocks* size, then they use their shapeshifting ability to grow them larger. Their competitive natures come out and they go back and forth, adding length and girth.

"Like what you see?" Conrad waggles his brows.

When I giggle, they both inflate them some more.

"Too big!" Silas kicks at the guys, as if to chase them away. "You'll hurt her!"

"No one is hurting me." I rub Silas' thigh to reassure him. Then I turn to Conrad and Zeke. "Having all three of you is like having every sex toy option to play with."

“I’ll be your boy toy anytime you want,” Conrad purrs. Oh, that ignites a spark in my clit.

My two showoffs bring their offerings down to a size I might be able to take *after* some ample stretching.

Zeke adds suckers along the underside.

Then Conrad grows barbs. The spiky protrusions cover the bottom half of his shaft to his base.

“Holy shit.” I fan myself with all the sexy monster equipment they’re putting on display. It feels very much like a mating dance as they peacock in my room. “I’ve heard about barbs, but I’ve never seen them. Does it hurt?”

“They’re more stimulating than anything.” Conrad blushes, which is a strange reaction since he can see my interest. “And when we matebond, they’ll appear whether you want them or not.”

Oh, he’s worried I won’t like it. “I’m sure you’ll make it feel amazing,” I say. “When you decide you want to have that with me.”

All three mouths drop open in shock.

“Are you waiting for us?” Zeke asks. When I nod, he says, “We were waiting for you to say you wanted it.”

All three of my guys drop to their knees in front of me, touching me in some way. “Will you be my mate?” they ask in unison.

I cover my mouth, overcome with emotion. “Yes. Yes to all of you. My *mates*.”

I admire my handsome monsters, only made more attractive by their wonderful personalities and caring souls.

My kraken captures my attention with his curly brown sun-kissed hair, dreamy sea-blue eyes, and cuddly, strong body. He’s been so supportive and helped me overcome my fears. We share a love of the arts, something that’s a huge part of me.

My fun sphinx rebels against his stuffy lineage with his sharp wit and needed laughter. He’s a carefree spirit at heart and looks it, with his long, blond wavy hair, tan muscular body, cheerful amber eyes, and always easy with his smiles.

Then there’s my sweet, shy snakey… okay, badass basilisk. He slithered into my yard and into my heart with his consistent, thoughtful, caring ways. He brought beauty into my life, one flower at a time.

“Did we break your brain with our awesomeness?” Conrad asks with a cocky smirk.

Oh, I must have been zoning out, daydreaming about my mates while they were still in the room. “Yep, I think the only way to fix it is by being inside me and…” I lick my lips and eye each one of them. “And claiming me.”

“You’re wearing way too many clothes,” Zeke observes, and he has a point. They’re naked, and I’m fully clothed.

Conrad leaps forward, his fingernails shifting into sharp claws. He slices through my clothing with ease, and Zeke sprouts tentacles, ripping away the scrapes in one fluid motion.

“Thankfully, not my favorite set of clothes,” I murmur in shock, spread naked before them. I glance over at Silas. “You feel comfortable taking yours off?”

He kisses me, I sense he’s thankful I take his feelings and needs into consideration. “Yes, I want to mate you alongside them.”

“Good, then get naked, you sexy beast.” I peck his lips.

He gives me one of his stunning, rare smiles and jumps up to shuck his clothes. Dang. I love how each one of my males have a different look.

Lying on the bed all by myself, I whimper as they watch me. Then I slide my hand down to my pussy to play with myself. “Who’s first?” I ask, coquettishly.

At my taunting them, they let out growly-groans and advance on me.

Zeke uses his tentacles to spread my legs wide, and he replaces my hand with his mouth and fingers. I moan with the delicious sensation.

Conrad cups one breast and licks the other with his rough tongue. My back arches off the bed, and I keen.

The sensory overload is already too much, then Silas drags his sharp fangs over my neck.

Wait? “Fangs?” I gasp.

“An aphrodisiac to make you ready for a long night of mating.”

Oh, I feel like I’m in way over my head here.

“I’ll be as gentle as I can be,” he whispers against my throat.

Just then, Zeke slides the tentacles holding my ankles farther up along my calves and teases my inner thighs.

“Get her ready for us, kraken,” Silas orders. “Both holes.”

Oh goddess, my quiet pleasure dom is reporting for duty with group activities.

Conrad's hand moves from tweaking my nipple to wrapping around my throat. "Basilisk, have you sampled these beautiful breasts?"

"I have, but I would love to see how she responds to my fangs' venom spread over her hardened nipples."

His sharp fangs scrape over my tits and more of his aphrodisiac enters my system.

Zeke probes my pussy with a tentacle. "She's so wet already, I barely need any of my lubrication."

"Lube?" I gasp as he plunges deeper, stretching me.

"I secrete something very similar to a basilisk."

My pussy spasms as the fluid enters my bloodstream almost instantly through the thin walls of my vagina. "*Fuuuck*," I hiss.

"Wait until you get a dose of my barbs' *philter*."

"Are you all *trying* to kill me?" I breathe out as my mind becomes loopy, as if I'm drunk.

"Our substances should only relax you," Silas assures me. "You can say no at any time, and we *will* stop."

"I don't want to say no. I want everything. I want to mate with you," I admit, grabbing at him to stay close.

He kisses me, then nibbles on my lip with his fangs. I shock him by licking one, and getting another dose of aphrodisiac.

"Naughty mate."

All the while, strumming my clit with his thumb, Zeke returns to pumping his tentacle into my pussy, then slowly slides another into my ass to get me prepared for more.

"You ready for my cock?" Zeke asks. "To mate bond?"

"Yes, please." I reach for him.

He lifts up, kisses me, then aligns his massive cock at my entrance.

Talk about being sucker cocked…

Slowly, he slides into me, filling me up, and gripping my insides. One sucker latches onto my fleshy g-spot and stimulates it. I cry out, my pussy fluttering around his member.

A strange pulsing energy ripples through me over and over, like waves of the ocean.

My hips undulate with its rhythm, my body building to my first orgasm.

Silas trails his fangs up the side of my breast, along my neck, and over the shell of my ear. “Come for us, our mate.”

When Conrad pinches my nipple, my entire body seizes, my pussy and ass contracting around Zeke’s appendages.

His hot release fills me, then keeps filling me. He begins to sing a mesmerizing tune, and my entire body tingles. My heart feels as if it expands to fill my entire body. A golden light erupts from our chests and dances around us, and his song weaves our souls, linking us together forever.

It triggers another crashing wave of pleasure. “Oh, my kraken, my kraken!” I shout.

Zeke gazes down at me with glowing blue eyes filled with adoration. “Look.” He points to a tattoo appearing on my chest, and on his, of a tentacle wrapped around in the shape of a heart. “My beautiful bonded.”

We kiss, and our mate bond reveals how his love for me is as deep as the seas.

“Such a good mate,” Silas praises and sucks on my earlobe.

“Ooh, she likes that,” Zeke groans as my pussy contracts around him. “Do you have a praise kink, my water nymph?”

“I have a *hot Mythic neighbors’* kink,” I tease, breathless.

“I *told* you guys she was into monster fucking,” Conrad teases back.

“Conrad!” I admonish, but laugh because he isn’t wrong.

Zeke reluctantly pulls away, and I feel the evidence of our pleasure flood out of me.

Instead of cleaning me up, Silas settles between my legs, his cocks nudging at my center. “To claim you I must have both cocks inside you, and my fangs. I don’t want to hurt you, so don’t pull away when I do.”

