



Stranded

WITH THE

KRAKEN



ZOE ASHWOOD

STRANDED WITH THE KRAKEN

A MONSTROUS HOLIDAY TALE

CLEARWATER MONSTERS #1



ZOE ASHWOOD

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*For my wicked readers,
who told me I should write
a tentacle story.
This one is for you!*

HI, DEAR READER!

Thank you so much for downloading *Stranded with the Kraken*.

If you need to check **content warnings** for this book, they're available [on my website!](#)

I had so much fun writing this one - it started as a Shortie (a monthly short story) in my Patreon subscription, where my readers voted that I should write a tentacle story. And I did - only it ended up as a long novella instead of a five thousand word story.

I hope you enjoy it!

Happy reading!

xo, Zoe

CHAPTER 1



ARIELLE

I park my Toyota by the side of the road, near a heap of snow that a plow must have pushed to the side, wondering if I've arrived at the right place. I double-check the maps app, then the last message I got from Jasper, the hot monster guy I'm meeting tonight.

Yep, looks like I'm right where I'm supposed to be. I take a deep breath, then type a message for Jasper in the Bone-R app's chat.

Hey, I'm in front of your house.

Now that I've shut off my car, snowflakes accumulate on the windshield, creating a dusting of white I can't see through. The radio I'd been listening to has been blaring out weather warnings, urging people to get off the roads. It's two days until Christmas, and I debated postponing this rendezvous because of the severe weather warning, but what else am I going to do tonight if not hook up with Jasper? If everything goes to shit and we get snowed in, my home is only about three miles away. I can hike that far if I have to, then pick up my car another day.

It only takes him a moment to reply, so I don't have time to second-guess my decision to be here.

The code for the gate is 122187. Come around the house to the backyard.

Okay, that's a little strange. It's not like Bone-R is an app to share picnic invitations. And it's freaking freezing, with the wind whipping around the car, carrying flurries of snow. I came here with a very specific reason—to hook up with the monster hottie—and he invited me here because he really wants to, er, bone a human.

I sit there for a minute, seriously debating leaving. But I didn't go through the rigorous onboarding process to back out now. I've been chatting with Jasper for days since we first got

matched on the app, and I don't want to throw away an opportunity of a real connection, even if it's purely physical.

Still, I text my best friend, Morgan, to let her know where I am. She knows all about Jasper, but I haven't shared his address with her yet. The message remains on unread, which isn't unusual for her at all. Knowing her, she's elbows-deep in her current research project and won't see my text until much later. Still, I like the thought of *someone* knowing where I'm going tonight.

I push open the door, make sure I have pepper spray ready at the top of my purse, and lock my car. I punch in the code at the gate, and the eight-foot-tall sheet of metal slides to the side. This place is a fortress. A shiver of apprehension goes through me, and I feel as if I've strayed far, far away from my small hometown of Clearwater, Maine. I'm entering an entirely new world here, even if I'm actually only at the edge of town.

My slow steps crunch in the thin layer of snow. The gravel pathway leading up to a beautifully restored farmhouse has been shoveled recently, but that won't do much good with the amount of snow coming down. We're no strangers to snowstorms here, but this massive storm system has had weathermen in a frenzy for days.

I stare at the house in awe, because if I had the money to buy and renovate a property, this is what my dream home would look like. Inviting yellow light spills from the tall windows onto the snow, and what I can see of the inside of the house seems tastefully designed and classy. It's nothing like my rental apartment above the general store in town, which looks shabby and worn, no matter how many times I deep clean it using tricks I learned online.

I shake off the melancholy and move toward the side of the house, anticipation rising inside me. At least I didn't arrive to some weird den-type of a monster lair. I'd heard horror stories about women being matched with gargoyles who roost in abandoned stone towers, so arriving at a luxury country home is a good sign. As I near the backyard, strains of music reach me, a low rock ballad that I recognize but can't place exactly.

But it's another thing to set me at ease, because Jasper said he wasn't fussy about music, and our shared love of rock concerts was one thing we'd bonded over.

Not that I need bonding to have a one-night stand. I remind myself that this is supposed to be a one-and-done kind of situation. We'll fuck, and then I'll never see him again.

I round the corner of the house, and a wide lawn opens up, with trees lining the edges, creating pockets of darkness. But what catches my attention is a large pool, lit from within, gleaming blue. It's encased in a massive greenhouse-like structure, which wasn't visible from the road. Inside it, strings of fairy lights cast a soft glow over the scene, and Jasper even set up a couple of candles by the water.

I stare at it, unsure of what to do now that I'm here. I glance at the porch, but other than a set of footsteps leading from the patio door down to the covered pool, I don't see anything out of place.

"Arielle, hi," a deep voice says.

I swivel to the right and find the man sitting in a deck chair by the pool, a glass of white wine by his side. The door to the pool is open, signaling he's been waiting for me. He puts away his phone, screen side down, and stands to greet me.

My first sensation at seeing Jasper in the flesh is intense relief. He's even more handsome in person than in the photos he shared with me. Then I flush with the realization that this man is supermodel-hot, his clothes clearly designer, his medium-length hair styled perfectly, and I came here in black jeans and a cute band t-shirt. I picked my combat boots and black puffer jacket because I thought I was meeting a fellow Iron Maiden fan, not a freaking millionaire.

Which Jasper clearly is. Everything about this place screams money, and suddenly I realize just how skewed my vision of tonight has been. I thought I'd have the upper hand, in a way, being human, because monsters have to remain hidden in our society. Now I know nothing could be further from the truth—Jasper is so high above me, class-wise, I have

no idea why he thought matching with me on the app was a good idea.

“Hi,” I squeak, far too late.

My voice is an octave too high, signaling to him that I’m freaking out. And I haven’t even found out what kind of a monster he is. But something pulls me forward, and I take a couple of steps, my boots scuffing on the flagstones leading down to the pool.

“I’m happy you’re here,” he says, walking toward me slowly. He’s barefoot, which seems strange considering it’s wintertime. “Did you have any trouble finding the house?”

I shake my head, still too nervous to speak.

Jasper stops several feet away from me and sniffs the air. His nostrils flare, then he grimaces and retreats a step.

What the hell?

“I’m sorry,” he says. “This won’t work.”

That has me straightening my spine. “Why?”

I look down at myself. Yes, my clothes are much more casual than his, but he saw my photos—this is my go-to everyday uniform, so it’s not like I’d misled him. I lift one shoulder slightly to sniff at myself and don’t get anything but bodywash and my light perfume. I showered after work, not more than an hour ago, so I have no idea why that would be an issue.

“You’re afraid of me,” Jasper says, his voice low. “That’s not exactly a turn-on.”

“I’m not afraid,” I reply on instinct. My breath fogs in front of me, a physical manifestation of my lie.

He raises one eyebrow. “No? I can smell it on you.”

Oh.

“Well, that’s embarrassing,” I mutter. Then I straighten my shoulders. “I-I’m not *afraid* of you. Like, I won’t scream and start running, if that’s what you mean.”

Jasper sniffs the air again and doesn't move. "No?"

I shrug. "I'm just..." I motion at the pool, the house, and finally at him. "I'm intimidated."

He cocks his head to the side. "You are? But why?"

I take a tiny step forward before I can stop myself. "You're kidding, right? Everything about this is above my level. I feel like I've walked into a photo shoot for some lifestyle magazine."

"Ah." Jasper palms the back of his neck. His cheeks flush, the change barely visible in the low lighting. "Is it the fairy lights? I thought they'd make the place more cozy, but if it's too much, I can switch them off."

And just like that, some of my apprehension evaporates. He tried to make sure I was cozy?

"No, they're lovely," I say softly. "I don't mind. And that's really thoughtful of you."

He gives me a small smile, and it lights up his face, rendering him instantly more approachable. "So, if you're not about to bolt, would you like a drink?"

Jasper leads me into the pool house. The air inside is warm, like in a tropical greenhouse, and when I stomp snow from my boots, he informs me the floor tiles are heated, which explains his shoeless situation. Feeling a little weird, I unlace my boots and leave them at the entrance along with my socks while Jasper closes the door, shutting us into the cocoon of coziness surrounding the pool. I ask for a glass of wine, and he invites me to sit on the deck chair next to his. I face him, and he turns to me, so our knees are just inches apart, even though we're not sitting together.

"Have you done this before?" he asks. "The Bone-R app, I mean."

"Nope." I shrug off my puffer jacket that's much too warm for this space. "I'm a Bone-R virgin."

I pick up my wineglass and toast him with it, but he doesn't respond. Instead, he stares at me, his lips parted

slightly.

“Are you okay?” I ask after a moment.

“Y-you’re not a virgin, though, right?” he asks, his voice somewhat strangled.

I laugh. “No, don’t worry. That ship has sailed.”

He drags a hand over his face and lets out a long exhale. “Thank the gods.”

“Why?” I lean forward, leaning my elbows on my knees. “Would that be an issue?”

He grimaces. “What I am is usually an issue even for experienced human women. I wouldn’t want to be your first, I don’t think, and especially not in a situation like this.”

I stare at him, curiosity rising. We’ve come to the question that’s been on my mind for days. “So...what are you?”

Jasper’s throat bobs, and he sits back, setting his wineglass down. “You haven’t guessed?”

“No?” I think through our conversations. “Should I have?”

A corner of his lips twitches. “I dropped hints for you, hoping we could avoid this conversation.”

“Then why didn’t you tell me?” I ask, confused.

“You didn’t ask,” he retorts. “I thought you either knew already or didn’t *want* to know.”

I set down my glass, too, thinking I need my head straight for this one. “My friend told me it was rude to ask. So I figured you’d tell me eventually.” I point at him, then at myself. “I mean, we can hardly do this if you don’t tell me, no?”

Jasper purses his lips. “I could fuck you in this form, if that’s what you mean.”

So he has more than one form? He must be a shifter of some kind. But apart from the gargoyles who can’t hide away their wings unless they’re wearing glamours, and witches, who only have one human form, he could really be anything. I

squint at him. He's not giving me wolf vibes, so I doubt that's it, and he seems to live alone out here, which means he's unlikely to be a bear shifter or any creature who likes pack life. I mentally scroll through the creatures I know exist and settle on the possibility that he's a dragon shifter.

The tall fence around his property and the sense that's he's a loner fit that theory, but why would he hint that he could also fuck me in his other form? Dragons are massive, and if he shifted, he'd freaking rip me apart with his monster dick. I'm pretty sure I ticked HELL NO in the app on any penises larger than twelve inches, thanks.

"Okay." I put my hands up. "You need to tell me what you are. Then we can both make informed decisions."

Jasper sighs. "It'll be easier if I show you."

He stands and walks around the deck chair. His expression falls, though, and I feel a twinge of worry that this is so uncomfortable for him. Without thinking, I snag his hand as he tries to walk past me.

"Hey," I say. "Wait a moment."

He stares down at me, wordless, so I hold on to his hand until he relents and sits next to me. This close to him, I smell his ocean-fresh scent, and it soothes something inside me. I lean in and sniff again, then realize what I'm doing and back away slightly, cheeks heating.

"Sorry," I say. "But, uh, we don't have to do this if you don't want to. I mean, I know we agreed on a hookup, but like you said, if you'd like, you can stay in this form, and we'll see where things lead us." I squeeze his hand, which I still haven't let go. "Unless you want to tell me why this is so hard for you?"

His lips twitch to the side, and he gives me a wry smile. "All right. Imagine you meet a pretty girl." He reaches out and wraps a strand of my dark hair around his fingers, then tugs lightly. "But the moment she sees your true shape, she turns tail and disappears as fast as she can."

I wince. “Someone did that? Is that why you reacted so strongly when you scented me?”

He dips his chin in a nod. “Yeah. Imagine that happened *every* time you met someone you liked. I don’t want to traumatize another beautiful woman.”

“Right.” I take another deep inhale of his clean, intoxicating scent. “So...do you want to keep it a secret?” I glance down at our interlaced fingers. “Do you want to fuck me as a human?”

He closes his eyes and lets out a shuddering breath. “If it means you won’t run away...”

Fuck, this guy has some issues. I don’t know what the deal was with the other women he’s met, or how hideous his true form is. I could accept his offer for a human-shaped quickie. He’s gorgeous, and I’m fairly sure he called me beautiful just now. So we’d likely get each other off, then go our separate ways. But I don’t think I can do that to him either. It would be another rejection—even if it doesn’t look that way on the surface. And if I leave now, I’ll spend the rest of my life wondering about what could have been.

And maybe we both need this. Maybe we need each other, even if it’s only for a night. After all, everyone else is preparing for a white Christmas with their families, and we’re on a Bone-R date. I don’t know if Jasper had any other goals besides having a fuck buddy, but I agreed to meet tonight in part because I wanted to forget about the fact that I don’t have anyone to spend the holidays with.

Oof. I haven’t admitted that to myself until now, not in so many words.

“Listen,” I say. “I can’t promise you for sure I’ll want to have sex with you after you show me your true form. I’ve never done this, and even though I filled out that questionnaire, I don’t *really* know what my hard limits are. Okay?”

He frowns but says, “I understand.”

“But,” I continue before he can say anything more, “I *can* promise that I won’t run away. Or scream.”

I bite my lip to stop myself from babbling out something more, because it’s on him to decide now.

Jasper remains silent for a long minute, his gaze roaming from my eyes to my lips, down to where my band t-shirt has slipped off my shoulder, and back to my face. His fingers tighten on mine, and he dips his head, giving me plenty of time to move away. Then he closes his lips over mine, the kiss tentative and soft at first. I lift my chin and angle my head to the side, giving us room to explore, and when I part my lips for him, he deepens the kiss, taking over.

He brings his hand up to cup the back of my neck, his thumb caressing my jaw, and it’s the best kiss I’ve ever had, slow and thorough, as if he’s mapping me, learning how to seduce all my senses. The taste of him is exquisite, the sweet bite of the white wine mixing with something more potent. If I didn’t know better, I’d say he tastes a little salty, but the effect is amazing, sort of like the creamiest peanut butter.

I want to stay right here and suck on his tongue until the end of time, but Jasper tears himself off me, breathing hard.

“Fuck,” he says. “This might be more complicated than I thought.”

CHAPTER 2



JASPER

The most gorgeous woman sitting on the deck chair next to me is sending me into a rut. My cock, already hard and straining against the zipper of my slacks, throbs with urgency. I grip the cushioned seat with both hands and force myself to take a deep breath in an effort to calm myself.

The plan backfires spectacularly, because I get another lungful of Arielle's delicious scent. She smells like caramel and tastes just as sweet, and every instinct in my body is telling me to drag her down to the pool, get inside her, and fill her wet pussy with my seed.

"What is it?" she asks.

Her brown eyes are wide, her lips swollen from my kisses, and I can't resist going in for another taste. She moans into my mouth and digs her fingers into my hair. She's not one to sit passively and wait for me but demands more, until I capitulate, grab her hips, and lift her into my lap. Arielle makes a surprised sound, then melts against me, her arms looping around my neck as she presses herself closer.

Rut isn't even the right word, but some of my friends, a wolf shifter pack, use it to describe the frenzy that takes over when nature reminds us that we've found our perfect partner. Maybe *heat* would be a better one, because I'm burning up, my body radiating warmth. It's all to prepare myself for spending a long time in the water while mating—because my ancestors did it in the ocean, not a hot, covered pool.

"Wait," I gasp between kisses. "Arielle, wait."

She seems almost dazed. She pushes herself away from me enough to meet my gaze. "Okay," she pants. "Yeah. Sorry. But you kissed me—I didn't—I mean..."

She drags her hand through her hair and seems to collect herself. Her eyebrows draw together when she glances down and realizes she's now sitting in my lap.

I tighten my grip on her luscious hips before she can decide that she wants to move away from me. I don't think my monster self would react very well to any sort of distance between us now that I have her in my arms.

"You were going to show me," she murmurs. "You said you'd tell me what you are."

There's too much at stake, I know that. If she decides she doesn't want me, I don't know how I'll ever bring myself to try another date. I've never been kissed like this in my life, and my body has never responded so strongly.

"Yeah." I put my forehead against hers for a moment. "All right."

As I set her back on the deck chair cushion next to me and stand, my instinct howls at me to keep holding on to her. But that's my primal side talking, because how am I supposed to undress myself while still clutching her?

So I turn my back on her and walk toward the edge of the pool. I drag my cashmere sweater over my head, unbutton the cuffs and collar of my shirt, and tug it off with one swift move. I unzip my slacks, let them slip off my legs, and kick them aside.

A delighted gasp from behind me has me turning around to Arielle. She's staring at me, her lips slightly parted, the buttons on her jeans undone. I cock an eyebrow at her, and she looks down at her hands, then jerks them away from the waistband, as if she didn't realize what she was doing.

The gesture gives me hope. Maybe I'm not the only one who's losing control.

But she rallies quickly. Her smile turns wicked, and she says, "Well?"