“I wouldn’t pull away from you. Besides, I’ve heard a mating bite feels amazing.”

“You’re going to take both my cocks now.” His chartreuse yellow-green eyes glow with need. He cradles my head in both hands from under my shoulders. I feel completely captured by him, body and soul.

Then he glances over to Zeke with a sexy smirk. “A little assist?”

Zeke chuckles with surprise, then wraps a thin tentacle around the two cocks and presses them together. Silas sucks in a breath at the contact, then focuses back on me completely.

With Zeke guiding him, Silas notches at my opening and presses his narrow hips forward.

Zeke pulls his helping tentacle away as Silas stretches my pussy with his double *dicker*.

"*Oooh, Silas*." I love the contrast between my two lovers, and I'm sure that I'll love the third sensation just as much.

"Darlene, goddess, you feel so tight, so perfect," he murmurs against my neck, with a clicking purr.

Goosebumps erupt down my body, and I buck my hips to meet his, to feel him full seated inside me.

"That's it. Take all of me." His mouth finds mine, and he consumes my moans and grunts as he begins to thrust.

"Fill her ass, kraken," Silas orders.

Zeke grins at me. "Gladly." He slides a tendril over my clit, making sure I'm stimulated everywhere.

"Sphinx, feed her your cock," he directs next.

Whoops, I guess *now* I'll be stimulated everywhere.

"Who knew we had a quiet dom in the mix?" Conrad nods appreciatively, his cock bouncing with excitement as he moves to place himself at my lips. "This is going to be so much fun."

"Quiet, sphinx, or I'll get a squirt water bottle when you're a bad kitty." Silas thrusts harder now.

I shiver at his dominance, and so does my sphinx. When we make eye contact, we suppress a chuckle since we can both see Silas actually following through.

"Yes, sir." Conrad gives me a wink and a seductive grin as he taps my lips with his tip. "Open wide, princess, and take your potion."

I do as he requests and his non-barbed cock slides over my lips. He grips the hair at the nape of my neck and holds me still as he begins to pump into my mouth and down my throat.

Each one of my holes are claimed by my mates. Within moments, I feel another orgasm cresting. I grunt and moan, and Silas must observe how close I am. His cocks vibrate inside me.

"*Mine!*" he snarls.

Both Conrad and Zeke fling themselves away, sensing how feral he's just become. Still cradling my shoulders and head, he pumps fast and hard, almost punishingly.

His fangs elongate, and he sinks them into the base of my neck where it meets my shoulder. It doesn't hurt for more than a split second, then fills me with ecstatic bliss.

I shatter around his cocks. His hot release coats my insides while his fangs are still buried in my neck.

Another golden thread appears, entwining our souls. He lifts up to watch the bond form with me.

"I want to bite you, too."

"Do it," he begs, tears forming in his eyes as he gazes at me with pure adoration.

I lunge forward and sink my teeth into his shoulder. Blessedly, my faeborn lineage makes them sharp enough to go in cleanly. Through our bond, I begin to sense his utter astonishment that he now has me as his mate.

As he senses my unconditional love, it overcomes him. Silas bucks into me, driven to claim me again. When he thrusts forward, one of his cocks slides into my pussy and the other into my back hole.

Fortunately, I'm prepared for the abrupt invasion. Overwhelmed, I can't do anything but feel the pleasure he brings me. As Silas' second cock erupts in my ass, I come with him.

His body seems to fully encase mine, like a boa constrictor around its prey.

The aftershocks of my orgasm shudder through me.

I must pass out, because when I open my eyes Conrad is hovering over me.

My sphinx's appreciative gaze is seductive, yet playful. Just like him.

He leans back, his clawed fingertips lightly trailing down between my breasts to my mound. Carefully, his thick fingers slide over my soaked pussy lips.

"They've made a proper mess of you, haven't they?" he purrs. "And it's only going to get messier with what I'm about to do."

My soul aches to join with his, and I reach out to feel his weight on top of me.

Retracting his claws, his finger slips into my channel, and he watches for my reaction. "How are you feeling?"

"Empty. I need you inside me. Now," I order my submissive guy.

He grins wickedly, then kisses the hell out of me, but doesn't sheath himself. "I think this is a time when I'm going to be dominant, my Darling mate."

Without warning, he flips me onto my stomach. I squeak, but instinctively lift my hips for him to mount me.

"Good little mate," his voice deepens, becoming more of his beast. "Now you're going to become mine." His hands on my hips grow claws, positioning me higher. Then one hand grips my hair, lifting my head so I arch my back dramatically until I'm looking up at him from where he stands behind me on the edge of the bed. His wings suddenly appear and flare out from his back, and I gasp as they take up the entire width of the room.

The thick head of his cock notches at my entrance, and I wonder if he has his barbs triggered already.

His tufted tail curls around and tickles my clit, and I moan. Then he slides slowly inside me, inch by girthy inch, stretching me even more than Silas' did with his two dicks.

I do my best to keep eye contact with Conrad's glowing amber eyes as he takes me.

"I don't know if I can take all of you," I whimper.

"You're doing so good, just a bit more, my love."

I'm stuffed so full, stretched so wide, that I actually am worried that his full sphinx size won't fit inside me.

"Fuck, this is hot," Zeke whispers.

"Don't even think about it," Conrad growls and thrusts deeper. "My beast won't allow either of you to get near her for this."

His possessiveness turns me on more than it should. He gives me a wicked smirk making my pussy clench around him.

His tail stimulates my clit, and I feel him slip in farther.

He thrusts forward and pulls me fully onto his dick, burying himself so deep I gasp.

Fully seated, I can tell he doesn't have his barbs out… yet.

"That's it, my beautiful mate, taking everything I have," he purrs, and my inner muscles ripple over his massive shaft.

His hold on my hair loosens, and he presses me forward until my cheek is flush with the soft blankets. I need him to move, fuck me. I try to wiggle to ease the pressure.

Clawed hands hold my hips still as he finally delivers. After a few gentle pumps, he speeds up until he's lost in a frenzy of punishing strokes. I glance over my shoulder, seeing a gorgeous monster fucking my brains out.

"Oh, goddess, Conrad!" My pussy contracts around his girth.

"Yes, that's it, mate," he groans. "Trigger my barbs."

His thrusts become shorter, still hitting the perfect spot inside me. I shatter, trembling, and I feel prickling inside, catching me, holding me to him. A wave of euphoria crashes over my entire body.

He erupts, filling me up so much that it slicks my inner thighs.

His sharp canines find my unmarked shoulder, and he claims me with a sinful rumble of satisfaction.

Another wave of pleasure hits me and another. I'm cascaded into a series of orgasms, aided by his shallow thrusts. The *philter* from his barbs makes me see stars.

His massive wings curl around me, the softness making me moan. Every sensation is bordering on too much. His arms wrap around my chest as he lays us flat, almost all of his half-beastly weight on me. One arm slides up, offering his corded forearm.

"Bite me, my love, my mate, claim me."

And I do.

Another golden thread whips around, entangling me with my third mate. His love floods my senses.

Then my other two mates join him, sending me their love through our connection, and I weep with joy.

My heart and soul sing with happiness, bonded to my three extraordinary loves.

I must have passed out, because I'm on my side with Conrad still inside me. But Silas and Zeke are snuggled up with us too. His barbs finally retract enough for him to slip out, and I feel just how messy a triple mating is.

I close my eyes and drift. Then feel someone pick me up. Through the bonds, I know it's Zeke. He carries me to my bathroom and settles us into a warm bath.

I sigh, relaxing into him, feeling the most trust I've felt in my entire life. Warm hands of my three mates wash and soothe my exhausted body.

Their presence is the most wonderful thing I've ever experienced. I've never felt at home in the fae realm or in the mortal realm.

And now, I’ve finally found a true home with my monsters.

OceanofPDF.com

EPILOGUE

Several months later…

DARLENE

"Mythics are freakin' weird, but I love it." I smile to myself. I suppose people are weird, no matter what their species. Humans, fae, demons, supernatural creatures, nulls, we can all be uniquely weird.

Today's our day off, so I'm lounging around with Silas in his basilisk form in our nest in the woods. We've talked a lot lately about how dragons and basilisks trace their lineage back to the dinosaurs, who were actually often feathered creatures.

His giant tail is wrapped around me. I stroke the feathered end, and cuteness aggression overtakes me.

I grab his tail, clutching it to my chest, and shout like a kid, "*Dine-O-sauuur!*"

He responds with a silly and sweet, "*Rrwowr*."

I love him so much. I love how he's still the same quiet, gentle soul, but he's loosened up a lot and realizes I'm not *that* fragile.

Instead of riding him, Silas and I take a leisurely stroll holding hands alongside the creek and through the woods back to our houses. It's a beautiful spring day, and the breeze stimulates our creative juices as it filters through the branches of budding trees. The sun warms our skin after

a cold winter, not to say we were cold by any means as the four of us generate plenty of heat together.

Once back in Silas' garden, he checks in on how his Purple Haze pumpkin seedings are doing. We notate the progress of different germination methods in his garden journal. My OCD, neurodivergent brain appreciates Silas' attention to detail.

While I watch him work, I stroke my protection tattoo that Zeke gifted me to match theirs. It's imbued with even more magic since the guys' powers have been emerging since our mating. We're not sure if it's from our bond or if it's what would have happened since they reached the Mythics' age of maturity.

We load the firepit with wood for tonight's sing-along that I've come to love. I get to join in their chorus instead of just secretly listening through my bedroom window.

After we finish, Silas brings out two glasses of freshly squeezed lemonade for us on the back patio. Under his arm, he's carrying what looks like to be a very large, old leather scrapbook that has been cherished and cared for.

"What's that?"

"It's my private scrapbook. I started it when I was still weaning my fangs." He swings his arm like a little kid, looking at his feet.

"Do you want to show it to me?" I coax.

He quickly nods, presents me the book, and opens it to the title page. In meticulous, yet clearly child-like handwriting, Silas wrote his full name, date of birth, and day of first molting.

I turn the page and see a date about ten years after his birth, under a mounted purple-blue feather just like the one that was in his hair at the Harvest Festival, but only smaller.

"Aw, Silas, this is so adorable!"

Taking my time to appreciate each feather, I flip to each page and see another one for each year since the first, all around the same date in October.

"You saved a feather from each year?" I look into his chartreuse green eyes.

"Yes. And the last one is your feather. The one you pulled out of my hair." He places his hand over mine resting next to the feather.

“Was that the first one? Are all of these the first feather for each molting?”

Silas smiles and nods.

“Oh my, Silas. I’m sorry! Did I hurt you when I pulled it out?” I feel bad for just ripping a part of someone off their body.

“Nope.” He pats my hand to reassure me. “I’m glad it was you. It was a sign.”

“A sign?”

“Yes, that you and I are meant to be.”

I throw my arms around his neck and lay a big smooch across his lips.

It’s time for my weekly check-in. “Hey Auntie!” I say happily as she answers.

The guys chorus their hellos too.

She laughs at their boisterous affection. “I’m going to have to make a trip out soon to meet your troublemakers in person.”

“We’d love it!” Conrad shouts. He can hear everything with his supe hearing, even though the phone isn’t on speaker mode. He’s wearing the shirt I made him with the phrase, “Yeah! What he said!” from the first comedy show I was at.

I walk out of the kitchen and head for my retreat room, otherwise I’m going to have the peanut gallery shouting out responses the whole conversation.

“So, how’s the dream life going?” Auntie asks in the pleasant bantering sort of way she does.

“Things are busy, like they always are these days. We landed two more small, regional natural grocery store chains.” I sit in my comfy chair.

“That’s great, sweetie!”

“Ever since Bernie’s Market took a chance on us last holiday season, the doors have opened up and things are taking off. We hired two more employees. I’m just so lucky.” I’m exhausted but grateful for all that has happened in this last week alone.

“Luck has nothing to do with it.” Auntie scoffs. “You were always meant to succeed doing *your* own thing. That I did *see*.”

“Bev said something similar when I turned down her job offer. She told me she saw herself in me when she was young and hungry, and that I wouldn't be truly happy until I branched out and worked for myself like she did.”

“Well, she’s right. You were always filled with aspiration, ever since you were little.” She falls quiet for a moment.

“Auntie? What’s wrong?” I sense the heaviness of what she wants to say next.

“I want you to know your success in everything that you have accomplished, your business, your guys, the wonderful life you’re creating for yourself, is because of *you*,” she says in a more serious tone than usual.

Tears well up in my eyes, and I try to hold them back by looking at the ceiling.

“And I feel horrible that I didn’t see that you and your guys were in danger because they were Mythics. I’m dreadfully sorry about that.” She sniffs back her tears. “All I ever received was the vague impression that you would find joy and happiness in Midville.”

“Darlene, I purposely created a blindspot around you when using my gift. I didn’t want to influence your life that way. Even if my intentions were good and out of love, I knew I could inadvertently steer you into something I thought was good for you, even though you might not want it. I didn’t want to put any expectations, albeit subconsciously, on you, like your parents always did. I wanted you to be free to live your life for you, by your own choices—victories, mistakes, and all.” She cries softly. “Please forgive me.”

“Auntie, I do,” I get out in between my sobs. “I had no idea. That must have been so hard for you.” I pause, taking in the weight of the moment. “Especially when you saw me doing the dumb things I used to do as a kid.”

We both burst out in laughter mixed with our tears.

“Auntie, thank you for everything. If it wasn’t for you–”

“Stop. It was all you. Besides, you’re going to make me cry again,” she jests, trying to break up the heaviness.

“Auntie, I love you.”

“I love you, too.” She air kisses over the phone. “And tell the guys to get the spare bedroom ready. Auntie is coming soon.”

“It’s ready with your favorite things!”

“Aw, such sweeties. Bye for now.”

I give her an air kiss. “Bye.”

The next day, the guys and I check out the progress on my business.

I can’t believe how fast *Darling Monster Cookies* is growing. We’d rented a small storefront with a sizable baking and prepping space in the back to handle the supplies and equipment the guys bought me.

And everything took off from there. Zeke’s natural leadership skills made him a great fit for an operations manager and accountant. Forget the sexy librarian, he’s the hot accountant. He’ll divide your number and knows where to put the decimal point. He’ll count down your orgasms and always leave you in the black… *ink*.

Conrad’s charming personality makes him a wonderful and incredibly productive salesman. With him, we not only have the storefront, but it seems every day we expand to another boutique grocery store.

There’s even talk of franchising.

And my quiet Silas loves to work with his hands in the bakery and leading the crew with proper protocols. But his favorite job is experimenting with me. With his knowledge of all things edible, he’s become my right-hand guy in research and development.

Some of our bestsellers are the raspberry-filled vampire red velvet cookie and the hellhound double chocolate lava cookie. Then there’s my favorite, the why choose mystery pack containing three random monster cookies and their printed trading cards that I’ve illustrated.

Our latest co-creation is set to be released soon. We call them *Monster Muffins*.