I've never been self-conscious about my human body. I know enough about humans to know that I got lucky in the gene lottery, and getting naked in this form has never been an issue. So I hook my thumbs in the waistband of my boxer briefs and push them down, then straighten, letting Arielle look her fill.

Her throat bobs as she swallows. “Listen,” she murmurs, “if you’re any larger in your monster form, we might have a problem.”

I grin, then glance down at my hard cock and give it a lazy stroke. “Don’t worry about that.” A growing bubble of hope threatens to burst inside my chest, so I know I must act fast before I get completely lost in the way she’s staring at me.

“Ready?” I ask.

Arielle gives me a quick, decisive nod.

I take a deep breath—and step back, letting myself fall into the pool.

CHAPTER 3



ARIELLE

Jasper falls in a slow arc, and I let out a shriek. He drops into the pool, sinking under the surface with a surprisingly small splash—he’s like an Olympic diver, sleek and nimble. I jump to my feet and hurry to the edge of the pool to watch him. He dives, twisting underwater. The pool must be much deeper than I first thought, at least ten feet on this side.

He breaks the surface and slicks his hair back. It’s darkened by the water, but the glow from the pool reflects strangely on it—because it seems bluish now, no longer dark blond. His skin has changed somewhat, turning from a warm golden color I admired earlier to a cooler tone, and its texture seems to be shifting, too. Water droplets run off his shoulders in rivulets—it’s a small difference, but my mind keeps trying to reconcile what it knows with what I’m seeing, and I know something’s not entirely right.

He blinks at me, and my stomach swoops—because his eyes, which were a gorgeous hazel before, now glow golden, the irises vertical like a cat’s. Then I finally process the most marked difference of all, which took me a while to notice because I thought I was merely being tricked by how water fractures images.

Jasper’s legs have disappeared. Instead, a mass of thick, bluish-purple tentacles roil in the pool beneath him. Mouth open, I stare at him, trying to figure out what I’m seeing. His powerful upper body, still muscled like before, tapers into a narrow waist, and where his hips should be, tentacles flare out. They’re wiggling underwater, apparently keeping him afloat without issue, because he’s not even moving his arms.

I force myself to tear my gaze away from those long limbs and focus on his hands—they’re not entirely human-shaped anymore either. His fingers are now webbed, delicate skin stretching between each digit.

“What—?” I choke out finally.

Jasper swims a little farther away from me. “A kraken.”

A kraken.

I sit down hard on the tile, shock pounding through me.

“You’re not screaming,” he says.

His expression is neutral, but a small swoop in his voice betrays a hint of hope. I don’t have it in me to tell him that I’m simply too surprised to utter any sound at all. I think over the questionnaire I’d had to fill out before being admitted to the Bone-R app. Did I tick the tentacle box as a maybe?

I drag my hands over my face, no doubt smearing my mascara. I wish I hadn’t left my wineglass behind, because I could use a sip or two, but I don’t think I can get my legs to work. Besides, I promised Jasper I wouldn’t run away.

Now that the initial surprise has worn off, I let myself check him over with a more critical eye. The golden eyes are intense, yes, but beautiful, and the way he keeps staring at me reminds me how hot our kiss was just minutes ago. I track my gaze over his features, noting the small differences—the chiseled cheekbones, the hint of sharp canines peeking past his full bluish lips. I don’t think he has scales, but something about the sight of his skin makes me want to run my palms over his shoulders to learn the texture.

I scoot closer to the edge of the pool and peer over the lip. “So...tentacles? How does that work?”

“I would show you if you’d let me,” he says softly. “I could make you feel very, very good.”

I swallow some instinctual panic at the thought of being in the vicinity of a mythological creature. “Have *you* done this before?”

“Once,” he says. “I had a girlfriend in college. It didn’t work out in the end, but she never complained about, ah...” He motions at himself. “She was a witch, so she grew up with the knowledge of what I am.”

I stare into the water, trying to see what happened to his cock. He sees me looking and grins, which in turn makes my

insides heat, because apparently I'm still attracted to this gorgeous man despite his bottom half resembling an octopus.

"My cock will remain hidden," he tells me, "until we're both ready to mate."

So there's still a cock...

"And kraken are...genetically compatible with humans?" I venture.

He nods. "Hence the need for you to be on birth control. You can imagine that condoms would be less than effective underwater."

"Oh." That never even occurred to me. That was one of his requirements for our meeting—that I get tested along with him and provide proof that I'm on the pill. "So...I'd have to join you? In the pool?"

Jasper swims closer, as if he scents my reticence waning. "Yes. You don't have to worry. It's completely safe."

Safe. I swallow a slightly hysterical laugh. I could still leave. It would hurt Jasper, but I know I have every right to change my mind and hoof it. But the longer I stare at him, the less I want to do that. What seemed so incredible at first is now settling in my mind. If he was a gargoyle, I'd have to contend with his wings and a massive, knotted cock that turns to literal stone. If he was a wolf shifter, he'd fuck me in his half form, with fangs and claws and all. So I guess tentacles aren't *that* out there despite being completely inhuman.

I let out a long breath. "Talk me through it."

He grips the lip of the pool with both hands and pulls himself closer. "Talk you through it?"

I nod. "Yeah. How...how would we...?"

"Ah." His golden gaze goes sultry, his eyelids growing heavier. "You want to know how I'd fuck you? First, you'd sense the water itself. It's the perfect temperature, and it would feel strange on your naked skin, because you've never felt saltwater this warm or thick before."

Unable to stop myself, I scoot closer to the edge and plunge my palm into the water. He's right—somehow, the water feels almost slippery between my fingers, as if it's more concentrated than in the ocean.

"I asked a water witch from town for a clever little enchantment," Jasper murmurs. "And she gave me exactly what I wanted."

I glance at him sharply, weirdly jealous at the thought of another woman giving him anything.

Jasper lets out a laugh. "She's happily mated to three monsters. You have nothing to worry about."

"Sorry," I mutter, surprised that he can read me so easily. "I don't know what I was thinking."

"You don't want anyone touching what's yours," he says.

Now that I've come all the way to the pool, we're so very close. He stares hungrily at my mouth. My heart pounds, and a part of me is screaming at me to be cautious, but I can't stop myself from leaning forward until we're nose to nose. Then Jasper closes the distance between us and presses his lips to mine.

The kiss is as good as before—only this time, I sense the heat radiating from his skin and the hunger between every swipe of his tongue. The sharp bite of his canines on my lower lip leaves me gasping, but he doesn't let me think about it too much, because he soothes the sting with his tongue and kisses me again, winding my need tighter.

We break apart, and I let out a startled laugh. "Why does this feel so good?"

He brings his hand up and tugs at a lock of my hair again. "You feel it, too?"

I do. The attraction is there, and the urge to flee has gone. I signed up to Bone-R for a reason—I wanted *this*, an experience that would take me out of the ordinary. And maybe it's unfair that I'm using the app as a way to seek a thrill, but then Jasper must have requested to match with me for a similar reason. He wants a human just as much as I want a monster.

I give him a quick nod. “I’m probably crazy. But I don’t want to run, and if you can go slow with me, I’m ready to try.”

His exhale is rough against my lips. He pulls me closer and touches his forehead to mine. “I can go slow. But I need you to get in the pool, Arielle. Right now.”

CHAPTER 4



JASPER

The woman of my dreams pauses for a moment following my invitation. Or maybe it was less of a polite invite than an order, I realize as I replay the words back in my mind. But she doesn't seem to care. Her pupils are dilated, nearly hiding the gorgeous brown of her eyes, and her pulse flutters at the base of her throat. I zero in on it, my predator's senses on high alert.

She's delicious. The taste of her lingers on my tongue. Her scent invades my senses, driving my body into a heat. I've never experienced this before. The witch I mentioned to Arielle was my girlfriend, yes, but she never produced this reaction in me. We were younger, so maybe that's the difference, but somehow I think Arielle is the key.

She's everything I want.

Suddenly the stakes of this random Bone-R encounter are much higher than I imagined. I'd swiped right on her profile because she was pretty, then cheered silently when she accepted. Through the texts we exchanged, I sensed her fun personality, which had given me hope. But meeting her in person turned my life upside down, and now everything hinges on whether she's brave enough to take this next step with me.

I *know* I can make this night amazing for her. But it's not just one night that I want from her. I don't want to come on too strong, so I sink my sharp teeth into my tongue and wait for her decision.

Slowly, Arielle stands. Her toenails are painted a vivid blue that matches the pool I'm in, so I take it as another fortunate sign. Then she hooks her thumbs in the waistband of her jeans. She meets my gaze and pushes them down, wiggling her round hips. The movement reveals her black lace panties, which I know she put on for me.

"You're so fucking gorgeous." I run a palm over my face, groaning. "And you're not even naked yet. Fuck."

Her laughter is husky but real, and her cheeks turn a pretty shade of pink. The scent of her arousal is the sweetest thing I've ever smelled, and it loosens something in me. She *wants* me, tentacles and all. Some of the tension in my shoulders eases, and I let my limbs stir up the water, stretching and preparing to show her how good we can be together.

“You never told me what would happen when I got in the water,” she reminds me as she reaches for the hem of her band t-shirt.

She crosses her arms and draws the soft-looking thing over her head, and my mouth goes dry, which is a feat because I'm a water creature in my element. But the way her black bra cups her full breasts has my cock easing out of its protective pocket. She's not even in the water with me yet, and I'm ready to sink inside her wet pussy and fill her with my seed.

My insistence on her birth control bothers me now. All my instincts are signaling to me that *this* is my perfect partner, the mate who must bear my children.

Maybe I can keep her.

I could have her stay, ask her to stop taking those pills, then fuck her full of my cum until she grows round with my baby.

My cock nudges out of its pocket another inch, the head now fully revealed. I grit my teeth and force myself to breathe through the insane wave of lust and need. If I tell her what I'm thinking, she'll run for sure. And I can't let that happen. I can't blow this chance, so I'll have to go slow and make sure she's comfortable.

“Jasper?” she prompts, hand at her hip.

I shake myself. “Sorry. I, uh, blanked out a little.”

She grins, the dimples in her cheeks popping. “I'll take that as a compliment.”

“You should.” I nod enthusiastically, swimming closer to her. “You should take *everything* I do tonight as a compliment, please.”

She sits on the edge of the pool, cross-legged, still in her underwear. “So...do I just jump in?”

I pause where I am. She’s not comfortable enough to be completely naked with me yet, and that’s all right. So my idea to catch her with my tentacles as she jumps in is probably too optimistic. I float back to give her space.

“Join me,” I say, “and we’ll figure out what you like.”

She rakes back her thick hair with her fingers and takes a deep breath. Then she reaches behind her and unclips her bra, tossing it on top of her clothes. She gives me a coy look from under her lashes. “I don’t want to ruin it. I don’t think lace and saltwater go together.”

I unstick my tongue from the roof of my mouth and choke out, “No, that’s a good call. Maybe, uh, maybe you should take off your panties, too. Wouldn’t want to risk it.”

Her chest rises on a quick breath, and I can’t help it—my gaze strays to her nipples, dusky pink and peaked. She doesn’t cover up, which tells me she’s enjoying this as much as I am. She shimmies out of her black panties but closes her legs, dipping her feet in the water. Blood pumps faster through my veins, and I’m surprised the water around me doesn’t boil, because I’m burning up, my body readying for what’s to come.

For what I *hope* will happen.

I look back at Arielle’s face and catch her ogling me. Her gaze slips from my mouth to my shoulders and down my abdomen before she flicks it back up and flushes. I grin at her, more than happy to let her stare if that will tip the scales for her. I’m not above using my physique to lure the pretty human into the water with me.

She bites her lip, then seems to make her decision. She scoots to the very edge and peers into the water between us. I try to still my tentacles, but it’s hard, especially since I’m trying to stay afloat. After a long moment, she meets my gaze and holds it, then pushes herself off the edge and slips into the water.

CHAPTER 5



ARIELLE

I must be crazy for doing this. I've done some wild shit in my youth, including that time I dated a biker from an actual *gang* in college, but swimming with a mythological creature takes the cake.

What I notice first after I get in the pool is the consistency and temperature of the water, like Jasper predicted. He hasn't told me much about what would happen despite my questions, but I don't think he's keeping things from me on purpose. He just seems distracted. By me.

And I won't lie, it feels amazing. Both his attention and the water, that is.

"Wow," I say, moving my arms around. "I feel like it's easier to stay afloat?"

Jasper hums in agreement. "You'll expend less energy trying to keep yourself above the surface."

I kick my bare legs out and float on my back for a bit, submerging my hair, then straighten again when I realize my nipples poke out of the water in the starfish position. Flushing, I focus back on Jasper, but he doesn't seem to mind—he's watching me with rapt attention, his golden eyes gleaming.

"Can I touch you?" he murmurs.

His tentacles swirl under him in the water, their movement sinuous. I swish my arms around, then swim closer to Jasper.

"Yes," I say, because I think he needs me to say the actual words. "But slowly."

He smiles. "Do you want to go to the shallow end of the pool so you can stand?"

I shake my head, anticipation rising in me. "No, it's fine. I'm a good swimmer."

Jasper's widening grin tells me he thinks I'm being cute. And I guess that my swimming skills can't compare to those

of a sea creature. But now that we're so close, I'm sort of counting on him to hold me up if needed.

He moves toward me, hands reaching out. I blink in surprise because I thought he'd hook me with his tentacles, but he takes my hand first and runs his palm all the way up to my shoulder. I kick to stay afloat with one hand occupied, and he simply slides his other arm around my waist, supporting me. In the water, I feel weightless, and Jasper handles me as if I am—there's still several inches of space between our bodies.

That won't do.

Putting my hands on his shoulders, I pull myself close and kiss him, eager to continue where we left off earlier. His body is so hot, his skin firm under my touch.

Jasper strokes his tongue against mine, and I angle my head to the side to deepen our kiss. The water lapping at my body feels like I'm being caressed all over, and I don't hate the sensation at all. My nerves are on high alert, but in a way that sends shivers down my spine, and the anticipation of pleasure has me on edge.

And I'm sure the pleasure is coming. This man can kiss, and I've learned through previous hookups that excellent kissing often leads to great sex.

Something touches my leg, and I jerk in Jasper's grip. My eyes fly open, and I glance down between us into the water.

A long, deep-blue tentacle strokes softly over the top of my foot, then slides around to my calf. I glance up at Jasper to find him watching me warily, as if he expects me to bolt from the pool at any moment. But the sensation isn't unpleasant at all. The tentacle is slippery, yes, but I expected that since we're underwater. What I didn't expect is for it to be as warm as the rest of Jasper's body.

Slowly, I reach down with one hand and wait for Jasper's cue. His hands twitch on my hips, but he holds me easily above water. I've given up all pretense of trying to stay afloat on my own. It's lovely to surrender to him, to trust his

strength. I know he won't drop me in the water, no matter what.

One of Jasper's tentacles rises to meet my outstretched hand. Its tip curls around my palm, the flesh warm and giving. It feels like muscle, but perhaps a little harder than that, since I don't think he has any bones in there. I want to ask him all the questions, but not right now. For the moment, I'm content to explore by feel.

Jasper turns the tentacle over in my hand, exposing a double line of small suckers. They're tiny at the tip, no larger than a ladybug, but they grow progressively larger the closer they are to Jasper's torso. I run my thumb over the light-blue suction cups, and they react by sticking to my skin.

Jasper lets out a ragged gasp. "Fuck, Arielle."

I lift my chin to meet his gaze. "Are they sensitive?"

The tentacle moves in my hand, sticking to my skin and sucking gently. The sensation is strange at first, but when Jasper moves it to the inside of my wrist, all my hairs stand on end because it feels incredible, like a dozen soft caresses happening all at once.

"They're full of nerve endings," Jasper confirms. He leans in and captures my mouth in a quick kiss as if he can't help himself. "Your touch feels amazing on them."

I stroke up his limb, the suckers fluttering in my wake. "Is it like...touching your cock?"

He laughs. "Not quite. It's hard to explain, but maybe think of them as your nipples."

I offer him a mischievous smile. "So in theory, you could come just from having your tentacles stroked?"

"In theory," he agrees. "But I'd rather have you stroke something else."

When a flush works its way up my neck and into my cheeks, I tell myself it's because of the water and Jasper's body heat. I shouldn't be blushing like a maiden on a Bone-R date, I'm sure. But Jasper has that effect on me.

I squint toward where I think his groin must be, but the moving tentacles and the water obscure my view. “So...you said your cock is hidden?”

Jasper hums. “Yes. It’s tucked away in a pocket of skin when I’m in this form, usually. But right now, with you in my arms, I’m having to fight very hard to keep it there.”

“Why?” I ask.

He presses his forehead to mine, his exhale brushing my lips. “Because I need you to come first. I need to make sure you’re comfortable with me before I fuck you.”

The tentacle stroking my leg moves higher, to the inside of my knee, and I barely hold back a groan.

“I’m comfortable,” I sigh. “I won’t run.”