My guys and I slip in the back entrance and give a wave to the staff. The best part? They’re supes who can’t work in normal jobs because of their inability to blend in with humans. Ruby vouched for each one of them. No one seems to question that my guys are anything more than regular, if not rare, octopus, lion, and snake shifters.

I’m proud that I’ve gotten over my stupid prejudice and now have so many supes as friends and employees. With the help of my philanthropist Auntie, we have even started a charity for ‘the little spawns’. The customers

think it’s a silly joke as a monster company, but we actually do help supe kids in need.

I shudder when I think of what could have happened if Chad and his hunter friends had won that day. Thankfully, we stopped them, and Clover has been sabotaging the hunter network on the dark web to keep the entire supe and Mythic population safe.

I pull Conrad and Zeke into a side hug, one on either side of me.

“What’s this about?” Zeke asks.

Silas comes up behind me, pressing his trim body against my back.

I lean into him, basking in the contact of my mates. “I just love what we’ve built together.”

Conrad nuzzles my cheek, Silas kisses the top of my head, and Zeke hums happily as he pulls me tighter to him.

“We do too.”

Things just couldn’t be any more *perfect.*

As the sun sets, I head out to check our mailboxes. Yes, *our*, as in living together.

We’ve decided that I should move into their place as they have another bedroom that I can have as my own. It’s been pretty much where I spend most of the time anyway. We plan to rent my house out to a supe friend.

When I get to the curb, Betty approaches me while walking Lil’ Bit.

“Three men?” she asks, “You like it like that, huh?”

I straighten my shoulders and stand stock-still as my eyes go wide, then turn to look at her in shock.

“Not bad.” She leads Lil’ Bit away from wandering in my yard. “Back in my day… Now *those* were some parties.” Betty passes me and simply adds, “You should come over for one of my Wednesday, you know, ‘hump-day’ get-togethers. You might learn a thing or two.”

I’ll say…

Shaking my head at the shocking revelation about my not-so-pleasant neighbor, I sift through our mail. One envelope stands out from the rest. It’s addressed to the three of them. Weird, they don’t usually receive anything but bills.

They’re working on dinner when I walk into the kitchen.

“Hey, there’s something addressed to all of you.”

They turn in unison, hearing the strange tone in my voice. I know it’s weighty, whatever it is. By their expressions as their eyes catch on the envelope, they feel it too.

I hand it over to Zeke since he’s the only one who seems willing to touch it.

He opens it and reads it in silence. We wait with bated breath for the news of its contents.

Zeke finally looks up, color drained from his face. “We’ve been summoned.”

“Where?” I ask.

“*Home*.”

OceanofPDF.com

BONUS EPILOGUE

SILAS

Dread washes over me while standing in the forest behind our house with my loving, gorgeous mate and two mate-brothers.

Instead of tending to our garden as I had hoped, I have to face my past. A past my brothers and I thought we left behind on the Mythics' secret island when we ventured out to start a new life. Unfortunately, we must comply with our parents' summons, forcing us to put Darlene in danger. If we don't, it's likely our parents will attack. My parents are especially dangerous.

In the letter, they demanded we arrive at dawn before the next full moon, and to bring our 'female.' That means we've only had two days to prepare our mate to meet our unwaveringly stern and judgmental parents, and the harsh mythic world.

But how do we effectively prepare when we don't really know what to expect when we arrive? Will they attack on sight? Will they give her a chance? Will they attempt to rip her away and try to destroy our mate bonds?

We run through a few basic Mythic social protocols with Darlene. But mostly, we focus on training with our newfound magic that we acquired after reaching full maturity. We've used our extra boost to place protective wards over our mate and ourselves.

Conrad has been obsessed with practicing his new sphinx power of portaling, even as we prepare to leave.

“Enough practice,” Zeke warns.

Looking at Conrad, I can see he’s probably pushed himself too hard. His arms tremble, and there’s a sheen to his forehead.

He’s terrified he’ll mess up and harm our mate, but he’s only exhausting himself now. Which compromises her safety because we can’t protect her and escape when this trip turns ugly.

And it will inevitably turn ugly.

My parents wouldn’t have our visit end any other way.

With a shrug, Conrad drops his hands and dismisses the magic back inside himself. “Silas, how are you doing with your portaling skill?”

“Not as adept as you, but if I have to use my ability, I can call upon it.”

He grunts, and I can tell he’s not exactly happy with my answer. I’m not happy either, but I’ve been focused on my earth magic and mental fortifications to protect against my parent’s inevitable psychic attack.

We check our travel bags, protective talismans, and concealed battle potions, finding everything in order.

“Ready?” Zeke’s tentacle wraps around Darlene, keeping her pressed to him.

“Not so tight, sweetie.” Darlene pats his appendage, but he doesn’t seem to ease off much.

I’d glower at him, but he’s doing exactly what I’d do if I had my hands on her right now.

“I know you guys are nervous, but it’ll be okay… right?” Her eyes widen when none of us jump to put her at ease.

“We won’t let them hurt you.” I cup her cheek and touch my forehead to hers before giving her a lingering chaste kiss.

Her face whitens. “Do we have to go?”

“Yes,” we say in unison.

“Unfortunately, ignoring them will only make things worse for us,” Zeke explains.

“Then let’s get this over with.” She nods to Conrad.

He skillfully gathers his magic and with his intention rips open the space in front of us to our designated landing spot, which is no more than an outcropping of rocks in the middle of the sea. Travelers can’t open a portal directly into Huldu, so we have this spot for portaling purposes.

Once there, Zeke will swim over to the main island, while Conrad and I will fly, with me carrying Darlene.

We step through and Darlene doubles over from the disconcerting effects of the portal.

I place my hand on her back and stoop down to look her in the eyes. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I just need a minute. I never liked portaling.”

When I look over at Conrad, he’s stock-still, the color draining from his face as if he’s seen a ghost. The dawn’s rising sun blinds me, and I squint to see what Conrad is staring at.

At the water’s edge, there’s a traditional Egyptian reed boat bobbing in the ocean’s wake. A silhouetted woman stands at its bow with her arms crossed, staring at Conrad.

Nailah.

“Oh shit,” Zeke whispers.

“So you’re the other woman, huh?” The sphinx woman glares at Darlene and looks her up and down.

Darlene’s mouth drops open in shock, her eyes bouncing back and forth between the two sphinxes. “Your betrothed?” she accurately guesses.

Conrad drags his palm down his face in distress.

After an uncomfortably long moment of silence, Nailah bursts out laughing.

Has she lost her mind and is planning revenge?

Conrad does a double take and protectively steps in front of our mate.

Darlene tucks behind Zeke as well, unsure of what’s going on. I step closer to Darlene to portal her away if necessary.

“I’m just messing with you.” Nailah waves off her gruff persona and gestures for us to board the boat. “Get in, losers.”

“You just laughed,” Conrad blurts in sheer surprise.

Nailah rolls her eyes. “I do possess a sense of humor, despite what you might think.”

“But I—”

She cuts him off. “I didn’t want to marry you anyway. Nothing personal. You did me a favor by leaving. Now, get on the boat so we can get moving.”

We all climb aboard, and with a flick of her finger, the boat begins to slice across the ocean waves.

“You’re really not mad?” Conrad asks her sheepishly.

“No. It was my parents’ scheme to benefit from your family’s influence and prestige, not mine. They’re obsessed with continuing our noble family line, but I have a hundred years before I have to seriously consider a mate. Besides, I like being single. Way more fun.” She winks.

Conrad relaxes his shoulders and sighs in relief.

“Hello, I’m Darlene,” she says with a little wave.

“These males don’t have any manners, do they?” the sphinx chuckles then nods respectfully at our mate. “I’m Nailah.”

I allow a bit of the tension I’m holding to release, but I won’t let my guard down until we leave this place. A flutter of magic races over my body as we cross through the islands’ protective wards.

The mystical fog parts, and the shores of our homeland come into view. A small gathering of our people stand on the craggy rocks, and my heart pounds erratically in my chest at the sight.

Sensing my unease through the mate bond, Darlene reaches out and squeezes my hand in support.

As we near, I find only the matriarchs are here to meet us. All three of our mothers are lined up and waiting for our arrival.

It’s a mostly forgotten tradition that the female leaders are the first to meet any new potential female members of the tribe. With only the matriarchs in attendance, does that mean there is a chance they will accept Darlene?

When the reed boat slides gracefully onto the beach, I step out of the boat and help Darlene out, ensuring her footing is stable.

Then I dare to look at my mother.

I’m almost knocked backward by what I see…

Her smile. A genuine smile. And a baby in her arms.

“Silas?” Darlene moves closer as she worries about my churning emotions.

I pull her to me, tucking her to my side.

“Son, it is good to see you again,” my mother says in a warmer tone than I ever remember hearing from her.

I can’t find the words, not that I’ve ever been great with them. I mostly blame my father for my silent nature. Why speak when no one at home would listen?

Safiyah, Conrad’s mother, steps forward. “Present your mate.”

Darlene swallows hard and glances at us.

“Mothers,” Conrad says with a seriousness he rarely displays, “we present you with our fated mate match, Darlene.”

Zeke’s mother sniffs the air. “A magicless faeborn?”

The muscles in Zeke’s jaw flex, and he barely holds back a sneer.

“Yes.” Darlene straightens her shoulders. “I’m a null from fae-mage parents.”

“And why should we trust a fae with our sons and with our sanctuary?”

“I risked my life for your sons, saved them from hunters with iron traps.” Darlene speaks clearly and with confidence. “And I’ve long left my fae connections behind. I will make a binding pact that I would never betray your sons or the Mythics here as long as you do not betray them yourselves.”

Safiyah stares down Darlene, no doubt sizing up her intelligence and offer of a magical promise bond. If agreed upon, then anyone breaking it could die.

I hate that Darlene offered this without consulting us, but it’s a bold move that would almost certainly ensure our safety.

“Agreed.” Safiyah offers a smile filled with what looks like pride.

Our mothers step forward and join hands with Darlene, and a pulse of magic goes out with their intentions.

I resist the urge to pull Darlene away from their reach. What is the point of a peace pact if I behave as if it wasn’t made?

“I’d like you to meet your sister, Zola,” my mother says as she turns for us to see the babe’s round face.

And my heart melts like wax set on an open fire.

She’s the most adorable creature I’ve ever seen. Her eyes are a darker green than mine. Her fuzzy head is covered in dark fluff, and a hint of scales grace her cheekbones and chubby arms.

Darlene gasps. “She’s so precious.”

My mother hands me the tightly wrapped bundle in a show of trust I don’t expect.

Zola’s tiny hand whips out, snatches my finger, and promptly bites down with the tiniest basilisk fangs in the realms.

“How can a being be this cute?” Darlene echoes the question I have.

My mother gazes adoringly at my sister with a soft smile. “She’s just as cute as Silas was at this age.”

“You thought I was *cute*?” I’m completely baffled. Who is this person? Not my mother.

“Of course, I did.” She sighs. “I know we were far too hard on you. I regret that. And I regret forbidding your friendship with Zeke and Conrad which drove you away from here. But I think it was a lesson I needed.”

I don’t press for more about what she might have learned. But I sense that the tension-filled alliance with the other two matriarchs has become more of a friendship.

Could our rebellion in leaving actually have changed things here?

DARLENE

Zeke and Conrad coo with me over Silas’ sweet baby sister, while my basilisk mate cradles her like he’s afraid she’ll shatter from holding her too tight.

Then we hear a throat being cleared to get our attention.

Zeke tenses next to me. We turn around, and he places his arm around my shoulders.

“Mamma, this is Darlene,” Zeke says. “Darlene, this is my mother, Ragnar.”

Just like Zeke instructed, I extend my arm for his mother to take while making direct eye contact. “Hello, it’s an honor to meet you.”

She meets my gaze, takes my hand into hers, and shakes it firmly. “Hello.” She gives me a once-over as she lets go of my hand.

Ragnar claps her hands. “Now we perform the Rettssak. Prepare yourself.”

I look over to Zeke for a clue of what she’s talking about. His eyes go wide and dart back and forth between his mother and me.

“Are you ready?” Ragnar places her fists on her hips.

“May I have a moment with Zeke?” I ask with a higher pitch than normal.

She nods, and I lead Zeke down the beach and hopefully out of earshot of everyone.

“What in all of fae is Rettssak?” I ask, feeling the anxiety build in my stomach in sync with the sound of each crashing salty wave on the stony beach.

“It’s a tradition.”

“Why didn’t you tell me about this?”

“Nowadays, there’s usually just a mating banquet. I didn’t know she was going to demand the Rettssak.” Zeke rubs the back of his neck.

“Yeah, but what is it?”

“It’s an ancient ritual.”

“And?” I swear, it’s like pulling tentacles to get this information out of him. He’s only making me more nervous.

“It’s a trial, of sorts.”

I give him a pointed look for him to just spill it.

“Um, it’s fishing.”

“Fishing? How hard can that be? I can fish.”

“Well, it’s done kraken-style.”

I give him a blank expression. “Are you fucking serious?”

“It’s done by hand, or I should say by tentacle.” Zeke releases a long breath. “It’s a competition to see who can catch the most. Traditionally, it’s a mother kraken’s challenge to a son’s potential mate to see if they’re worthy to continue the bloodline.”

“Well, your mom has an unfair advantage, being she’s a kraken and I am *not.*”

“Yes, but unfortunately, it’s my mother’s way of accepting you into the family.”

“Okay, I can do this.” Hopefully, I can. Or at least try.

Zeke and I return to his mother, who hasn’t moved a muscle since we left.

“I’m ready.”

“Very well.” She leads me on a small trail up a cliff face.

Dammit. Not another cliff.

At the top, Ragnar points to the dark and turbulent sea far below. “Where the current spirals, that is where the water is deepest.”

She frees her long hair from a bun and drops her cloak. At the edge of the cliff, this fearless woman basks in the wind completely naked without shame, her long silver-blue locks blowing around her body.

“The deeper the water, the bigger the fish.” She looks me in the eye, and in one fluid movement, dives headfirst. Halfway down, she shifts into a full-sized mamma kraken. Holy crap, that’s how big a fully grown kraken is? She’s at least twice the size of Zeke.

“Here goes nothing.” Before I let my fear—no, my healthy respect for water—take hold of me, I jump in feet first. As I descend, I see Ragnar slip under the sea without so much as a splash.

With my limbs flailing, I hold my nose and hit the dark water hard. My adrenaline spikes, not only from my leap of faith but also from the frigid North Atlantic ocean. My body wants to hyperventilate, but I imagine Zeke’s arms and magic embracing me, keeping me safe.

After plunging, I flip around so I can see the depths below. Fortunately, my slightly enhanced vision from my faeborn lineage allows me to see Ragnar below me darting about with ease.

Holy mackerel, she has already amassed quite a hall of large fish. Dozens are attached to the suckers on her tentacles.

How am I supposed to compete with that?