He nuzzles the side of my neck and lightly runs his sharp teeth over my jugular. “When I enter you,” he says, “my cock will lock inside you for a while.”

I raise my eyebrows at that. “Like a knot?”

I’d read about those. Werewolves and several other creatures have them, and they’re supposedly very stimulating for whoever is on the receiving end, but they tend to be very large.

“Not quite,” Jasper says. “You’ll find it enjoyable, I promise you.”

Another tentacle joins the fun, twining itself around my other ankle, the suckers pulling lightly at my skin. It’s an onslaught of sensation, and I realize suddenly I’m caught almost completely. Only my left arm remains free where I’m still clutching Jasper’s neck for support.

This is where I should freak out and demand he let me go. But instead, my body softens at the knowledge that I’m in well over my head. Jasper wants me to surrender to him, and I want that so badly. I want to give him permission to have his way with me.

“Okay,” I murmur. “I agree with your plan.”

He smiles, devastatingly handsome. “Do I need to keep checking in with you, or would you rather pick a safe word and let me lead this?”

It’s like he’s reading my thoughts, aware of exactly what I need from him. I gasp as the tentacle on my left leg reaches my thigh, squeezing like a boa constrictor, then letting up again. “Safe word,” I pant. “Um, I pick winter.”

“Good,” he purrs. “And you ticked yes on anal on your questionnaire, correct?”

“Yeah.” My pussy clenches around emptiness at the thought of him fucking me there. “I’m good with that, too. Just don’t let me drown.”

“Never,” Jasper promises. “You’re completely safe with me.”

He kisses me, and the last of my worries melt away. I grasp the back of his neck, digging my fingers into his slick hair. He groans into my mouth, the sound ravenous. He inches his tentacles up my naked legs, stroking my skin as he goes. When the first suckers reach the juncture of my thigh, I gasp, tearing myself away from his kisses.

I have to watch this, at least the first time.

Jasper and I both stare in the water between us as the softly pointed end of his tentacle slips between my legs. His grip on me tightens, and he works my thighs farther apart, as if he wants me on full display. Another tentacle wraps itself around my torso for support. Then he brings the tip of the first to my pussy, parting the lips.

I gasp at the contact of the slick, warm limb with my clit. I’m hot and wet for him, and the tentacle itself is slippery, so it slides easily over my sensitive spot, then curls back on itself. Jasper turns it so the small suckers drag against my flesh. My muscles lock tight at the unfamiliar touch, but a moment later, he lets the suckers stick onto me, and pleasure shoots through me.

“Ah!” I throw my head back, closing my eyes. “Oh, shit. That’s amazing.”

I don't know what I expected, but it wasn't *this*. Jasper's low chuckle is all the warning I get before another tentacle presses into my pussy. The one at my clit continues sucking and sliding, teasing me mercilessly, while this one fills me inch by inch, working its way into me.

At first, there's barely any friction, but then Jasper twists it inside me like a screw, and his suckers find that elusive, incredibly sensitive spot on the wall of my pussy. My mouth drops open on a silent gasp. I clench my fingers in Jasper's hair, and he hisses, then slams his mouth down on my lips in a rough, claiming kiss. He slides more of his tentacle into me, the velvety touch of his suckers teasing along the way.

I'm full of him now, but still he presses in, fitting the thicker part of his tentacle into me, stretching me out. But there's no pain, no pinching sensation, because he's so wonderfully slick. It's the strangest thing, feeling the tentacle sliding easily inside me and experiencing the more textured rub of his suckers on my inner walls.

"You feel so good," I groan, pressing my chest to his.

I squirm closer to him, and he lets me, pulling me flush to his chest. He's just so hot, and the fresh scent of him drives my senses wild. I kiss his neck, where I find three soft slits, which must be his gills, and he groans when I brush my lips over them. I'm learning him just as much as he's learning me, exploring all the ways we're different from each other.

Then his tentacle reaches the end of me, and I straighten my spine with a surprised cry.

"Good or bad?" Jasper murmurs, his tentacle stilling.

I rock my hips forward, even though I can't find any purchase. "Good. I think. Fuck, why is this so good?"

I meet his golden gaze and see the wary hope reflected there. He's taken over, yes, but I sense he's still holding back on me because of his previous experience.

So I bring my free hand to his cheek and tell him, "I love what you're doing to me. It feels incredible." I punctuate the

words with a kiss. “I promise to use my safe word if I need to.”

Jasper groans in my mouth, kissing me with an almost desperate urgency. At the same time, he shoves more of his tentacle inside me. The slim tip of it coils in my pussy as the thicker part of it stuffs me full. Then he slowly twists and turns it, letting his suckers stroke me from the inside. At the same time, the tentacle at my clit rubs upward, one of the larger suckers latching on to my overstimulated bud.

Pleasure slams into me, sudden and overwhelming. My muscles tense, my body bowing in the grip of Jasper’s tentacles. I’m full, but he still fits more of him inside me somehow, pressing deep and prolonging my orgasm. His tentacle seems to pulse in time with my heartbeats, the suckers opening and closing to wring the last ounces of bliss from me.

Finally, I grow limp, panting against Jasper’s shoulder. The tentacle at my clit slips away, coiling itself around my waist to caress my skin. Jasper runs his palms up and down my back, and I appreciate that contact so much because it grounds me somehow, even though I’m still floating, weightless in the water.

With effort, I lift my head to look at him. “Wow.”

His grin is brilliant, his white teeth flashing. “Yeah?”

I give a light tug with my hand, and the tentacle that held me there slips away. My fingers tremble as I slick back my wet hair. I need a moment to settle myself, to compose my thoughts, because I want to tell Jasper how amazing this was—without making it seem like it was great just because he’s a monster. This orgasm was more personal than any I’ve had in my life, and I don’t want to diminish that by gushing about his supercool limbs.

Which reminds me...

I glance down in the water between us, noting the tentacle still stuffed deep in my pussy. My inner muscles twitch around it, triggering an aftershock of pleasure that has me shivering in Jasper’s arms.

“Can I— Can I stay inside you?” he asks.

I glance up at him again. “Yeah. You like that?”

He gives the tentacle a small push, probing deep in my pussy. “You feel like you were made for me.”

His voice is a low rasp, and I sense the sincerity behind his words. It’s not some cheap line intended to make his hookup of the evening feel good—it sounds like he’s speaking from the very depths of his soul.

I scratch my nails lightly over the base of his scalp and grin when he leans into the touch, moaning. He’s just as attuned to me as I am to him.

“This was already the best sex of my life,” I tell him. “And it doesn’t feel fair that it was one-sided.”

Jasper’s golden gaze darkens. “You think I derived no pleasure from yours?”

Suddenly, he takes my hand and dips it underwater, guiding my palm down his abs to...

“Oh, fuck.”

My fingers brush over a hard, slick length. His cock is definitely larger in monster form than it was when he was human-shaped, but not by much. I close my hand around it and stroke up to the slightly tapered tip, then down again, all the way to the base, to gauge the texture. It feels smooth, but Jasper mentioned it would get stuck inside me, so there must be something special about it that I can’t see yet.

“Feeling your pussy squeezing my tentacle is incredible,” he says. “Almost as good as fucking you will be.”

“Okay,” I breathe. “That’s good to know.”

I’m flushed again, my clit still throbbing from Jasper’s earlier attention, and I want him to fuck me now. I want to feel his cock inside me and discover what he looks like when he comes.

But Jasper closes his arms around me and swims toward the shallow end of the pool.

“I’ll give you what you need, Arielle,” he says as if he can read my thoughts. “But I need to feed you first. And you have to drink something, or you’ll get dehydrated in the water.”

The pool house comes back in focus, and I remember where we are. I lift my gaze toward the glass roof. The sky has been completely obscured by the blanket of snow. A look through the walls tells me it’s still snowing hard, but in here, we’re wrapped in a cocoon of warmth, safe from the elements.

I grin at Jasper. “All right. Show me what you’ve got.”

CHAPTER 6



JASPER

I'll never be able to let her go.

The thought pounds in my mind, insistent as a drumbeat, and I have to force myself to uncoil my tentacle from around Arielle's waist so she can drink the water I set out for her. I watch her greedily as she picks up a finger sandwich with feta cheese and black olive tapenade and munches on it, then licks her fingers clean.

I set out the snack by the pool before she arrived, thinking we might get in the water, then chat a little. In truth, I hadn't held out much hope of getting lucky tonight, despite Bone-R's extensive intake questionnaire. But Arielle exceeded every expectation I had, and how beautifully.

The sight of her coming apart in my arms changed something inside me. A part of me locked into place, like the final puzzle piece finally fitting in its spot. And I knew that my heat, the way my body has revved up to fuck her, is no coincidence.

She's the only one for me. If I was a better man—a better monster—I'd let her go while she's still soft and pink from her orgasm, satisfied and happy. I could bring her to another climax just like this, with my tentacle screwing into her, then send her on her way. She'd get her ride on the wild side, two spectacular orgasms, and a story to tell her friends over glasses of wine after the holidays.

That's what I should do. If she remains here, if I get any more obsessed with her, I won't be able to detach myself from her. I'll fuck her and convince her to stop her birth control, then I'll fuck her again and again until my seed takes root in her and she's round with my baby.

It's uncivilized to want this. To want to breed this woman I only met tonight. But all my instincts are roaring at me to lock her down, to hold her and never let her go.

So I keep my tentacle lodged deep in her pussy, so she'll stay soft and stretched for my cock. I pass her another sandwich and snag one for myself so she doesn't feel weird eating on her own. But I don't need food right now—I only need her.

A hint of remorse surfaces in me at the thought that Arielle's ordinary human life might be over now. If I keep her here, she might grow resentful of me. She might even start to hate me. Yet I could no more let go of her than I could chop off one of my limbs.

She swallows the last bite of her sandwich and looks up at me. She seems to notice something is wrong, because a small furrow appears between her dark eyebrows.

“You know, I didn't expect any of this.” She motions toward the food platter and the dish piled with mini eclairs I purchased at the witch bakery downtown. “I think you're still somehow worried I'm unhappy in this situation, but I can assure you, this is the best date ever.”

I brush back her hair and linger with my palm at her cheek. “You should always expect the best for yourself.”

Arielle flushes pink, then squirms, her hips rocking in the water. “You say nice things like that and feed me, and I think you're almost too sweet to be allowed, then I remember I'm still stuffed full of your tentacle.” She sends me a coy glance from under her lashes. “I like knowing that you're not all sweet.”

My cock kicks underwater, fully extended from its pocket. When I allowed Arielle to touch it earlier, I nearly shot my seed right there, rubbing against her palm. But even though she's protected, I want to spill my cum inside her tonight. It'll flood her pussy, and I'll keep her locked to me until she's full of it.

A low growl reverberates through the pool house, and I realize it's me. I clear my throat to cover it up, but Arielle grins at me, so she must like it well enough. Maybe she enjoys me a little feral. I guess that plays into her wish to fuck a

monster. But I can't bring myself to exaggerate my traits for her—I want her to want me just as I am.

If that's a fool's wish, then I'm the most foolish kraken who ever lived.

"It's still snowing," she whispers, looking over my shoulder at the night outside.

I tighten my hold on her a tiny bit, sticking my suckers to her thighs. "Are you worried about getting home?"

She bites her lower lip, worrying it between her teeth.

"What is it?" I prompt her.

Her palms land on my chest, warm and soft. "Well, I was kind of hoping you'd invite me to stay the night?"

Wonder bursts through me, the feeling that she's so fucking right exploding in my chest. I clasp her face between my hands and kiss her, devouring her mouth, gorging myself on her addictive taste. When we finally break away from each other, her lips are swollen from my kisses, red and puffy.

She laughs. "I'll take that as a yes?"

"Yes," I confirm. "I would love for you to stay."

She melts for me. "All right. Then we have all the time. We can take this as slowly as you'd like."

Slowly? As I'd like?

I pin her against the side of the pool, cradling her head so she doesn't bump it on the hard tile. "You think I want to go slow?" I growl. "I've been trying to hold back because I don't want to overwhelm you. I've been dying to fuck you since I laid eyes on you."

"Jasper," she gasps. Her breath hits my lips a moment before she reaches up and hoists herself in my arms, hooking her legs around my waist. "Then stop treating me like I'll break. I want this. I want you."

She's a dream. The gods must be playing cruel tricks on me, tempting me with happiness. But I'll wake soon, and all this will turn out to be a heartbreaking mirage.

My mind spins out in a thousand different directions as I stare down at her, trying to reconcile what I know about humans with this gorgeous creature in my arms. But Arielle is done waiting. She reaches between us, wraps her hand around my cock, and gives it a firm squeeze. My hips snap forward on their own, and it's over. My control breaks, my instincts forcing out every thought that isn't focused on bringing my woman pleasure.

I grasp her legs with my tentacles and push away from the shallow end, needing space to swim. I want her helpless in my arms, surrendering completely. Arielle wraps her arms around my neck and licks my gills, and it's a fucking trip how sensitive they are under her touch.

I pinch her side lightly in warning, and she giggles, the brat.

"I never knew how good that feels," I admit, my voice hoarse. "But you're uncovering all my secrets, Arielle."

I let my tentacle slip a little way out her pussy, so the suckers ripple over that spot that makes her gasp. Then I bring the tip of the tentacle that's holding up her leg to her ass and tease between her cheeks.

"I'll have to uncover all of yours, too," I murmur against her lips, catching her moan.

She digs her fingernails into my shoulders as I gently slide the tip of my tentacle in her ass. Her muscles clench down on it, and my vision sparks with pleasure. Here, I have to proceed more carefully than with her pussy, but I know how hard she'll come if she lets go, so I wait her out, not pushing into her until she relaxes in my arms and her tight ring of muscle lets me in.

"Jasper," she whines. "I thought you were going to fuck me."

"Hush," I order. "I need to do this first."

She wants to protest, I can see it in the way her eyebrows draw together in a frown, but some instinct is driving me to do this, to make sure she's limp from pleasure, hot and slick, before I enter her with my cock. So I bring another tentacle to

her gorgeous breasts, letting the tip of the tentacle curl around one rounded mound, then the other.

Arielle's inner muscles clench around both tentacles, but then she relaxes under my care, allowing me to push my tentacle deeper into her ass. Her mouth parts on a silent gasp, and she closes her eyes for a moment, scrunching them tight. I wait her out again, worrying she might have to use her safe word, but she just rolls her hips in the water as if trying to impale herself deeper.

"More," she gasps. "Jasper, I need to move!"

I let out a hoarse chuckle. "You can't."

Her eyes snap open, and she glares at me. "I know that." She dips her gaze to where I'm holding her open, several inches from my cock. "You're one evil kraken."

I nuzzle her cheek. "I'll move for you if you promise me something."

I let more of my tentacle slip into her ass, then twist it around gently. I can't go much deeper without causing her pain because my tentacle's too thick the deeper it goes, but I still have some space.

"What?" she asks, her eyelashes fluttering as she tries to keep her focus on my face. "At this point, I'm willing to promise you almost anything."

I dive in for a kiss, twining my tongue with hers. "Please consider staying with me over Christmas." I put up my hand to stop her objection and add, "I don't need your answer right now. But I want you to know that I'd like you to stay more than one night."

She bites her lip and gives me a nod. "All right, I'll consider it."

"Good," I reply, my voice deep. "Now hold on, Arielle."

Her eyes snap wide as I slip the tentacle from her pussy, almost all the way out, then force it back in with one long, slick shove. She cries out and squeezes down on me, but I'm already withdrawing the tentacle in her ass, falling into a

rhythm of push and pull, stuffing first her pussy, then her snug back hole.

My body sings with pleasure. The tight channels of her body hold me so beautifully, and my suckers open and close almost on their own, twitching in delight. Her scent fills my senses, and when she wraps her arms around me and presses her lips to my neck, sucking on my gills, I shudder with something like a climax, even though Arielle didn't even touch my cock.

I groan deeply, then bring my hand down between our bodies to find her slick clit with my fingertips. I circle the exposed bud, harder than I would have if I wasn't so desperate to make her finish, and she screams my name, her voice echoing around the pool house. She comes, her body squeezing mine, and I ride the wave with her, drowning in pleasure.

When she grows quiet and her grip on me lightens, I slowly remove my tentacles from her body. She gasps, then lifts her face, her dazed gaze finding mine.

"Jasper," she whispers.

I kiss her temple, unable to squash down the overwhelming feeling of tenderness that swells inside me. "I know, baby."

Arielle swipes her hand over her face and peers in the water between us. "Did you...?"

"I'm not sure what happened," I tell her, my grin wide. "I've never come without even touching my cock before, I have to admit."

She gives me a self-satisfied smile. "Never? That's fitting. I've never come so hard before either." Then she puts her palm to my cheek. "And I'll stay. This wasn't what I planned, but I wanted to tell you before we fuck for real and you think it has something to do with how much I liked your kraken dick."

I bark out a laugh. "All right." I lean down to kiss her again. I don't think I'll ever get tired of her taste. "And thank you. That means a lot."