I try my best to swim down to Ragnar, where all the fish are, but even with Zeke’s gift of enhanced water abilities from our mating bond, I still don’t possess the power and agility of his mother. Thankfully, with Zeke’s magic through our bond, I won’t need to resurface for air.

A thought hits me. Maybe with Zeke’s gift, I can call the fish to me. I focus my intent on just that. After a few moments, a large school of fish approaches and circles me. I reach out and easily grab one, but now my arms are full. I have one fish compared to the dozens Zeke’s mother has caught.

Another idea comes to me. Silas’ gift through our mating bond is the magic to sway others. That’s how a basilisk’s mind-wiping abilities works—they compel the target to forget. It’s also how they can make people do things they want, similar to how a vampire would. Perhaps I have enough of his ability to catch all these fish.

In my mind’s eye, I project the image of the fish swimming to shore and throwing themselves on the beach. The school around me and others from the depths below follow my suggestion like puppets on a string. As the fish swim past me, I let go of the one in my arms and grab on to the fins of two large fish so they can pull me to the shore.

The two fish and I land on the beach with a crashing wave to see hundreds of fish flopping on the shore.

“Darlene!” Zeke yells as he runs up to me, followed by Conrad and Silas. “Thank the goddess you’re okay. I was so worried. It took everything in me not to jump in after you.”

I fall into his arms, exhausted from my use of magic. “I’m okay.”

Conrad and Silas each place a hand on one of my shoulders.

“You’re better than okay.” Zeke breaks our embrace and looks at all the fish I commandeered. “You caught schools of cod, salmon, mackerel, herring, and halibut.

“But how did you do it?” Silas asks.

I shrug. “I used your gifts and Zeke’s to attract and persuade them.”

That was far too easy. And frankly, scary. I don’t know if I like having this ability. Even though I have nowhere near the amount of skill that Silas has, I now fully understand Silas’ trepidation of wielding his gifts. With great power comes great responsibility.

“Brilliant!” Conrad cheers and rubs my shoulder as Silas nods with raised eyebrows.

Zeke’s mother emerges from the sea, tosses her haul of fish into a pile and shifts back to her human form.

Zeke looks at his mother and whispers to me, “But…”

“But what?” I mouth.

“You’re supposed to let my mom catch the most.”

“You didn’t tell me that!” I almost screech.

Ragnar looks around at all the fish as she approaches us and breaks out into full laughter. Zeke hands her her cloak, and she puts it on.

“Any non-kraken that can catch more fish than me earns my approval.” She reaches out with arms extended for a hug. “Welcome to the family. Now, to the banquet!”

Zeke is motionless with an odd mix of happiness, confusion, pride, shock, and relief frozen on his face.

“Boys, bring today’s catch to the banquet hall. Darlene and I have much to catch up on.” Zeke’s mother takes my arm into hers and leads me up the path of a rising bluff.

Other Mythics take the lead with the rest of the food as Ragnar and I set half of the fish in a firepit to cook and leave the other half for people to eat raw.

One young Mythic is an actual sushi chef and prepares some rolls and sashimi for the few who enjoy sushi.

Zeke's mom gives me an approving nod when I eat some of the sashimi offered to me. I now see where Zeke gets his love of sushi.

Finally, I'm done with my Rettssak duties and free to socialize with my mates and the rest of the Mythics in attendance.

I watch Silas and his mother play with Zola, and my love for him expands at the sight. I don't know if I ever plan on having kids, but if I did, I suspect my mates would make excellent dads.

Conrad and Zeke are catching up with some of their old friends, so I take a moment to look around and Mythic-watch from my corner.

"Hello."

I turn to take in the eerie vision of older versions of Conrad and Zeke.

"We hear you are the faeborn null who stole our sons' hearts," Conrad's father says in a lordly tone.

I stare down the male. "I suppose I am."

Zeke's dad chuckles, his smile wide as he tosses back some fish. "I hear you also bested my mate in Rettssak fishing. You're either very brave or you hit your head on a rock jumping off that cliff."

"Mostly, it was that your son didn't warn me of the tradition." I fold my arms and give him a shake of my head.

"Either way. I get a bunch of free fish out of it!" He lets out a joyful laugh, and Conrad's father huffs at his display.

Just as Conrad said, he thinks he's superior to everyone.

"So you were raised in the fae realm?" he says with an air of disgust.

"Unfortunately." I shrug.

He seems to light up with interest at my response and points to the night sky. "They teach you about celestial knowledge in your little academies?"

"Some." Out of the corner of my eye, I see Conrad and Zeke notice I'm being interrogated by their fathers, and they begin their journey across the reception area.

"When does Isis rise over Sah?" His father points in the wrong direction.

I nod at the eastern sky. "Actually, it's Sopdet who *raises* Sah at dawn beginning in late summer, at the start of the rains."

"Very good." He turns and winks at Conrad in approval. "I suppose you've been educated by your silly schools, or my son was able to impart

some knowledge. Either way, I'll take it as a win."

I suppose I'll take it as a win too.

"May we have this dance?" Conrad places his hand on my shoulder.

"Certainly." I gladly accept and take Conrad's and Zeke's arms as they lead me away to the dance floor, rescuing me from further interrogation.

The night is flowing along nicely, and I'm meeting a few of my mates' old friends when someone appears from the shadows.

Silas' father stalks toward me, slowly clapping.

The music screeches to a stop.

I know this is a challenge. And I must meet him toe to toe. This visit has been a challenge of my worthiness, over and over. The powerful Mythics are much like any other powerful shifters I've known. I can't back down or show any weakness. They'll smell it, and I'm done.

Consciously or not, I suspect they've saved the most challenging for last.

My mates freeze then gather quickly around me, but I ignore their protective nature.

I have no idea what compels me when I widen my stance and match his slow clap, beat for beat.

Clap, clap, clap.

The tension rises with each smack of our hands. I dare to stare right into his dangerous basilisk eyes.

Everyone goes silent and still at the party, watching.

Then the forbidding, intimidating male throws his head back and barks out a laugh that echoes eerily around the room.

Through the bond, I can feel Silas' utter shock. I doubt his father's laugh is something most have heard.

"Okay." Silas' father points at me. "I like her moxy."

The room explodes in cheers and the music begins to play again.

Silas' father saunters up to me. "You put yourself at risk to save my son. You appeared here when we were likely to kill you just as easily as taking out the trash. Magicless. Essentially helpless. But you saved these foolish boys with the help of your *fae* friends."

How did he know about my friends?

He reads the expression on my face. Or perhaps reads my mind.

“Yes, I know of your circle and how they rushed to aid you… them.” He sighs. “It does make me think I should accept the new Fae Queen’s request for a parley.”

“She contacted you?” Silas asks.

“Not directly, but the messages have traveled to our pocket realm.” He raises his brows in a way that looks so much like Silas, it’s creepy. “What do you think? Can we trust the fae?”

“That is a good question. I don’t know. My seer aunt senses good things about her, but I would be cautious even if the Queen herself has good intentions.”

He nods to Silas. “You have an intelligent mate. Well done.”

The wave of relief and confusion through our bond hits me like a crumbling tower of bricks.

The last parent test passed.

Now what?

Unexpectedly, as a wedding gift, my mates’ parents bestow us with a spacious three thousand square foot chateau on a bluff overlooking the sea.

We decide to stay here a while longer as a well-deserved vacation and what humans call a honeymoon. With no commitments to attend to, it’s wonderful to enjoy time with my guys, both in and out of the bedroom.