Arielle holds her hand between us, studying her palm. “Hmm. I’m getting all wrinkly in the water.” She wiggles in my arms, then gives me a wicked smile that lights up all my instincts. “I think you should let me have that cock now, or I’ll have to take matters into my own hands.”

“Brat.” I catch her wrist with one tentacle and hook her other arm, too, until she’s suspended in the water in front of me, limbs open wide. “Be careful what you wish for.”

CHAPTER 7



ARIELLE

“Be careful what you wish for.”

At Jasper’s growled words, all my senses snap to high alert. I’ve been teasing him, but maybe I’ve pushed too far. I really should have remembered that I’m in the presence of a freaking mythological creature. A predator of the oceans. I don’t know much about kraken, but it’s not hard to imagine Jasper ruling some underwater kingdom, a crown of coral on his head.

The image flashes through my mind, and pure satisfaction streaks through me at the thought that I’m staying here for the holidays—that way, I’ll get to ask him all the burning questions I have. But only the most pressing one remains in my head: Am I going to regret teasing Jasper?

One of his tentacles slithers up my leg and spreads open my pussy lips. I’m sensitive and swollen from the two orgasms he gave me, but since his tentacles are so soft and slick, I’m not sore at all, just well-fucked and feeling empty right now. He flicks the tip over my clit, drawing a shudder from me, and flashes me a feral grin that shows his pointed teeth.

“Jasper,” I whine.

“What do you need, beautiful girl?” he purrs.

I reach out for him and clasp my hand on his neck. “You. Please, I need you.”

Jasper hisses out a breath when my fingers brush over his gills. Then he draws me closer, and the tentacles holding me apart relax enough so that I can hug him. We’re chest to chest, his skin sliding against mine. He’s hot all over and slick in a way that’s different from how wet human skin feels, but I love the sensation. I run my palms over his arms and shoulders, then dig my fingernails in the thick slabs of his muscle.

Jasper’s tentacles roil in the water underneath us, warm against my legs, but his hands are firmly on me. His lips part

on an exhale, and he seems just as affected by me as I am by him. He came earlier, I know it. Pride surges through me at the thought. Who knew tentacle sex could be so much fun?

But now I want him inside me. Jasper reaches between us and finds my clit with his fingers. He rolls it lightly, and I jerk my hips forward, chasing more contact. He just grins at me, his white teeth flashing, and I glower at him.

I dip my hand in the water and wrap my fingers around his cock. Jasper's eyes close, and he groans deep in his throat. The slick length of him pumps into my fist, and I move with him, exploring. The slightly conical head, the smooth shaft, and the textured base where the root of his cock is surrounded by a fold of skin that must be the pocket he mentioned. He lets me explore, breathing hard through his nose, and I marvel at his restraint—he's trembling under my touch, his muscles bunched and tight.

Finally, he grasps my wrist and tugs my hand away, his golden gaze burning. "That's enough," he growls. "Now hold on, Arielle."

He angles my legs so they're hooked up higher around his waist, putting me in position. I try to roll my hips, but his tentacles hold me immobile, open for him to do what he wants to me. I grow wetter in a rush at the realization that he has me completely at his mercy. I'm about to find out what kraken sex is really like, and something already tells me I'll be ruined for all else after this.

But I don't care. I want Jasper so much, I'm not above begging.

"Baby, please," I plead. "If you don't want to fuck me now, please let me come, you don't—"

My mouth falls open on a gasp. The first nudge of his cockhead against the swollen, slick lips of my pussy is incredible. I knew he was warmer than me from touching him, but this feels like a branding, a claiming.

Jasper pushes inside me slowly, his gaze on me. "You okay?"

I jerk my head down in a nod. “Yes. More.”

I’ve been reduced to monosyllabic words, that’s how bad I’ve got it. For a brief, panicked moment, I consider stopping this madness, because the intensity of the sensations scares me. I’ve never felt like this before—and it’s not just about being impaled on a kraken dick. I want Jasper to consume me. I want to crawl inside his skin and remain there forever. The thought of this being a hookup only, a fling that might last only a couple of days, carves a deep wound in my heart. And the thought of him finding another woman on that app...

I clench my thighs around his waist, dig my fingers into his shoulders, and use all my strength to pull myself flush against him. His tentacles are stronger than my limbs, yes, but I have the element of surprise. He didn’t expect me to do this. His long, thick cock slides inside me as I impale myself on it, and Jasper shouts in surprise, his head thrown back in pleasure.

“Arielle!” His arms close around me like iron bands at my back, and he pumps his hips several times, thrusting into me as if he can’t stop himself. “Fuck, you feel so good.”

I cling to him, gasping for breath. His slick shaft powers into me, filling me so well, and that textured base rubs against my clit in the most perfect way. I’m so sensitive from his tentacles, I’m hurtling straight for my climax when he stops himself and lifts his head to gaze down into my eyes.

“You’re deleting the Bone-R app after this,” I blurt before I can stop myself.

He stares at me in shock for a moment, then the most beautiful smile lights up his face. “I am?”

“Yes.” I scowl at him, even as a deep flush works its way up my neck. “I’ll do it, too.”

“Really?” Jasper’s hands slide down my back. He palms the globes of my ass and gives them a squeeze, then thrusts languidly inside me. “Was it my kraken cock that sealed the deal for you?”

I pinch his side. “You know that’s not it. I just...” I trail off, trying to find the words. “I don’t want to share you,” I admit.

“There is no one else,” he promises. “I’ll delete the app. I won’t be needing it anymore.”

My heart swoops at his words. I’m not ready to ask what he means by that, and mostly I’m just relieved that he didn’t scoff at my order.

“You have to hold still now.” Jasper brings his forehead to mine. “Just for a moment, okay?”

I meet his gaze. “Okay.”

I trust him completely, and I hate to see the small frown line that appears between his eyebrows. He’s still worried I might not accept him. So I reach up to palm his cheek, then kiss his lips lightly. It’s a sweet caress through which I try to tell him how I feel. Jasper doesn’t attempt to deepen it either, only lingers with his lips against mine for a moment.

It looks like he’s concentrating hard, but I can’t figure out over what.

Then I feel it—the slight increase of pressure inside my pussy.

“What—?”

Jasper’s cock swells inside me, growing impossibly larger and harder. I gasp out loud. My hips jerk on instinct, but he’s holding me still, and it’s only now that I realize how completely he has me immobilized. If I got the drop on him earlier, I have no hope of doing it now. Two tentacles are holding my legs still, powerful coils wrapped around my thighs and calves, all the way down to my feet. Another secures my waist, an immovable safety band.

“Last chance to tell me to stop,” Jasper forces out through gritted teeth.

He’s hanging on to some precipice, still worried that I might reject him. And I get why it might seem that way—I’m tense and probably sweating nervously, all my muscles locked

up. He scented my fear on me earlier, so he must be sensing it now, too.

God, is this what he had to go through every time he wanted to have sex in this form? Convincing his partner that he wasn't going to hurt her?

I take a deep breath through my nose and let it slowly out through my mouth. Deliberately, I relax my muscles, first in my hands, so I don't have a death grip on Jasper's shoulders, then in my legs. Another slow inhale, and I soften my belly, breathing deeply. Finally, with some effort, I unclench my inner muscles, relaxing completely in Jasper's arms. Then I look up at him, hoping I'm not too late—that he hasn't already decided for me that this is too much.

But I find him gazing down at me in wonder. His nostrils flare as he drags in a breath, and then he groans in relief, his mouth slanting over mine. This kiss is a claiming, a surrender, and a thank-you rolled all into one. I understand everything he's trying to tell me, and I kiss him back to reassure him that I feel it, too.

Then I tear my lips away from his and whisper, "I'm ready."

I want him to know that there's no more doubt in my mind.

Jasper caresses my sides, then brings his hands to my hips again and holds me still. "My cock will fill you up," he rasps. "It'll fit itself to your pussy."

"Will we still be able to move?" I ask.

"Yes," he assures me. "You'll see."

The girth of him is incredible. If he tried to stuff all of that inside me from the outside, I would have had trouble taking him. But there's not a pinch of pain, only pleasure. He grows larger inside me, the slick length of him pressing against the walls of my pussy.

Then something brushes my clit, the touch featherlight. I shiver, about to compliment him on great tentacle use, when I peer in the blue water between us. A ring of smaller tentacles is growing out from the pocket around the base of his cock.

I stare down in shock. “What is that?”

“Fuck,” Jasper growls, “you have no idea how good this feels.”

That doesn’t explain what’s happening. Because something *is* happening—those tentacles are extending outward, sticking to my thighs, between my legs, and—

“*Ah!*”

I scream as one of them latches itself on to my clit and pulses there, writhing around, the tiny suckers rippling over it. My orgasm roars through me, my pussy clenching helplessly around Jasper’s thick girth. All my muscles snap taut, and I claw at his shoulders because the pleasure just keeps intensifying. He grasps my hips and pulls me closer, fucking his cock deeper into me.

“Arielle!” He buries his face in my neck, his sharp teeth grazing over my skin. “Hold on, baby, just hold on.”

Jasper’s large tentacles hold us both up as he grasps handfuls of my ass and drives us together again and again. The ring of small tentacles around his cock latches itself on to my skin, keeping us tightly bound, and one of those wicked little limbs strokes at my clit like a magical tongue, never letting up. If Jasper dropped me, I’d drown, because I can no longer control my muscles—I’m a creature of pure lust and pleasure, and he’s the one keeping me afloat.

Another climax crests inside me, and I utter an incoherent cry, pulling Jasper’s face to mine for a sloppy kiss. I bite his lower lip, sinking my teeth in the soft flesh, and he hisses, then thrusts his tongue in my mouth, licking and biting right back. He pushes his cock into me in one last desperate shove, and then he’s coming, snarling my name against my lips, pulsing deep inside me.

A rush of warmth floods my insides. I widen my eyes at the sensation—I’ve used condoms with all my exes but one, but I don’t remember human cum being that hot or, well, *present*. It fills up my pussy, coating Jasper’s cock and seeping out between us, but it slides deeper into me, too. I glance down

into the water. There's so much of it, creamy and thicker than human cum.

“Oh!” I reach between us and swipe some up with my hand. When I bring it out, it sticks to my fingers, and I admire its light pearlescent sheen. “Um, I get why you said condoms wouldn't work.”

It's the stupidest thing I could have said in the wake of the most spectacular sex of my life, but to my credit, I think Jasper fucked my brains out. He tosses his head back and laughs, then kisses me again, only this time, his moves are languid and sensual. He treats me like a queen, caressing me all over and soothing me with his touch.

“You okay?” he says finally. He cups my face with both hands as we float toward the shallow end of the pool, still connected with his cock.

I give him a tremulous smile. “I'm better than okay, Jasper. I loved every moment of this.”

CHAPTER 8



JASPER

We bask in the warm water. I do my damn best to get my cock to soften, but every time Arielle so much as twitches above me, I feel it all over, so it takes us a while to separate. We snack and talk in the meantime, and with every passing minute, I realize how incredibly lucky I've been to have been matched to her on the Bone-R app.

“Why don't you live closer to the sea?” she asks as she licks melted chocolate off her fingers.

She's on her third éclair, and from how much she's enjoying them, I'm already making mental notes on what to buy on my next visit to the town bakery.

“I mean,” she adds, “I know we're less than two hours from the shore, but a guy like you could probably afford a house on the beach.” Then she squints at me. “What is it that you do again?”

I push my hair back from my face to give myself time to answer. “I inherited my family business. When my father passed away, my mom didn't have the will to do it on her own, so I took over.”

She lifts her eyebrows at me. “I'm sorry about your dad.” Her palms are flush with my chest, her legs wrapped around my hips, and I hold her close so she doesn't get chilled, even though the pool house is heated.

“Thank you,” I say, then answer the unspoken question. “I'm a treasure hunter. I always feel ridiculous saying it, but that's what my father did. He searched the sea for sunken ships, dropped cargo, and so on.”

“That's so cool,” she says. “And it's the perfect job for you!”

I give her a wry smile. “Well, these days, I'm doing more with our investments than actual treasure hunting. My dad was

a smart businessman, and he took most of the money he got from museums and collectors and invested it.”

She hums. “I’m going to tell everyone you’re a treasure hunter, though. It sounds much cooler.”

She grins at me, and I know she’s teasing. But the thought of her telling her friends about me has me grinning right back.

I rub my hands up and down her back and add, “One of my great-great-grandfathers was a pirate ship captain.”

Her brown eyes dance with merriment. “But you’re not interested in pillaging and plundering?”

I tickle her, and she squeaks, then squirms in my lap, which leaves us both gasping as my still-hard cock moves in her pussy. Arielle’s eyelids grow heavy. She plants both palms on my chest, shifts her position, and proceeds to ride me to another bone-shattering climax. I take her ass with one of my tentacles and don’t allow myself to blow until her screams of pleasure echo around the pool house.

My cock finally slips from her hot pussy, so I carry her out of the pool to the shower to rinse off all the saltwater, then wrap her in a large soft towel. She doesn’t protest when I pick her up and carry her into my house. The snow is still coming down strong, but with the holidays approaching, I don’t mind in the slightest. I close the glass door leading to the deck behind us with one hand, then continue all the way to my bedroom. It’s getting late, and Arielle is barely keeping her eyes open. She uses the bathroom, then sits on the edge of the bed.

“I have to lock up,” I whisper, tucking her hair behind her ears.

She gazes up at me, a soft smile on her lips. “Okay. You’re sleeping here, right? You won’t leave me alone?”

There’s something surprisingly vulnerable in her gaze.

I lean down to kiss her forehead. “I won’t. I’ll never leave you.”

The moment the words tumble from my mouth, I want to take them back. It's too much, too soon. Arielle is going to freak out on me, I just know it.

But I realize immediately I've underestimated this beautiful human once again. Her smile grows, and her cheeks turn a pretty shade of pink, then she scoots under the covers and draws them all the way to her chin.

"Hurry back," she says.

I almost run out to the pool, where I collect our discarded clothes—I don't want her to wake up in the morning and be uncomfortable without hers—and check the front door. Then I return to the bedroom, and my heart swells at the sight of Arielle sleeping in my bed.

Turning off the light, I slip into my bathroom, where I set out some towels for her. I should have thought to get her a toothbrush, but I didn't dare hope she'd stay when we agreed to meet tonight. I unearth a spare toothbrush from my cabinet and hope she'll be fine with sharing my toothpaste. This was supposed to be a one-night stand, but I can't stop myself from hoping for more than what she already promised me.

She said she'd stay for Christmas, so I have two days to convince her to stay forever.



I wake up with Arielle in my arms. Last night, she rolled right over in her sleep, as if her body was attuned to mine in ways neither of us could comprehend. So I'd tucked her into my side and fell asleep inhaling the sweet scent of her hair.

Now I crack open one eye to find Arielle watching me, her gaze dipping from my eyes to my mouth, then down to my throat.

"Your gills are gone," she whispers.

I lift my hand to my neck, rubbing at the spot. "They close when I don't need them."

She props herself up on her elbows. “Sorry for waking you. I just couldn’t sleep anymore. We forgot to close the curtains, and the light is so white outside.”

I squint at the window. From what I can see, the sky is still overcast and dumping snow, but as she said, the light is almost violently bright.

“Gods,” I groan, burying my face in the pillow next to her. “Too much.”

She giggles. “Not a morning person, then?”

I shake my head. “I like to go for nighttime swims. Then sleep in.”

Arielle’s voice turns coy. “Is there anything I can do to help you wake up?”

I flop onto my back and peek at her from under my arm. “Uh, what did you have in mind?”

In answer, she slowly tugs the covers down until she exposes my cock. It’s already hardening, perking up at the thought of Arielle touching it. When she wraps her fingers around it, I groan, my hips rolling without conscious thought. A moment later, she lowers her head and takes me into her mouth. Her pink lips close around the tip of my cock, and my brain almost explodes.

“Yeah, you can do that,” I babble. “That’ll—fuck!—that’ll help. Oh gods, Arielle.”

She laughs softly, her breath fanning over my spit-slicked cock. It’s too big for her to take all of it, so she gets creative with her hands, squeezing and rubbing and sucking until I’m trembling under her. I’m so much stronger than her, but she has me completely at her mercy. I’d do anything to keep her talented mouth exactly where it is. When she hums around the cockhead, then swallows it down so it brushes the back of her throat, I know I’m close.

“Arielle.” I’m panting and sweating, barely holding back. “Baby, you have to let go. I’m gonna come.”

She saw how much cum there was last night. I won't blow as much in my human form, but I don't want her to choke.

But she meets my gaze, her eyes sultry, and sweeps her tongue around the underside of my cockhead. And I'm done.

My hips arch off the bed, and I fuck her mouth. The immense wave of my orgasm crashes over me, stealing my breath. Arielle swallows down the first rush of cum, and the second, then gasps for a breath as I shoot again and again. My cum lands on her chin, her chest, and spills over her hand, thicker than human release. She stares down at it, mesmerized, then goes back in to lick it all up, cleaning me with her pink tongue.

I shudder and shake under her, cursing softly. "You're amazing," I slur. "No one's ever—fuck!" I gasp as she squeezes my cock again, forcing out another squirt of cum that she catches on her tongue. "You like it, don't you?"

She wiggles her hips. "You taste so good," she admits.

Still shaking from my orgasm, I sit up and grab her by the waist. "Now I need to know how *you* taste."

Arielle squeaks as I flip her over on the bed, then press my lips to hers. Kissing her is like coming home. She's everything I ever imagined finding in a woman, and I can't hold back my hope anymore. If she decides she doesn't want me after we get to know each other, I'll have to deal with that. But for now, I'm all in. She needs to know how much I want her to stay.

I nibble and lick my way down her body, feasting on her skin. She arches underneath me, squirming, and digs her fingers into my hair to pull me where she wants me. I love how demanding she is as a lover. There's nothing I wouldn't do.

Somewhere deep in my mind, a small voice warns me that I should keep at least some of myself back, that this is the way to ruin, but the need for Arielle drowns it out completely.

She spreads her legs for me. I settle between her soft, pale thighs, my mouth hovering over her pussy. She props herself up on her elbows to meet my gaze, and I stare directly at her.

Then I open her pussy lips and lick her for the first time. The taste of her explodes on my tongue, sweet and creamy, with just a hint of tang. Arielle's eyelids flutter, and her belly draws down on a sharp inhale.

“Lie back, baby,” I order. “Let me take care of you.”

She puts her trust in me once more, and I reward her by sucking gently on her clit. I don't want to overwhelm her—and this isn't a race. I want to savor her, discover what she loves, and bring her an orgasm she won't forget. I lick into her tight channel, fucking her with my tongue, and she rides my face shamelessly, seeking more friction. I press on her clit with my thumb, and she mewls, her voice hoarse.

“Make me come, Jasper,” she cries, “I can't take it anymore!”

I chuckle against her slick flesh. “You can. Just hold on a little longer.”

She's impatient, but somewhere deep inside me, I know this is what she needs—it's as if her body is giving me a roadmap to her pleasure. I'll fuck her hard and fast after this, but I need her to realize she's worth more than just a quickie.

Her full breasts rise and fall with each panting breath, and she switches from cursing me for not letting her fall over the edge to begging again, but she doesn't use her safe word, and she doesn't push me away, only pulls at my hair to keep me right where she wants me. I grin at the pain, rock-hard and ready for her again.

I lift my face from Arielle's pussy. “I'm gonna make you come now,” I rasp. “And you're going to let yourself feel it, okay?”

“Yes,” she sobs, “please, please, just— Ah!”

I slide two fingers deep into her clenching pussy and hook my fingers up, nudging at that sensitive spot I found last night with my tentacle. At the same time, I suck her clit between my lips and flick the tip of my tongue over it, once, twice, and she comes, her hoarse cry the most beautiful sound in the world. Her pussy squeezes down on my fingers, and she grips me

with her thighs, then goes limp underneath me. She shudders again and again as I slowly bring her down.

Finally, I gently remove my fingers from her pussy and lick them clean, then swipe a hand down my chin and kiss the inside of her thigh. “That was incredible,” I say, looking up at her face.

A jolt of horror goes through me. Arielle is crying, silent tears streaming from her eyes, down her temples and into her hair. She flicks her gaze at me, then groans and covers her face with her hands, rolling to the side.

I hover there beside her, cock still hard because the idiot hasn’t gotten the memo that a woman weeping in bed isn’t a good sign.

“Arielle?” I say quietly.

I reach out to touch her shoulder, then jerk my hand back, unsure if she wants me to touch her. Probably not. Gods, what an idiot I’ve been.

“I’m sorry,” she croaks, her voice broken. “I didn’t mean —”

She hiccups and buries her face in the pillow, like I did earlier, only her whole body is tense now, instead of relaxed like I wanted.

I draw the blanket over my lap so she won’t see my erection, then move the other end of the blanket over her body. She hasn’t sought to cover herself, but surely she must be uncomfortable if she’s crying.

“You have nothing to be sorry for,” I choke out. “Just— please. Tell me what to do. Do you want me to go?”

I glance out the window at the relentless snowstorm and know how difficult it’ll be for her to return home in this weather. Still, I’d move fucking mountains to get her to a place where she’d feel safe.

But Arielle unrolls herself from her position and sits up, her eyes red-rimmed, some of last night’s mascara smeared under them. Her hair sticks to her sweaty face, and her cheeks

are flushed, but she's the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. My stomach sinks with the realization that I hurt her—somehow, I fucked up and hurt her.

“What?” she says. “No! I don't want you to go.”

I stare at her in confusion. “You don't?”

She scrubs at her eyes with her fingers, then curses when she sees the black stains on her skin. I reach over to my nightstand for a tissue—what can I say, being a kraken means resorting to self-love more often than not—and hand it to her. She dabs at her eyes, then pushes her dark hair back and lets out a long exhale.

“I'm so sorry,” she says again, staring at a spot between us where she traces a pattern in the covers with her fingers. “This is so fucking embarrassing.”

I reach for her hand, relief surging through me when she doesn't pull away.

“Can you tell me what happened?” I ask.

She sniffs. “It's just... No one has ever done that for me before.”

“What—licked your pussy?” I frown. “Who the fuck have you been hooking up with?”

Arielle's cheeks turn pink again. “No, I mean, they have, that's not the issue.”

I glower at her. The thought of some human guy tasting her like I had just now makes me want to drown all her former lovers in the sea. I'd drag them down to the bottom, and nobody would ever see them again.

“What I meant,” she continues with a softer voice, “is that no one's ever made me feel this way. You said you'd take care of me, and you did. And I was just overwhelmed, so I...” She trails off and lifts the wadded-up tissue in her fist as evidence.

Oh.

I squeeze her hand tighter, then force myself to loosen my grip a little. “Do you want to go slower?” I ask. “Because we

can. I'm in no rush."

It's her turn to clutch at my hand. "No, I don't want that." She stares up at me with those gorgeous brown eyes. "I want it all, right now, and that freaks me out. But I feel like maybe you want that, too?"

I shudder with relief. "Yes. My plan was to make you come on my tongue first, then fuck you so hard we'd both see stars, but I have an even better idea."

Her expression lights up. "A better idea than sex?"

I reel her in for a dirty, sensual kiss that leaves us both panting. "Okay, maybe it's not better than sex, but it's what we both need right now."

CHAPTER 9



ARIELLE

Jasper lets me borrow his sweatpants, which are way too long on me, and a soft t-shirt that smells like him. He puts on a pair of well-worn jeans and a band t-shirt, and if I thought he was handsome last night in his slacks and cashmere sweater, I'm powerless against him in casual clothes. He makes me the largest stack of pancakes I've ever received and drowns them in syrup, then looks up as if he only just now remembered that maybe not everyone wants that much.

"It's great," I tell him. "That's exactly how I like them. But I wouldn't have guessed that kraken have such a sweet tooth."

He cuts into his stack of pancakes and chews thoughtfully on a piece. "I do when I'm human-shaped. When I'm out in the sea, I'll catch fish for myself."

I raise my eyebrows at him. "So you do go out to sea?"

"Oh yeah." He pours us both coffee from the fancy French press and offers me some half-and-half. "I have to. Staying in my human skin for too long makes me itchy. Kraken need the ocean. I usually go on the weekends, but I went earlier this week because of the forecast."

He motions toward the window. I peer outside to find that the world has turned completely white overnight. The driveway is covered in at least two feet of snow, the decorative bushes only vague lumps under the white blanket. Rising from the kitchen island, I walk to the living room to check out the backyard. The glass pool house where we spent most of last night is dark now, with snow slipping from the steep roof.

"I'm not getting out of here today, am I?" I ask.

I mean it more as a general remark, but when Jasper doesn't reply, I turn back to him and find him staring at me, still sitting, his expression crestfallen.

"Oh, no," I hurry to say, "I didn't mean that I *wanted* to go."

I return to his side and take his hands in mine. He's stiff for a moment, then lets me step between his knees so I can get right close to him.

"Hey." I raise my hand to his cheek and tip his chin up so he's forced to meet my gaze. "Talk to me?"

He blows out a long breath and closes his eyes, leaning into my touch. "Sorry. I just... My mind immediately goes to, 'Of course she wants to leave.'"

I shuffle in closer until I'm flush with his body. He brings his hands to my hips, then slides them down to my ass, and I grin, because this is definitely progress.

"What I wanted to say," I murmur, letting our foreheads touch, "is that we're snowed in. Sorry for freaking you out. I don't want to leave. You gave me several fantastic orgasms, your bed is a hundred times more comfortable than mine, and you fed me pancakes?" I give him a rueful grin. "You'll have to kick me out after the holidays or you'll never have this house to yourself again."

His grip on me tightens. "What if I don't want that?" His expression goes serious, and he pauses as if he wants to find the exact right words. "What if I want you to stay?"

Something flips in my chest. The sensation is frightening, but it doesn't feel wrong. "What do you mean?"

He pushes a hand through his short golden-brown hair. "I want you. And not just physically, though that's a huge part of it. But there's something about you that makes me want more, and for once, I can imagine it." He takes my hand and kisses my knuckles, his lips warm on my skin. "I want to wake up with you every day and make you pancakes. I want to take you to the ocean so you can see my full form."

I swallow thickly. "Full form?"

His cheeks turn an interesting shade of red. "Um, yeah. What you saw last night was what we call a half form. A lot of monsters have one. Like werewolves, who can shift halfway and remain bipedal or turn all the way and become actual wolves."

“So your full form is...an octopus?” I venture.

I try to imagine a human-sized octopus and wonder if I’m brave enough to go swimming with one.

Jasper inclines his head to the side. “Er, not exactly. You ever see those old paintings of giant squid monsters taking down ships?”

I stare at him in silence. He has the grace to look sheepish but shrugs, as if to say, ‘What can you do?’

“You’re big enough to take down a *ship*?” I ask, just to confirm what he’s saying.

He purses his lips. “If I want to. Our magic is weird. I can also be a small kraken if I want. And I’ve never taken down a ship, just so we’re clear. I’m only saying that I could if I wanted to.”

I go to sit on the chair next to him, but he maneuvers me so I end up in his lap instead. I don’t protest because he’s warm and it feels lovely, even though I’m still processing the new kraken info. I should really ask for a minute alone so I can go online to Google the hell out of this, but that seems kind of rude when he’s right here and willing to answer my questions.

And I have one that seems just as premature as Jasper’s invitation for me to stay here with him.

“If we had kids,” I start, then hold my hand up immediately to stop his protest, “I’m only talking theoretically here, of course. But I have to ask. If we had kids, would they be kraken, too?”

Jasper catches my hand and intertwines our fingers. “Nothing theoretical about it. I would love to have children with you.”

When I gape at him, he must realize how wild it is for him to say that to a woman he only met last night, because he clears his throat and adds, “One of the reasons I want you so badly is because you have triggered a heat in me.”

“A heat?” I ask.

He presses my palm to his chest, which is warmer than normal, now that I think of it. Last night, I'd noticed how hot he was in the water, but I'd chalked that up to him being a different species.

"All my instincts are telling me you're the one," he says softly. "The mate every kraken is searching for. So believe me when I tell you, I'll do anything to make this easy for you. But you have to know how serious I am about you. I want to have kids with you," he repeats.

I want to interrupt, but he gives my hand a squeeze, a silent plea to let him continue.

"And to answer your question, yes, it's very likely they'd be kraken, too. One of the reasons why I moved to Clearwater is because of its magical community. It's the perfect place to raise kids. The private school that witches run has options for all kinds of creatures. Roosts and perches for gargoyles, chew toys for young werewolves, safe spell bubbles for little witchlings whose magic is acting up. And if we had kids, they'd add a classroom pool if we asked them to."

I remain very still, processing what he's saying. Chew toys? Private schools?

"You've given this a lot of thought," I say at last. "You know? I accepted your Bone-R invitation for a one-night stand, but you were looking for a-a mate, a family this whole time."

A muscle twitches in Jasper's jaw. "You make it sound like I've lured you in under false pretenses."

I turn to face him, still perched in his lap. "No, that's not what I meant. But can you see how far ahead you are?" I motion with my hands, measuring an inch between my fingers. "I'm here. And you are way over there!"

I widen my hands dramatically, as far as I can. Jasper stares at me for a long moment, then reaches for my hands and brings them closer together, his palms larger than mine.

"Can we meet in the middle?" he asks quietly. "I'll stop talking about schools, and you can promise me to think about

all of this?”

He sounds so earnest, so hopeful. But there's a reason why I'm saying all of this.

“Jasper,” I say, “are you sure you want *me*? Because you don't know me. I mean...” My cheeks flush as I consider my words. “You do know some very intimate parts of me, but not who I am. And I have no idea who *you* are. What hobbies you have. How you spend your free time. Your friends. There are things you should know about a person before you agree to reproduce with them, don't you think?”

He lifts one shoulder in a shrug. “Yeah. But that can come naturally. I don't have to know all of your secrets to know how I feel about you. And I trust the fates. They know what they're doing, and so do my instincts.”

I let out a small growl of frustration. “That's easy for you to say. Your world is magical and special, but I'm just a human. You may trust the fates, but I wasn't raised to do that. What if your-your *mate radar* is confused and we get a kid on the way, and then you realize it was just some stupid hormones making you feel all this stuff? What will we do when your heat's over and you don't want me anymore?”

I clamp my mouth shut because this is all getting too serious. Too revealing. I stare at my lap and clench my hands into fists, tugging them away from Jasper and tucking them under my arms. But even though I want to run away to go sulk somewhere, alone, I don't move from Jasper's lap. It hits me then that I want comfort from him, and tears sting behind my eyelids at the thought that he might only be feeling whatever he's feeling because of some silly twist of fate.

“Arielle.” Jasper nudges my chin up like I did to him earlier and forces me to look at him. “Is that what's holding you back? You think I'll get bored of you?”

I twist my head away with a sniff because I realize how self-conscious that sounds. I admitted more than I wanted, and now Jasper's staring at me with those gorgeous hazel eyes, his forehead furrowed.

“Maybe,” I croak finally, feeling silly. “But it goes beyond the human-monster thing. Consider this house.” I motion at the gorgeous, state-of-the-art kitchen, the living room beyond, and the snowy garden outside. “Everything about us is uneven. I live in a shoebox of an apartment. I make what you probably spend on fancy organic coffee beans each month.”

I grasp the cup of lukewarm coffee and grumpily take a sip because it’s too good to waste. Jasper stares at me like I’ve lost my mind because he clearly doesn’t understand my dilemma.

“What do I bring to this relationship, Jasper?” I ask, exasperated now. “I’m not being afflicted with false modesty when I say there are thousands of women like me out there. So I have to wonder—are you feeling this way simply because I’m the only one who didn’t run away?”

Jasper’s nostrils flare as he drags in a quick inhale. His cheeks flush a darker shade of red, and a muscle twitches in his jaw from how hard he’s clenching his teeth.

I’ve pissed him off.

My heart flutters at the thought then sinks when he takes me by the hips and lifts me off his lap and into my chair. Then he stands and strides to the living room windows, his hands on his hips. He stands there for a long while, staring out into the falling snow.

I curl into myself on my chair, still nursing that cup of coffee, and wish we could erase the last hour. I could have avoided this entire conversation and spent some lovely time with Jasper. We could have left all the difficult topics for another day.

But that’s not how I want to start this...this relationship, if that’s what we’re doing here. I don’t know if we’ll ever get past this talk, really. When this was going to be just a one-night stand, I didn’t mind as much, but then we suddenly brought up kids and fates and serious shit like that.

From the way Jasper’s shoulders bunch under his t-shirt and the rigid tilt of his head, I know I went too far, though. The poor man didn’t ask for this. He probably only wanted

some company for the holidays and thought we'd evolve naturally to discuss these important issues. But I'm beginning to fall for him, and I don't want to get my heart all bruised up when he eventually realizes what I said is true.

"How do you not see yourself clearly?" he asks quietly.

I set my mug on the kitchen island. "What?"

He swings toward me, his eyes blazing with gold. "You asked me what you bring to this relationship, yes? Well, I'm asking you how you can be so blind about yourself." His voice is harsh, his words clipped. "You showed compassion last night, Arielle, and more bravery than I've ever encountered in a human. You're so beautiful I want to lock you up and keep you all to myself, and the thought of you going off and dating another man makes me want to punch through a wall. You're fucking *magnetic*. I don't know how else to explain it to you, but you're everything I've ever dreamed of in a mate."

He walks forward and braces his hands on the kitchen counter opposite me. He's close enough now that I get a whiff of his delicious ocean scent, and it messes with my senses.

"And I don't know about you," he goes on, more fired up by the second, "but I've never had sex like we had last night. Or this morning. Was it ever like that for you with any of your previous lovers? Because if you tell me that this is how humans always fuck, I might believe that you're interchangeable, but that definitely isn't something I've ever experienced. Have you?"