I spend some of our free time painting again. Mostly I focus on their beautiful homeland, Huldu. Then I paint a piece featuring our Colorado home for a blank wall in the chateau’s living area, but my guys want to take it back to our home on Earth. I sense more than anything that they’re itching to return to our life there.

“Before we head back, I’d like to see more of the island,” I announce as I put away my paintbrushes.

“I know exactly where to take you.” Zeke grins, pulls me to my feet, and spins me around in his arms. “Our secret hideout.”

We get dressed for a walk, and the guys lead me south of the village square.

As we follow a faint old trail, I sense their need to talk.

“What’s going on?” I prompt.

“Nothing’s wrong,” Zeke says to ease my nerves. “It’s just so weird being here with all the changes.”

“Yeah, when we left the island, our parents started talking to each other. And now?” Conrad shakes his head in disbelief. “After they found out about our mate bond with you, they’ve actually become friends, not just begrudging allies.”

“From what my mother said,” Silas explains, “when they discovered that you and your fae friends rescued us, it made them reconsider hiding from the supernatural world.”

It’s so strange to think that a rejected null from the fae realm, who accidentally fell in love with three Mythics, could be the reason a peace treaty happens after centuries of strife.

We reach the edge of the bluff, and far below is a crescent moon-shaped bay with a white sandy beach. Zeke takes my hand into his, and he sweeps his other hand in front of us.

A beached three-masted ship, just like the miniature version in Zeke’s lair back home under his pool, wavers in and out of focus and then appears before my eyes. He’s allowed me to peer through a *lookaway* spell.

“Reflecting Bay!” I shout happily. “It’s your secret hideout.”

Laughing all the way, I run down a narrow path to the beach with the guys chasing after me. Once on the sandy beach, we sprint toward the ship.

When we reach it, we jump on a large jute net hanging over the vessel’s side and begin to climb, racing to see who gets to the deck first.

I beat the guys, but of course I suspect they let me win, as usual. For a moment, I kid myself with the thought that I actually beat three powerful monsters. Yeah, *right*.

The ship is in amazing condition, and they must have used their Mythic preservation magic to keep it that way.

Conrad climbs the ladder to the upper deck and retrieves a wooden sword.

“Ahoy, mateys!” He swings on a rope back down to us on the main deck.

With a thud, he lands in a classic superhero pose, crouched down with his one hand on the deck and his other arm raised, wielding his wooden sword.

Conrad stares up at me hungrily before springing forward and charging after me. “You’re *mine.*”

A cold shiver shoots down my spine as my core heats up, such an odd sensation. I squeal, and I’m about to run.

Silas jumps in between us, facing Conrad, with his own wooden sword in hand. “Stop! You’ll give my blossom a splinter.”

Aw, my heart melts with my *ever-the-protector* basilisk standing up to save me.

“Prepare to walk the plank.” He points the tip of his sword at Conrad’s face.

A playful sword fight ensues, and I use the distraction to make my escape.

But Zeke, now donning a captain’s pirate hat, chases after me as I scurry down the ladder to the lower decks.

In the dark cargo hold, I quickly duck behind some barrels.

“Lass! Come out, come out. You can’t hide forever, my beauty.” Zeke booms in a ragged pirate’s accent.

I hear a flurry of footsteps coming down the ladder. It’s Conrad and Silas realizing the party has moved below.

“We have you cornered now, you scallywag.” Conrad matches Zeke’s enthusiasm.

The guys search for me in the dark corners of the hold. I trigger a *lookaway* charm and quietly sneak past them.

As I reach the ladder, Silas looks in my direction and sniffs. “Argh, our *booty* is absconding with our hearts.”

Oh my frickin’ goddess, I silently squee. I love it when my normally reserved basilisk joins in on our fun and games.

I quickly climb the ladder and head for the captain’s quarters. Once inside, I slam the door, lock it, and try to barricade it with a chair under the door handle.

I yelp when I see a tentacle squeezing through the small crack at the bottom of the door. I slowly step backward as Zeke’s tentacle knocks the chair out of the way and unlatches the door.

The door swings open with a creak as I bump into the captain’s desk covered with loads of gold coins and jewels.

“Step away from my booty, lass!”

I pick up a jewel-encrusted tiara and place it atop my head. “I’ll be your *booty*.”

Zeke storms toward me with a ravenous gaze, unzipping his pants. He pins me against the desk with his large frame.

Oh my fucking goddess, my core goes nuclear and will probably melt all this gold.

“We need to punish this naughty stowaway,” Silas says with a sexy smirk. “On your knees.”

Not that I’d consider it any sort of punishment to do that for my mates. In fact, my pussy slicks with the thought of taking them in my mouth.

“This landlubber needs to get *wet*.” Conrad waggles his brows and pulls his cock from his pants.

The other guys do the same, and each gives themselves a long stroke down their lengths, all while eyeing me with a hungry gaze.

When I drop to my knees, Captain Zeke moves to place his huge cock at my lips. “Open that pretty mouth.”

And I do, eagerly.

As Zeke fists my hair in a possessive hold, he feeds his long cock into my mouth. I reach up and take Silas’ double dicks in my right hand and stroke, then take Conrad’s in my left.

Zeke hits the back of my throat, and I fight back any gag reflex.

I’m servicing all my three guys at once. My favorite romance author, Juniper Jade, would say I’m *mate-multitasking*.

I’d chuckle, but then I’d likely choke.

Conrad and Silas are moaning and thrusting into my grip.

Zeke takes on some multitasking of his own and uses his tentacles to slink up the hem of my dress. He tears it in half, revealing my bra and panties, and flings the damaged dress aside.

Conrad’s claws shoot out, and he slices through my lace undergarments, leaving me miraculously unharmed. Damn, it’s hot when he does that.

They fall off me in shreds.

Welp, guess I’m walking home naked. Doesn’t matter, being with them is worth it.

Zeke slips one of his tentacles down to my clit, stimulating me until I’m sucking hard on his hectocotylus in response. He bucks into my mouth and sinks a thick appendage into my pussy.

I cry out around his cock at the welcomed intrusion.

With Zeke’s aphrodisiac-laced precum sliding down my throat, his one tentacle slipping through my folds, and another tentacle firmly locked onto my clit, sucking the life out of me, I’m about to unravel.

I release my hold on Conrad and Silas, and push on Zeke’s hips for him to remove his delicious cock from my mouth.

When he complies, I beg, “Please, I can’t wait. I need you inside of me. All of you.”

In one swift motion, Zeke picks me up in his strong arms, and while carrying me to the captain’s bed, he slides his thick length deep into me.

I moan in delight as my pussy stretches to take his girth as my arms fall limp in abandon at my sides.

He lies back on the bed with me on top of him, he’s still seated deep inside me.

Conrad takes my *six*, and hopefully only uses his *six* at my back door.

Silas’ positions himself with his throbbing cocks at my mouth, ready for me to suck him down. I lick each head.

“My beautiful blossom,” he groans, “I wish I could stuff your pretty pussy with both cocks right now.”

“I’ll switch with you.” Zeke gives me a wicked grin. “I want to see just how far she can take my hectocotylus down her throat.”

“Why didn’t you earlier?” I ask, genuinely curious why he hasn’t tried this before.

“Didn’t want to surprise you.”

I giggle as they switch positions, easily moving me around as if I weigh nothing. The sounds I make quickly turn to moans as I sink down on Silas’ doubled duty dicks.

Conrad collects some of Zeke’s special lube from my pussy and my own slick to ready my ass for the taking. I groan and squirm as his thick fingers work inside me.

Silas slowly works himself inside of me holding my hips still as he does.