I press my trembling hands to my thighs. "No." My entire body hums with the memory of the pleasure I experienced with Jasper. Still, I have another objection to voice. "But I don't know if great sex is a good foundation for a *relationship*."

Even as I say the words, I wince, and Jasper's frown tells me exactly what he thinks of my protest.

"What else would you base our relationship on, Arielle?" he demands. "If not this? What do humans do in this case?"

I squeeze my fingers into fists, fighting the urge to jump up, round the kitchen island, and throw myself in his arms. I want Jasper to hold me close and tell me everything is going to turn out all right.

“We-we go on dates,” I say weakly. “Um. When we’re looking for a serious relationship, I mean. Hooking up through an app like Bone-R is different. We’d go on several dates, usually, where we’d talk and see if we’re compatible.”

“I will take you on dates,” he barks. “As many as you’d like. What then?”

Why is he so impossibly determined to win me over?

“After a couple of dates, we’d usually go to bed together,” I squeak.

Jasper’s golden eyes narrow. “And fuck?”

“Yeah,” I admit. “But only after we realize we have other things in common.”

He prowls around the kitchen island and comes to stand in front of me, looming over my chair. “How many dates does it take you to invite someone into your bed, Arielle?”

I swallow thickly, then clear my throat. “I don’t know. There isn’t a set rule for it. You just go by feel.”

He leans in, bracing his hands on the counter on either side of me. His face is so close, his warm breath falls on my lips as he stares down at me.

“So let me get this straight,” he purrs. “What you need for a successful, serious relationship is to find things you have in common with someone, then spend some time dating, then take them to bed to see if you’re a good fit?”

I focus resolutely on his chin. “That’s right.”

He grins, his expression feral. “The way I see it, we’ve done all those things.”

I snap my gaze up to his eyes, surprised. He brushes his nose over my temple and inhales deeply, a low rumble starting in his throat.

“If you think about it, Arielle, you’ll see that we’ve had our date,” he says. “We had pancakes and coffee this morning, didn’t we? We have something in common, which is our taste in music and our love for good food. We discovered that during our chats on the app, before you even came here.”

I close my eyes and fight off a shiver, but the evil kraken sets his lips to my ear and nibbles gently on my lobe.

“That’s stretching the truth a bit, don’t you think?” I ask, breathless.

I don’t know why I’m resisting, because my body sings in answer to his proximity, all my senses on high alert. I no longer care that this might end someday—I only want more of it *now*. If Jasper hurts me, I’ll have only myself to blame because I’m too far gone to keep myself from getting attached to him.

“And you admitted that you’ve never had sex like that before.” He brings his convoluted logic to a close. “So from where I stand, we’ve satisfied all your criteria.”

I lean forward until my forehead bumps against his chest. “Will you break my heart?”

He cups my face with both palms and brings my chin up. Our gazes meet, and then he presses a tender kiss to my lips.

“No, sweetheart. You’re safe with me.”

It’s what he said last night when he promised not to let me drown in the pool, and I feel like I’m drowning now, too—except Jasper is here again, helping me keep my head above the water.

“Okay,” I whisper.

His grin is beautiful. “Yeah?” he asks.

“I might mess up,” I admit. “I’m not great at relationships.”

He pulls me in for a hug, lifting me clear off the chair and into his arms. “Neither am I. We’ll figure it out together.”

CHAPTER 10



JASPER

As much as I want to scoop Arielle into my arms, carry her to bed—or alternatively, the pool—and show her just how important it is that we’re compatible at sex, I know we have to take things slowly.

So I lend her thick woolen socks and a cozy sweater and drag her back to the kitchen to make Christmas cookies with me. I wasn’t planning on celebrating this year, given that I didn’t have plans with any of my remaining family members. My mother has opted to visit her sister in Mauritius, and I never got along too well with that side of the family, so I told her to go alone, especially since she’d been hinting that there was a pretty kraken lady she wanted me to meet. I’m smart enough not to mention this fact to Arielle, but I do tell her that my mother will be overjoyed that I’ve finally found my mate.

She blushes at that. “We might have to, ah, ease my family into this supernatural thing,” she informs me. “They don’t know about witches or anything.”

I raise my eyebrows. “But you live in Clearwater. This place is a supernatural haven.”

Arielle rubs her nose, leaving a dusting of flour on her skin. “Yes, but they don’t. I moved here four years ago, and I didn’t know about you either until then. My parents are very religious.”

“Oh.” I roll out the next batch of dough with more force than necessary, tearing a hole in the soft yellow surface. “We don’t have to tell them if you think it’ll upset them.”

Arielle puts a floury hand on top of mine to stop me. “Hey, that’s not what I’m worried about.” She looks up at me, her brown eyes serious. “I don’t know how they’d react to you is all, and I don’t want you to have to defend your freaking existence. I have no idea what they’ll say, but it won’t be good. They’d probably think you’re a demon, and witches are

all Satan's handmaidens, so we'll have to take it slowly, okay?"

She's worried for me? Not because she thinks I'll offend her parents? I wrap my arms around her, flour be damned, and kiss her, pressing her against the kitchen counter until we're both panting and the scent of her arousal perfumes the air.

Then the kitchen timer beeps, reminding us to take the first batch of cookies from the oven. I barely make myself let her go, though I keep touching her, little brushes here and there as we work. I don't have any food coloring on hand, so all our cookies get decorated in white, but Arielle declares them to be the prettiest cookies ever, especially the slightly burnt batch we drown in icing.

Then I brave the arctic temperatures outside and trudge through the drifts to the edge of the property where a cluster of tall pine trees shudders under the weight of the snow. I bring in several green boughs that fill the room with the scent of pine. Arielle takes the snowy branches from me and brushes the snow off my hair, then hangs the decorations on the mantelpiece while I set the fire in the grate.

She sighs contentedly when I draw her onto the couch and turn on the TV.

"...should stay inside if possible and shelter in place. The roads won't get any better, folks, so we hope you got your Christmas shopping done early this year. Over to you, Jim," the jolly news anchor is saying.

The weatherman pops onto the screen, waving his arms excitedly over a roiling white-and-gray mass on the satellite image. "The snowstorm will continue wreaking havoc on New England until at least Wednesday, bringing in more snow and temperatures in the low twenties. Our colleagues from Nova Scotia are reporting power outages, so it would be prudent for you to prepare while you can. As Walter said, roads will remain difficult to navigate." He levels a serious stare at the camera. "Our recommendation is to shelter at home unless you absolutely must venture outside, and then you might be on your own if you get stuck, because emergency services are

already reporting that they can't cope with the number of calls they're getting. Stay at home and stay safe."

"Thank you, Jim," Walter, the news anchor, says. "Now, our local politicians have already started..."

I mute the sound, letting Walter prattle on in silence, and glance down at Arielle. She looks so cozy, tucked under my arm and wrapped in a woolen blanket. She glances from the TV to me and chews on the inside of her cheek thoughtfully.

"I could still get home," she says softly. "It's not too far to walk, you know. In case you change your mind about me staying here."

I let out a low growl and tighten my grip around her. "You're not going anywhere."

Her cheeks flush a delicious shade of pink, and the corners of her lips turn up in a coy smile. "What would you do if I tried to leave?"

Leaning in, I run my nose over her temple and press a kiss to the side of her neck. "I'd chase you. Then I'd drag you back to my lair."

Arielle's breath quickens, as does the heartbeat pulsing in her throat. "Then what?"

The scent of her. Fuck, I'm getting addicted to it, and I love it. She's so responsive, so perfectly attuned to me, just as I am to her.

I tug the neckline of her sweater to the side and nibble on her skin. She tastes as good as she smells, and I can't wait to lick her all over. I only had one taste of her pussy, and I want more.

"Then I'd lock us in our room and fuck you until you were too tired to run," I rasp.

She jerks her head back in surprise. At first, I don't know what triggered this response. Then I replay my words back to myself and realize I called my bedroom *our* room. I open my mouth to apologize, but Arielle grabs me by the back of my neck and draws my head down. She kisses me deeply, her

tongue darting out to meet mine, her mouth open for me. I groan into the kiss, finding her waist with my hands. I inch up the hem of the too-big sweater and finally touch her warm, soft skin.

Arielle plants her palms on my chest, and I inwardly whoop because I love her touch. But then she breaks the kiss and gives me a strong shove, pushing me away from her.

I fall back on the couch, dropping her immediately, and stare at her in shock. She really put some strength into that move, and my mind goes blank with horror at the thought that she felt this strongly about heaving me away. I search her face for any sign of distress, because she kissed *me* just a moment ago, and I'm—

“Shit!” She covers her mouth with her hands. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to shove you that hard, I just thought I should because you’re so much stronger than me.”

I blink. “What?”

She stands and backs away from me, her socks rendering her steps almost silent. “I’m running away.”

I stare at her, worry and hurt cutting through the swirling mass of confusion. “But why? I thought...”

Arielle groans, then shakes her head. “No, Jasper, listen. I’m *running away*. From you.”

She takes another step back, keeping her gaze firmly on mine. Her face is still flushed pink, her dark eyes shining with mischief, and it hits me. She’s running away from me—and wants me to catch her.

“Oh.” I drag my fingers through my hair and fall back against the couch, relief rendering me nearly boneless. “Gods, Arielle, you scared me for a second.”

“Yeah.” She retreats a little more, now nearly at the kitchen island. “We’ll work on my delivery in the future, but...” She twists suddenly and darts around the corner, disappearing toward the hallway that leads to the bedrooms.

I laugh softly, my heart thudding. I'm still shaken from thinking she was serious about rejecting me, but a different kind of emotion swirls in my gut, exciting and new.

I'm going on a hunt.

I push myself to my feet and crack my neck. I drag in a deep breath, catching the whiff of Arielle's delicious scent. The socks she's put on make it harder to track her by sound, but a breathless giggle floats from somewhere in the depths of the house as I take the first step forward.

"Hide all you want, sweetheart," I call out, following in her wake. "There's only so many places you can hide."

I walk through the open kitchen and into the hallway. Arielle's scent is everywhere—she's been in the house for hours and slept in my bedroom, so tendrils of her essence hang in the air, tantalizing and misleading. I try to focus only on the freshest trail, though I'm not in a hurry to find her. If she enjoys being chased, the anticipation of the moment when I find her hiding spot is as good as being caught.

I open the door to the guest room and peer inside. A whiff of the air tells me she hasn't been in here, so I move on, letting my footsteps fall harder than usual on the floorboards so she can hear me approaching.

"You should know better than to run from a monster." My voice comes out gruff and raspy, and I'm hard, my cock tenting the front of my sweatpants. "You've been bad, Arielle, and now you'll have to pay."

A shocked gasp from somewhere ahead. I grin, walking silently now, and wrench open the linen closet door. It's barely enough for a set of shelves, some mops, and a bucket, and I can tell Arielle thought of hiding in here because her scent is all over the small space. But she must have changed her mind—there's nowhere to conceal herself here.

In quick succession, I check my home office—empty—and the remaining two bedrooms. I'm almost at the end of the hallway, with one last door to open.

My bedroom.

Our bedroom, if she'll decide to stay. Arielle hid in the space that will belong to her, that already belongs to her because I won't ever bring another woman in there. She's it for me, and I intend to keep her—beyond tonight.

“What should I do with you when I find you?” I muse as I step into the room.

My gaze darts from one possible hiding space to the next, and I inhale deeply, trying to determine where she's hiding. I let my supernatural senses take over, and I only need a moment to locate her.

There.

She's in my walk-in closet, and from the soft click of the hangers, I know she has crawled behind the rows of my suits and shirts. I could have her in my arms in seconds, but I want to build her anticipation further, until she's so tense and wound up, she can barely contain herself.

“If I were you, I'd hide under the bed,” I narrate.

Making a show of kneeling on the floor to peer into the narrow space, I listen for any indication that she knows I'm playing. Then I push myself to my feet again and walk over to the bathroom.

“Or the bathtub.” My voice echoes slightly in the empty room. “When I find you, Arielle, I'm going to fuck you in this bath. It's big enough for all my tentacles, did you know?”

A muffled giggle from the closet.

I grin, giving up the pretense. She must know I've heard her by now, so I stride toward the closed closet door and yank it open. Arielle tries to hide, but I shove the clothes hangers aside, exposing her. She's sitting on the floor, her hand pressed over her mouth, her eyes dancing with laughter.

She shrieks when I lean down, haul her to her feet, and throw her over my shoulder.

“Put me down!” She giggles helplessly, hands scrabbling down my back to find a grip. “Jasper!”

I pull the sweatpants down her legs and drop them to the floor. Then I rip the panties off her ass, grasping firm handfuls of her flesh, and carry her to the bathroom. “You shouldn’t have run, Arielle.”

My voice is gravelly and low, and she gasps. She must realize just how affected I am. My fingers clench around her thighs. I inhale the sweet, tantalizing scent of her wet pussy and shudder in relief. She wants this—wants me—as much as I want her.

“Sorry,” she pants. “I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“I’m not upset.”

I set her on the countertop by the sink, and she hisses as her bare ass meets the cool marble. Working quickly, I turn away from her, plug the giant recessed bathtub, and open the tap. I dump in a pound of sea salt, then focus on Arielle again.

“By the time the bath is full, I’ll make you come,” I promise her. “Then I’ll take you in there and fuck you again, do you understand?”

I was only playing with the chase earlier, but finding her hiding from me, so much like prey, has triggered a predatory instinct in me that I can’t quash right now.

“Yes.” Arielle clenches her fists in my t-shirt. “That’s—that sounds good.”

I grin down at her, and she smiles back, breathless and so incredibly beautiful. I twine my fingers into her dark hair and tip her head back to expose her pale neck.

“You couldn’t know this,” I murmur as I kiss and nibble on her skin, “but most monsters enjoy a good chase. It’s part of our evolution. And we’ve always seen humans as prey.”

She opens her legs so I can step between them, then hooks her ankles behind my back. “Maybe I’m the one who caught you. You fell into my trap.” She twines her hands around my neck and pulls me down to kiss me. “Maybe I’m the predator.”

I laugh because she’s so much more fragile than me, but she has a point. I’m caught in her net, a willing victim of her

sensuous charm.

With one hand, Arielle reaches between us and tugs at the drawstrings at my waist. I help her push my sweatpants down and free my aching cock. I kick them off, then yank my t-shirt off with one quick pull while Arielle does the same. Her bra and socks follow the rest of our clothes and land in a heap on the floor.

Arielle accepts me back between her legs, closing her thighs around my waist. My human cock nestles perfectly against her hot pussy, the shaft already slick from my precum and her wetness.

“Wait,” I say when she wraps her hand around it and notches it at her opening. “I want to make you—ah!”

My wicked little human puts me right where she wants me, then clenches her legs around me to pull me inside her. The head of my cock slips in, and the moment I feel her heat, there’s no stopping me.

I take over the movements. Arielle holds on to my shoulders. I grip her ass and angle her hips better so I can slide all the way inside. We both groan as I bottom out, my body flush with hers. When I slide out almost all the way, her thighs tighten around my waist, and when I slam back in, she throws her head back with a moan.

Our kisses turn sloppy and rushed as we pick up the pace. This is a rough fuck, a way to take the edge off, an entree to what I want to do with her. We have all the time in the world, with nowhere to go over the snowy holidays, and I intend to explore every inch of Arielle’s beautiful body.

She comes first, her body tensing around mine, her fingernails digging into my shoulders. The hot, slick walls of her pussy clamp down on my cock, and I shout out, my rhythm stuttering. I push my cock into her to the hilt, and then I’m coming, too, coating her pretty pussy with my cum.

Arielle’s breath is hot on my chest. She clings to me, shuddering with the aftershocks of her orgasm, and I never want to let her go.

“Thank you,” she whispers against my sweaty skin.

I lean away from her to see her face and brush back the hair that’s sticking to her forehead. “I’m sure I should be thanking you for this orgasm. I only wanted to go down on you, not fuck you on my bathroom counter.”

But she shakes her head, her brown eyes radiant. “No, I meant for catching me. For finding me.”

I know it’s too soon for either of us to voice our feelings, but I have an inkling of what Arielle is thinking from her open expression. I let myself relax so she can see the same reflected on my face.

I kiss her deeply, showing her with kisses what I can’t say with words yet. “I’ll always catch you.”

CHAPTER 11



ARIELLE

We spend a long time in that bathtub. Jasper fucks me with his tentacles, then finally lets me sit on his kraken cock so we both explode in bliss, then lie in the hot water while Jasper is still lodged inside me. I love how he takes care of me afterward, soothing any aches, bringing me down slowly from my overstimulated state.

He wraps me in soft towels and combs my hair. I fight tears that spring into my eyes at the tenderness. We make our way down to the kitchen for a late lunch and just manage to cook some pasta with sauce when the electricity winks out, the room plunged into gloomy darkness despite the early hour.