Then I feel the girthy head of Conrad’s cock replace his fingers, and I suck in a breath.

As he presses into my ass, Zeke fills my mouth. The sensations are overwhelming. All I can do is feel the impending tsunami of bliss.

I could drown in this pleasure, and I die a happy woman.

Zeke’s hectocotylus elongates, and he pumps deep down my throat, allowing me just enough airflow so that I don’t pass out. “That’s my naughty mate, taking her kraken,” he praises, and my body reacts.

I clench down, and both Conrad and Silas grunt and buck into me.

“She does love the dirty talk,” Conrad groans as I clench again.

They begin to work in a group effort, touching and stroking every erogenous zone they’ve discovered on my body.

I grip Silas’ shoulders in a desperate attempt to hold on to my sanity, but they are making me lose my damned mind.

My basilisk takes a nipple into his mouth, taunting it with his fangs, injecting me with more intoxicating mating-venom. Then ever so skillfully, he tantalizes my peak with small circles with his forked tongue. His hands deftly stimulate my other hardened nipple, pinching and pulling just the way I like.

These guys might have been virgins when I met them, but damn if they aren’t quick studies.

The sensation of Silas’ two in my pussy and Conrad in my back door, rubbing against each other through my thin wall is a whole other level of hot. I can’t believe we don’t do group stuff more often. At least we’ll have centuries to play and explore.

“Our mate likes all her holes stuffed full,” Conrad breathes out through clenched teeth.

“Soon, she’s going to be full of our cum,” Zeke growls in a deep rumble that vibrates through my body.

I tremble as they stoke me higher and higher toward my peak.

Silas lets out a low clicking purr. He bucks up and pumps even faster, seemingly even more aroused by the thought of them bringing me to a state of ecstasy.

Through the bond, they can feel just how close I am to an earth-shattering release.

“Come for us,” Silas orders, and it’s the last nudge I need to completely come undone.

A wave of euphoria crashes over me. Somehow, I shout out their names simultaneously, my entire body spasming with my orgasm.

Hearing their names, my guys *implode* into me as the gravity of our love for each other, our unbreakable bond, pulls us even closer together.

My pleasure triggers Zeke to shoot down my throat with an inhuman bellow. He falls away onto the bed with a dazed look on his handsome face.

Silas hisses and pumps into me, painting my insides with his release.

Conrad curses and his barbs catch, triggering another wave of my bliss with his philter potion. He comes with a roar, his seed spilling deep inside me. Then he collapses against my back and plants sweet kisses along my spine.

Zeke leans over and places a luscious kiss on my lips. “I love you, my Darling.”

“We all do,” Conrad adds, squeezing me tightly between him and Silas.

With his gorgeous basilisk green eyes glowing, Silas tilts my chin to face him so he can brush his soft lips against mine. “Such a beautiful mate. I can’t believe you’re really ours.”

I gather my wits enough to respond. “And I can’t believe you three are real. You’re a dream come true.”

Fortunately, my nurturer Silas has towels and a replacement dress for me in his pack. After we do a quick clean-up, I slip my new dress on, and we take the long way back through the village.

We wave or chat up some of their cousins and friends during our walk, and my heart fills with joy. My guys now have their families and their childhood home open to them again.

I don’t see that ever happening with my family, and I’d never risk my mates in a futile attempt to try. I’m perfectly happy with that because between my caring Auntie, my kick-ass friends, and my wonderful mates, I have all the family I’ll ever need.

When we get back to the chateau, we clean up properly in a hot bath.

As the sun sets, we fall into a cuddle pile in front of the fireplace and admire my painting of our home in Colorado.

Only one thing could make this moment better.

“Let’s go home,” I say with a sigh filled with longing.

“Yes.” Silas gives me a peck on the lips. “Home is where our house is.”

I shake my head with a giggle and kiss him back.

He isn’t necessarily wrong, and he’s all kinds of right.

They all are.

Thank you so much for reading!

Check out some of my other books and series below:

Need to know more about Darlene's old school friend Quade Hollis, he's part of the series Shadowcraft Academy.

Remember Darlene's favorite monster author? Well, she has a series too! Check out Bewitching Monsters!

Need more of Darlene's badass supe friends? You can read Clover's adventures in the next book in our Perfectly Mated standalone series, **Perfectly Average Shifters.**

We also have a bonus short story! Auntie comes to visit! https://dl.bookfunnel.com/1nq3lxttu4

THE END

OceanofPDF.com

THANK YOU FOR READING!

Darlene's favorite monster romance author has her own series!
Bewitching Monsters (Completed Series)
A fun, caring, curvy, grown-ass woman romance author discovers the paranormal world is real and all her sexy "monstrous" mates.
http://www.books2read.com/bewitchingmonsters1

Quade Hollis is part of the harem in…
Shadowcraft Academy (Completed Series)
I didn't want magic. I was supposed to escape.
I'm forced to attend a magic academy with five males who won't leave me alone—my fated mate dragon, a dangerous vampire, a protective druid, a seductive incubus, and a hot professor wolf shifter.
https://books2read.com/ShadowcraftAcademy1

Discover the origins of the Shadowcraft Universe…
Fae Hearted (Completed Series)
A human servant with a secret.
A tempting deal with an Elven prince.
Three elves willing to break all the rules for her…

https://books2read.com/faehearted1

Need bonus content? News on new releases?
Visit ValeRomances.com

OceanofPDF.com

ALSO BY YVE VALE

SHADOWCRAFT ACADEMY (completed series)

(Dark Paranormal Academy Trilogy + Bonus Novella)

Hexed ~ Jinxed ~ Cursed ~ Blessed

BEWITCHING MONSTERS (completed series)

(Grown-Ass Woman Monsters Trilogy + Bonus Novella)

Bewitching Her Monsters - Charming Her Monsters

Enchanting Her Monsters ~ Possessing Her Monsters

SHADOW MYTHS STANDALONE SERIES

(PNR Monster/Alien)

Chained Fates ~ **Rebel Fates**

FAE HEARTED (completed series)

(Romantasy/ Shadowcraft Universe Origins Prequel)

Between Realms ~ Tangled Secrets

Chaos Tempted ~ Bonds Eternal

GODS ARE HIRING:

My Karmic Destiny

A Why Choose/RH continuation of

My Instant Karma by Raven Vale

OceanofPDF.com

ALSO WRITING AS

WRITING AS RAVEN VALE

GODS ARE HIRING:

M/F PNR Standalones

My Instant Karma

Cupid's Last Arrow

WRITING AS JADE VALE

CAGE BROTHERS:

M/F Dark Billionaire Contemporary Interconnected Standalones

Nick's Gift

Cole's Resolution

Bryce's Valentine

For more book details, visit:

ValeRomances.com

OceanofPDF.com

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

From Yve:

A special thank you goes out to my wonderful fans for supporting me. I love reading your heartwarming reviews or when you reach out to talk about my books. They are gifts to my heart and soul.

Thanks to all my author and reader friends, my PA, and reader teams for their support and friendship.

A special thanks to Ella and Laura for your thoughtful feedback and uplifting encouragement for this book.

And my deepest gratitude goes out to all of you who have encouraged me in my life.

OceanofPDF.com

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Yve Vale loves spicy romance, fated mates, and redeemable supernatural guys who end up as cinnamon rolls for their woman.

She writes about strong females and their magical males, all set in paranormal worlds.

valeromances.com

OceanofPDF.com

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Aren Vale writes spicy reverse harem paranormal romance with fun, fierce FMCs and their supernatural guys, who are often cinnamon rolls only for her.

https://valeromances.com

OceanofPDF.com