Jasper assures me we have enough water and food to last us a week, then unearths some candles and sets them up in the living room. We eat on the couch, sharing that woolen blanket, and watch movies on his laptop until the battery runs out.

When that happens, I remember to text my friend, Morgan, with an update and find that she's read my previous message and replied with a thumbs-up. I can't wait for her to meet Jasper soon, because I know she'll like him. She'll probably have a hundred questions for him, too.

I doze off next to Jasper and wake up on his chest, listening to the steady drumbeat of his heart as he naps under me. It's the perfect Christmas Eve, and for the first time since I accepted his Bone-R request, I allow myself to hope that this could be real. That it could last.

Since it's completely dark outside, Jasper puts more wood on the fire in the living room, and we decide to make our little nest for the night right here, instead of in the bedroom, which we have no way of heating. I challenge Jasper to a game of cards, which somehow turns into a strip poker match. He loses so quickly that I suspect he might be throwing it on purpose, but since the end result is another round of mind-blowing sex, I don't complain. For dinner, we clear out the fridge of all the perishables and set out a massive charcuterie board—and I

learn that kraken need a lot more food than humans to feed their transformations and magic. After we stuff our faces completely, Jasper unplugs the fridge and carries the entire thing to the freezing back porch, maneuvering it carefully through the glass door, so the rest of the food doesn't spoil. He repeats the process with the freezer chest from the pantry, and by the time he drops it in the snow, I'm staring at him in shock.

"What?" he asks, stomping the snow off his boots.

I shake my head. "I guess I didn't know until this moment how strong you are."

He shuffles in place as if he's embarrassed by it. "Uh, yeah. I did tell you about the ship-sinking thing?"

I step up to him. "It's hot. You're hot. Please use some of that strength to toss me around like a sack of grains."

His eyes glint golden, and he does just that, holding me in his arms and fucking me without letting my feet touch the floor. By the time he's done with me, I'm a boneless, tired mess, so he takes me to the kitchen for a drink of water.

That's when I remember that I should have taken my pill this morning. Stumbling over to the living room, I locate my purse and squeeze the small pill from its packet. Then I return to the kitchen with it on my palm, staring down at it.

Jasper freezes when he sees me holding it out like that. I look from the pill to him and back, indecision swirling in my gut. It's way too soon to stop taking them, I know that rationally, but a little voice in my head pipes up, gushing about how great Jasper is and how beautiful our babies would be.

I close my eyes and squeeze the pill in my fist, trying to stomp down on those thoughts. Not yet, I tell myself. Not yet.

Jasper's warm arms close around me, and he draws me into his chest until I lean my cheek on his sweater and let myself relax.

"You don't have to decide today," he says. "We have so much time, Arielle, and I don't want you to rush into this."

I clear my suddenly tight throat. “Yeah, but you said you were in heat?”

“That’ll last a while,” he assures me. “And if it breaks, it doesn’t mean I can’t fuck you and make you pregnant outside of it, I’ll just be less crazed when I do it.”

I hug him. “I like you crazed.”

He laughs at that. “Good to know. But despite what I said about our relationship being so evolved already, I want you to be sure about this.” He brushes back my hair. “I’m all in with the kids, you have to know that, so whenever you want to stop taking these, I’ll celebrate with you. But we can wait for a while. Enjoy each other. Learn to be a couple first before we add a baby to our family.”

“Okay.” I peel myself away from his chest and let out a long sigh. “That’s some smart advice, Jasper.”

He hands me a glass of water. “Wisdom comes with age.”

I swallow the pill and stare at him. “Wait, how old are you?”

He gives me a comical eyebrow waggle. “Would you still want me if I said two hundred?”

I narrow my eyes at him. “Ye-es,” I drawl. “But are you really?”

“How about a thousand?” he teases.

I smack his chest lightly with the back of my hand. “No way are you a thousand years old. Tell me.”

He leans down for a quick kiss. “I’m thirty-six, sweetheart. Not a cradle robber.”

I press the back of my hand to my forehead, swooning dramatically. “Oh no, I’ve fallen for an older man!”

He narrows his eyes at me. “How old are you?”

I grin. “Thirty-one.”

“Brat.”

Jasper catches me around the waist and throws me over his shoulder. He carries me to the bathroom, where we brush our teeth side by side, and it feels like the most natural thing in the world to be standing next to him, our hips touching, our gazes locking in the mirror. We return to the cozy living room, and I'm about to suggest another round of poker, but I have to stop, covering a yawn with my hand.

"That's it," Jasper says. "I'm calling it. Christmas Eve is over."

I want to protest, but the thought of curling up under the blankets on the living room floor is too tempting. Besides, I don't think my body can take another orgasm tonight. The soft ache between my legs tells me how well I've been fucked, and I squeeze my thighs together at the thought, my pussy clenching around emptiness.

I kneel next to Jasper, who's already stripped down to his boxers, the blanket pooling around his waist. Despite his body heat, I decide to keep my wool socks on. They're way too comfortable, and I fully intend to steal them from Jasper. He wraps his arm around me, pulling me against his chest, and I wiggle my ass, settling in.

"You have to stop," Jasper groans, his breath warming the back of my neck.

"What?" I ask innocently, even as I grin into my pillow.

"You smell fucking edible." He licks the spot where my neck meets my shoulder and grazes his teeth gently over the spot. "But you need sleep, so I'll try to hold back. At least for a couple of hours."

I shift in his arms so I'm facing him. "Is that your heat talking?" I press my hand to the middle of his naked chest. "The constant need to fuck me, I mean."

He takes my hand and kisses my knuckles. "No. I'd want you even without it. You're gorgeous, and sex with you is incredible. The heat just makes everything more urgent, more intense." His eyes dip down between us. "Does it bother you?"

I think about it for a moment. “No, I don’t think so. I mean, I told you I like how crazy you are for me. I just don’t want to feel like I’m taking advantage of you or something.” I stroke a thumb over his cheek, down to the corner of his mouth, marveling at how handsome he is. “I’m just worried it’s like you’ve been roofied by fate or something, and I shouldn’t be fucking you until you’re of sound mind again.”

His gaze gets serious at that, and he cups both my cheeks with his palms. He holds me still for a long moment, searching my face. Then he presses a quick, demanding kiss to my lips.

“The moment I touched you, everything became crystal clear,” he rasps. “I felt as if the fog I’ve been living in had lifted. There’s no confusion, Arielle, and I haven’t been drugged. My body just knows that you’re the most perfect being on earth for me, and it’s making sure I procreate quickly. That’s it.”

I smile at his word choice and hook my leg over his thighs. “Procreate, huh?”

He groans. “Arielle...”

I dig my fingers into his chest, ready to tell him that I’m not that tired after all. There are things that we could do that don’t involve him putting his monster cock in my pussy, though that seems like a shame.

“We can—”

A massive thump on the roof cuts my words short. I look up with a gasp, flipping to my back, which is a stupid thing to do if the roof is about to collapse on us. Jasper, on the other hand, rolls on top of me in a flash, shielding me with his body. I stare up at his hazel eyes in shock, and the first, idiotic thought that pops into my mind is *Santa?*

“What the fuck was that?” I blurt, scrambling to get up and also glad Jasper can’t read my thoughts.

“Not Santa.” He smirks at me.

For a moment I think that he can, in fact, see into my mind, but he shrugs and points at the clock on the wall.

“It’s past midnight,” he says, “which technically means it’s Christmas.”

I smack his naked shoulder. “Okay, smart-ass. What was it really? Did a tree collapse on the roof?”

I try to remember if I’d seen any trees on the property that were close enough to fall over and make so much noise, but there’s another thump on the roof, and something like footsteps, though that can’t be right. Who would be walking on Jasper’s roof at midnight on Christmas Eve, and during a snowstorm?

“Wait here,” Jasper snaps. “I’ll check it out.”

He pulls on his sweatpants and stalks to the glass doors leading to the porch. He slides the door open and peers into the darkness outside. I wrap the blanket around my shoulders and scurry after him, though I don’t follow him to the snow-covered porch. I have some sense of self-preservation, it seems. I squint into the darkness, then glance behind me, trying to decide whether I should grab the poker from beside the fireplace to arm myself.

Suddenly, something large drops from the sky, and a massive crash has me flailing backward with a shriek. Jasper curses, crouching slightly as if preparing to attack. The creature that landed on his porch straightens, its large wings fanning out, scraping against the glass. Its dark-gray skin is barely distinguishable from the darkness, but I make out a broad, bare chest, a rough-hewn face, and thick horns growing from its forehead.

It’s a gargoyle.

Despite myself, I freeze in place, staring at the stranger. I’ve read about them, but I’d never seen one in person.

I glance over to Jasper to see what he’ll do to fend off the intruder, but he straightens from his fighter’s stance and pushes his hand through his hair.

“Fucking hell, Emmerich,” he growls. “What the fuck are you doing here?”

The gargoyle looks down at where he crashed directly onto a deck chair and tries to swipe the splinters behind him with his boots as if hiding the evidence will make Jasper forget he saw it. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to land so hard, but the wind is vicious tonight. It was either this or land on your pool house, and I thought you would prefer this.”

His voice is gravelly and low, the words holding the barest hint of an accent that I can’t quite place. German, maybe?

Jasper puts his hands on his hip. “Why are you here?” he repeats.

I move forward to see better, and the gargoyle’s gaze snaps to me. His dark eyes widen, and he looks from me to Jasper and back. Then his craggy face splits into a wide grin.

“I didn’t know you had a human, too, Jasper,” he exclaims and stomps forward, his hand extended in a greeting. “Hello, I am Emmerich.”

I only hesitate a moment before placing my hand in his much larger one. Unexpectedly, his skin is warm to the touch and soft, sort of leathery. I half expected it to be rough and cool, like granite. Emmerich takes great care not to squish my fingers, his claws staying well away from my skin.

“Hi, I’m Arielle,” I say. I meet Jasper’s gaze and lift my eyebrows as if to say, ‘Is this a friend of yours?’

“Let’s get inside,” Jasper says with resignation coloring his voice. “And you can tell us what’s going on.”

Emmerich the gargoyle tucks his wings tightly against his back and ducks his head to enter the living room. He’s taller even than Jasper, who must be six foot three. If Jasper’s house wasn’t a freaking mansion, Emmerich’s horns would likely brush the chandelier hanging from the living room ceiling, but as it is, he still takes up a ridiculous amount of space. He shuffles awkwardly by the couch, though, and I realize he’s staring down at the nest of blankets we’ve created, his nostrils flaring.

A blush creeps up my neck at the thought of him scenting what Jasper and I have been up to. If his senses are as strong

as Jasper's, he must know what's going on. But to my surprise, he beams at me, his dark eyes glittering, and pats my shoulder with care. It still feels as if I'd been hit with a snow shovel, but I manage not to stumble forward.

"It's good to meet you, Arielle," he says. "Jasper needed a mate. He was a very grumpy man."

I bite my lip and glance at Jasper, who is glowering at us, hands still at his hips.

"Really? He's been very nice to me," I tell Emmerich.

The gargoyle nods sagely. "Oh yes. He will treat you well. He's very rich and will be a good father to your brood."

I cover my mouth with my hand to hide my grin. I knew that Jasper was loaded, but this gargoyle's frank assessment of his financial means is a weirdly great kind of endorsement.

"Emmerich," Jasper snaps in warning.

He's adorable when he's annoyed, but I don't want to tease him in front of his friend. Instead, I walk to him and loop my arm through his, then smile sweetly up at him when he looks at me. Jasper lets out an exasperated huff, then wraps his arm around my shoulders and squeezes me to his side.

Emmerich watches us with interest, as if he's cataloging our interactions.

"We have found a human," he announces finally.

I blink. "You've found a human?"

"Gods," Jasper curses. "What do you mean, you found her?"

The gargoyle crosses his arms over his chest. "She was in the woods alone just before the snowstorm hit," he explains. "Klaus found her and brought her to our roost."

Jasper narrows his eyes. "He just took a woman from the forest?"

Emmerich nods gravely. "She would have died. Humans are weak."

“And did she...want to be taken?” I venture carefully. “To your roost, I mean. Or did she want to be brought to her home?”

Jasper’s hand tightens on my shoulder, and for a moment, I think he wants me to shut up, but he rephrases my question more directly.

“Did Klaus kidnap someone, Emmerich?” he demands. “Is that why you’re here?”

Emmerich’s dark eyes flare wide. “No!”

His wings snap to the sides, and he takes out a glass of water left on the coffee table. It tumbles to the blankets and spills but luckily doesn’t break. Still, the gargoyle quickly tugs his wings back in and hangs his head. I notice his tail for the first time, swishing anxiously behind him.

“She wants to be at the roost,” he says. “She said so herself. Klaus offered to fly her to safety, but she doesn’t want to leave.”

I furrow my eyebrows, more confused than ever. “Do you need Jasper’s help in getting her out of your home?”

“No,” the gargoyle says again, grinning now. “She is our mate.”

Jasper’s eyebrows climb up. “Uh, congratulations?”

I meet his gaze, and he shrugs, as if he’s just as lost as I am as to why Emmerich is here instead of celebrating Christmas with his newfound partner. To break the tension, I pick up the fallen water glass and hang the wet blanket over a kitchen chair to dry. By the time I return to Jasper’s side, my kraken has settled on the couch, and Emmerich is crouched in the middle of the living room, looking a lot like a Gothic statue.

“We need help,” Emmerich says finally when I sit next to Jasper. “Our roost is not equipped for a human.”

“Ah.” Jasper’s posture relaxes, and he leans back against the pillows. “Right, that could be a problem.”

“Why?” I ask.

Emmerich inclines his head toward me. “Your mate’s home is very beautiful. Ours is...”

“A stone fortress in the middle of the forest,” Jasper supplies.

I try to think of a fortress in the vicinity of Clearwater. “You mean the old watchtower on top of Blarney Hill? I thought that place was haunted.”

Jasper glances at me, his lips pressed together. He’s fighting a smile, and it takes me a moment to understand why.

“Ohh.” The place is haunted, all right, only it’s gargoyles, not ghosts, who have taken up residence, it seems.

But I see Emmerich’s issue. If he and this Klaus guy he mentioned are content to stay at a ruin like that, I’m sure a human would be less than comfortable. Especially in the middle of a massive snowstorm.

“What do you need?” Jasper asks.

Emmerich’s forehead furrows. “Blankets, water, and some food. I would have put on a glamor and gone to the shops, but...”

It’s Christmas Eve. All the shops in Clearwater must have closed at noon.

“We have a fridge full of food,” I blurt out. “And I saw some clean blankets in one of the guest bedrooms.”

I don’t think he and his partners would appreciate the ones that smell like sex. Then I realize I offered up Jasper’s belongings like I own them. I swivel to him, an apology on my lips, but he’s looking down at me with a soft smile.

He leans in to kiss my temple, then says, “We’ll get a bag ready for you. Give us a few minutes.”

He takes my hand, and we gather up some essentials for Emmerich’s human. It feels strange calling her that, but he never mentioned her name.

“Do you think this woman is okay?” I whisper as I take two towels from the linen closet and add them to the rapidly

growing pile. “Should we, uh, insist on going there to check up on her?”

Jasper shakes his head. “I’ve known Klaus for more than a decade. He’s a good male. Emmerich is a sweet guy, too, he wouldn’t hurt a fly. If he says she wants to be there, then I believe him. And I wouldn’t want to intrude on the gargoyles’ territory when they have a new mate. That would be a bad idea.”

We package some fruit, a bottle of milk, and a loaf of sliced bread. Jasper roots through his pantry and produces a jar of peanut butter and a pot of jam, then tosses in several protein bars. I put the folded towels on the bottom of the duffle bag Jasper prepared, as well as one of his sweatshirts and a pair of socks. We put in the food and tuck two blankets and a pillow on top, then carry it out to Emmerich.

“Come back tomorrow if she needs anything more,” Jasper tells him.

The big gargoyle nods in thanks. “We will see you soon. Thank you for helping us, Jasper. And you, too, human Arielle.”

With those words, he stomps back onto the porch, unfurls his wings, and takes off into the night. Jasper slides the glass door closed, then walks over to the fireplace and throws another log on the fire to offset the chill we let into the room. Then he stands and stares at me, expression shuttered.

“What?” I ask, picking up the blanket I set down earlier to help him pack.

He shoves a hand through his hair. “You reacted remarkably well to having a monster literally crash your Christmas.”

I shrug. “He’s nice. It was good to meet your friend.”

He still seems worried, and I get it. He’s waiting for me to freak out like he did when I first arrived here for our Bone-R date. And maybe I’m still in a bit of a shock, maybe I’ll have to process this and I’ll freak out later. But for now, I’m happy to have seen this side of Jasper. He was annoyed by the

interruption that Emmerich presented, but he didn't hesitate to help him out.

I walk to him and put my arms around his waist, leaning my head on his chest. "Your friend knew you'd help him," I say softly. "He came here in the middle of the night, and you didn't turn him away."

Jasper wraps his arms around me. "I'm surprised he came here, actually. The wolves would have been a better choice." He pauses, then adds, "Or maybe not, since the full moon is tomorrow."

I want to ask about the wolves, the gargoyles, and everything. There's so much I need to learn about this world of his—and about him. But now is not the time. I lift my chin and tug his head down for a kiss, then drag him back to our nest on the living room floor, snuggling under the blankets with him.

Jasper holds me close, his large body wrapped around mine. "So, you're still here."

I intertwine our fingers and squeeze his hand. "Still here. And I'm not going anywhere."

His exhale ruffles my hair. "I keep waiting for the other shoe to drop. For you to realize that this is all too much for you."

"Nope." I wiggle closer to him, drawing a pained groan from him. "I'm here to stay. Maybe it's a Christmas miracle."

"Yeah." He kisses the side of my neck. "Merry Christmas, Arielle."

"Merry Christmas," I echo.

His breaths deepen, and I know he's on the verge of falling asleep. But a thought occurs to me.

"Jasper?" I whisper.

"Mm," he mumbles.

"We should send a gift basket or something to the Bone-R HQ."

Jasper's reply is muffled. "Mmkay. Why?"

“Because their matching system is flawless.” I smile in the darkness. “They helped us find each other.”

“We’ll do it after the holidays,” he promises. “Now go to sleep. I have plans for tomorrow.”

I settle in, warm and comfortable with him by my side. “What plans?”

But Jasper is already asleep, his steady breaths caressing my skin. And I find that I don’t care what his plans are—I’ll be here for whatever he has in mind.

EPILOGUE



ARIELLE

E *leven Months Later*
A private island villa, Fiji

I kick off the bedsheet that's tangled around my legs and sit up. The light breeze flowing through the open window cools my overheated body, and I run my fingers through my hair to comb it back from my face.

I can't believe I fell asleep.

A blush works its way up from my neck to my cheeks at the memory of what Jasper did to me in this very bed this afternoon. We'd returned from our little day trip—one that included diving with sharks—to the villa, and barely made it to our bedroom before he ripped my swimsuit off me and fucked me against the wall, then carried me over to the bed for round two. The sex was hot, the urgency between us incredible.

But now my husband is nowhere to be seen.

I grin and glance down at the wedding band that has joined my engagement ring. I still can't quite believe I'm now Mrs. Kraken, as Jasper's friends jokingly call me, or that Jasper managed to convince me that spending our three-week honeymoon on a private island was a perfectly normal idea.

I'd think it's all a dream, but there's the slight sting of sunburn on my shoulders, the pinch in my foot where I grazed a sharp rock when snorkeling yesterday, and I desperately need to pee, so I know it's all real. This is my life now, and I'm loving it. The only thing missing is my husband, and I intend to track him down in a minute. But first, I have something very important to do.

Padding over to the luxurious bathroom with a shower big enough for four people, I root through my toiletries bag for something I hid there, knowing that Jasper wouldn't look

inside because he always sneezes when confronted with all my beauty products at once. I take the slim white package from the bag and tear away the plastic with trembling fingers.

Then I sit on the toilet and carefully pee on the end of the pregnancy test.

The next two minutes are the longest of my life. Okay, so I'm exaggerating, because I've done this before, last month, and the month before that. Jasper and I have been trying for a baby for more than six months, and though I'm aware that it often takes a lot longer than this, my heart thumps as I wait, hope mixing with worry. My period is several days late, which could be due to our travels—or I could be pregnant.

I want Jasper's baby. More than one, if possible, but we have to start somewhere. And I know Jasper is just as eager—he tells me so often, though I've never felt pressured by him. He told me in advance that kraken often take longer to conceive, which has something to do with their size and power, apparently. It makes sense—if they reproduced too quickly, the seas of this Earth would soon become chock-full of giant mythological creatures.

Even knowing this, it hurt every time the pregnancy test showed me a negative result or I got my period. I try not to make a big deal out of it. I've loved spending this year with Jasper, and we'll celebrate another Christmas soon, as well as our anniversary.

The timer on my phone beeps, and I pick up the test, my stomach swooping in anticipation.

And there they are, two pink lines, clear as day.

I blink, then blink again, clutching the plastic stick so hard my fingertips turn white. We're going to have a baby. We're going to become *parents*.

I let out a sound that's half laugh, half sob, then take a quick photo of the test and dump it in the trash. Now I really need to find Jasper to tell him the news. When I first went off the pill, I'd planned on doing some sort of romantic reveal, but

now I just want to throw myself in his arms and share this wonderful thing with him.

But when I race out into the living room, Jasper isn't there either. I frown, listening, but I can't hear his footsteps anywhere. Maybe he went for a swim—but I don't think he'd go without me, especially since he spent all morning in the ocean, making sure I wasn't mauled by the hammerhead shark that decided to swim around us in circles.

Then I notice the folded note on the kitchen counter. It's set so I would have seen it immediately upon exiting the bedroom if I wasn't so giddy from my newfound knowledge. It has my name written on it in Jasper's bold handwriting, so I pick it up and open it.

Arielle,

Come down to the pier.

Love, Jasper

It's short and to the point, and my curiosity is immediately piqued. If Jasper wanted me to know what this is about, he'd say it, so he must have a surprise ready for me. My blood thrums through my veins as I search for my swimsuit—another set, because the one I wore earlier today is irreparably damaged—and pad over to the porch, from which a wooden pathway leads down to the water.

The white sand is soft and warm. My feet sink into it. It's beautiful, but it gets *everywhere*, so Jasper and I have been spending most of our days on the private pier, where I get to lie in the shade of a gorgeous cabana and read while Jasper gets to swim all day long, bringing back fish for dinner—and little treasures for me. So far, I've received two sparkly seashells the size of my palm, four gorgeous pearls that Jasper has promised to have made into a necklace for me, and a gold coin that must have fallen from some long-lost ship traveling through these waters. As much as he claims that he's not really a treasure hunter like his family, he's very good at it.

I step onto the pier and squint at the cabana, but Jasper is nowhere to be seen. My steps scuff on the sun-bleached

wooden boards as I walk toward the cabana. The wind blows the white curtains, sending them snapping, and I realize for the first time that the weather is changing, the still water of the bay much more agitated than before. I check the sky for clouds because I sure as hell won't go swimming in a lightning storm, but there's nothing to worry me yet. The setting sun sits golden above the horizon, and I squint, casting my gaze around to find my husband.

Finally, I reach the cabana. On the low table, next to the paperback romance novel I left there this morning, lies another note, weighed down with a beautiful nautilus shell.

Heart thudding faster, I snatch up the note and open it, scanning the message quickly.

Run, sweetheart.

I stare at the two words for a long moment, confused. Then everything clicks into place, and I realize what Jasper is up to. A jolt of adrenaline slams into me, and I grin, anticipation rising.

He wants me to run? I can run, and considering where I am, he'll never catch me.

Giggling, I spin on my bare feet and haul ass up the pier, back toward the beach. We've done this before—and we have an unofficial rule of the chase that says I have to make it to a locked room to win. When Jasper chased me through his house the first time, we both discovered we love playing predator and prey, but that doesn't mean I want to make it *easy* for him. If I win, I get bragging rights that I bested him, because I always end up unlocking the door in the end. Not that I win often—he's still so much faster and stronger than me.

But this time, I'll win. I know it. I have a good head start, and since he left me the note on the pier, I assume he's already in the water. I have my sights on the bathroom because I don't know if any of the other rooms in the villa have a key. My feet pound on the dry wooden boards. Once I reach the sandy beach, I'll be slower, but if I can make it to the villa itself, Jasper won't stand a chance, I'm sure of it.

I'm four feet away from touching the sand when a massive blue tentacle erupts from the water beside the pier. I shriek in delighted surprise as water rains down on me, soaking me immediately. Spluttering and spitting out the salty water, I duck the tentacle's swiping end and focus on putting one foot in front of the other.

If Jasper's tentacles are currently this size, it means he has transformed to his full form, so he'll have to shift back before he walks on dry land. I only have to evade him for a little longer...

A warm, unyielding tentacle wraps itself around my waist and tugs me to a stop. I yelp, immediately grabbing on for support as Jasper lifts me off my feet and drags me over the side of the pier and into the sea. He moves slowly, and he's so gentle with me, as always, because he knows he could crush me if he wasn't careful, but no matter how I squirm, his grip on me doesn't let up.

Shimmering magic sparkles in the turquoise water around me, telling me he's shifting into his half form. I squint at the waves and spot Jasper hiding under the pier. He laughs at my bedraggled appearance, eyes glowing with mischief.

"Got you," he murmurs when he hauls me close to his chest.

The clear water of the tropical sea laps around us, and the waves settle, as if Jasper in his full form was the one who made the ocean so agitated. It's awe-inspiring—both the thought of him having such an effect on the sea, and the fact that he has calmed down so significantly now that he has me in his arms.

I put my hands on his shoulders. "That was unfair, making me come all the way to the pier first."

He lifts one dark eyebrow. "Hey, you're the one who walked into a trap." He puts his lips to my temple and drags in a deep inhale. "Fuck, you smell good, Arielle."

His voice has turned gravelly and deep, and the tentacle at my waist twitches lightly. Another inches its way up my leg,

the suckers attaching themselves to my skin and drawing a shiver from me. He looks at me with so much love and passion, my heart does a silly little flip. No matter that we've been together for almost a year—I still get butterflies in my stomach.

“I took the test,” I blurt out, unable to keep the secret from him any longer.

Jasper searches my face with his gaze and holds me in his arms. “Are you okay?”

Of course, his first worry is for me. He thinks it's another negative result, and he's worried I'm upset. I love him so much for it—that he checks up on me first, because he wants me to be all right. But this time, I have a different kind of news to share.

“I'm pregnant.” My throat closes up as I say the words, so they come out as a strangled croak, so I repeat them with more force. “I'm pregnant, Jasper.”

He stares at me for a long moment, his golden eyes wide. Then a grin stretches his lips, beautiful, happy, and incredulous.

“Really?” He palms my face with both hands. “You're sure?”

I smile back. “Yeah. Two pink lines and all that.”

“Arielle.”

My name on his lips is barely more than a breath, and then he kisses me, a desperate, fevered kiss that melts my insides.

“Congratulations,” he gasps between kisses. “Is that the right thing to say?” Another kiss. “I'm so happy.” A kiss on my cheek. “And so fucking proud of you, sweetheart.”

I hold on to his shoulders and return every one of his caresses. “I love you. You're going to be such a great dad.”

Finally, he wraps me in his arms and hugs me close. His heartbeat thuds under my cheek, steady and strong. “Gods. I nearly fucked you senseless with my tentacles. Good thing you told me before.”

I scowl and nudge at him until he releases me, then rear back so I can look him in the eyes. “I still want you to fuck me senseless with your tentacles.”

Jasper frowns. “But the baby...”

“Is safe,” I tell him. “And about the size of a pinprick at the moment.”

“I don’t want to hurt you,” he protests. “We should get you out of the water, I don’t want you to get a cold.”

Oh, no.

“Jasper.”

I sink my fingertips into his shoulders to stop him. Not that he couldn’t drag me out if he really wanted to—I have no leverage here. But he only tightens his grip on me and remains still, eyeing me warily.

“If you think I’m going to spend the next nine months without hot monster sex,” I growl, “you’re dead wrong.”

“Thirteen,” he says.

I blink. “What?”

He drags his fingers through his hair, and his expression turns sheepish. “The, uh, the typical kraken pregnancy lasts thirteen months.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose. “Oh god. Okay. We’re going to have to talk about that. But the same issue applies. I won’t have you treat me like I’m a porcelain doll for the duration of my pregnancy.” And when he opens his mouth to object, I roll right over him. “It’s perfectly safe to have sex all through to the end for humans, unless a doctor tells us otherwise.”

Jasper bites his lower lip, indecision wafting off him in waves. “You’ll go to my doctor the moment we return,” he hedges. “She’s a witch, so we’ll be able to tell her everything.”

“Okay,” I agree. “Of course.”

“And she’ll monitor you weekly—” he continues.

But I interrupt him, putting up a hand between us. “Monthly.”

Jasper scowls at me. “Bi-weekly.”

I can’t help but giggle as I shake a tentacle he holds in front of me. “Agreed.” I lean in to seal the deal with a kiss. “But everything will be all right, Jasper. I’m healthy, and the baby will be, too.”

He lets out a long sigh, then kisses me once more, his tongue stroking lightly against mine. “I’m so fucking happy, but also terrified. Is that normal?”

He swims from underneath the pier, and we bask in the last light of the day. The sun is a glowing orange half-moon dipping into the ocean, the water is perfect, and we’re all alone in this gorgeous bay.

“That’s normal,” I confirm, stroking my fingers over Jasper’s cheek. “But now I want to know what you had in mind for me before I told you my news.”

A tentacle slips from around my leg to my inner thigh, teasing its way toward my swimsuit. I gasp, then giggle when another molds itself to my other leg and tickles the underside of my knee.

Jasper’s smile is slow and wicked. “Well, I thought I’d show you what used to happen when a kraken caused a shipwreck.” He pushes back my hair with his hand and loops it around his fist, tugging my head back to expose my neck. “When a kraken catches his prey, he might like to play with it a little.”

I gasp as his lips find my throat. “That sounds good. Yep. Oh, *shit*.”

The tip of one tentacle slips under my swimsuit and teases my ass, the small suckers opening and closing over my skin. Goosebumps erupt all over my body even though I’m almost too hot with the warm water and the heat of Jasper’s tentacles coiling around my limbs.

It takes me a moment to realize that I’m completely immobile now. Jasper has wrapped twin tentacles around my

arms, too, and I'm suspended in the water in front of him, at his mercy.

"I can't even touch you?" I whine.

He shakes his head, his golden gaze mesmerizing. "Not until you scream for me, beautiful."

A strong tug of his tentacle, and the bottom of my bikini is ripped away. My heartbeat speeds up at the gesture, and Jasper groans as he inhales deeply through his nose. Then he brings his hand to the back of my neck and undoes the tie of my top. He wads both pieces in his fist, then tosses them to the top of the pier in an impressive arc.

"Littering is bad," he says, grinning, when I raise my eyebrows at him. "Some poor sea turtle could get tangled up in your hot swimsuit."

My husband is a majestic mythological monster, and he's worried about sea turtles.

"I love you," I murmur. "Do you know that?"

"I do," he says. He brings his lips to mine for a long, carnal kiss. "I love you, too."

He slides the tip of the tentacle that's curling around my thigh higher, and it brushes over my clit. I jerk in his hold, my body aching for release.

"Fast or slow?" Jasper asks, his breath hot on my neck. "Your choice, sweetheart."

"Fast," I gasp. "Please, Jasper."

He pushes his tentacle into my pussy on a long slide, and my body bows backward. The indecently good sensation of his suckers rippling over my inner walls is nearly enough to set me off, but Jasper is far from finished with me. He brings the other tentacle to my ass and nudges inside. By now, I know how to relax for him, though it's hard when he's already pumping the tentacle in my pussy, stuffing me full of his flesh.

Then he breaches my ass with the tip, and I squeeze my eyes shut at the overwhelming sensation.

“Arielle,” Jasper growls. “Look at me.”

I glance up to find him frowning at me.

“Do you still know your safe word?” he demands.

“Winter,” I gasp. “But I don’t need it. You feel so good inside me.”

His tentacles jerk at my words, as if he’s barely holding back. Then he brings me closer to him and lifts me a little higher in the water so he can kiss my breasts, first one, then the other. The tension in his tentacles from holding me up means he stiffens the ones that are stuffed inside me, too, and I cry out, nearly coming from that change alone.

Then Jasper closes his lips around my nipple and unleashes himself on me. The tentacle in my ass retreats, then pushes back in, reaching deep inside me, and I feel it twitching against the one in my pussy. Usually, he alternates fucking me with one then other, but today, he wants me so full of him, I can barely breathe through the sensations coursing through me, and we’ve only just begun.

I said I wanted it fast—but I also don’t want it to end, because it feels fucking incredible to be impaled on Jasper’s tentacles. He’s panting, too, his lips pulled back in a snarl, and I know how good this is for him. Over the past year, we’ve perfected all the ways we can make each other come, and as I hurtle toward my release, I want him to finish with me, too, even if he hasn’t even touched me with his cock yet.

“Mouth,” I gasp. “Now, Jasper.”

His eyes widen for a moment, but he knows what I want. The tentacle holding my right hand loosens slightly—not enough for me to touch his body but enough to free my hand in case I need to tap out—and its tip glides up my arm, over my shoulder and neck, and right to my lips.

I open my mouth, and he slides it inside. It’s salty and hot, and the way the small suckers attach themselves to my tongue should be weird, but it’s just another part of the whole-body stimulation. And I know that Jasper enjoys this so much. Especially when I run the tip of my tongue right in the middle

of the double rows of his suckers, reaching the most sensitive part of him.

“Arielle,” he rasps. “Fuck, I need you to come for me, baby.”

He fucks me faster with his tentacles, pumping in and out. I whimper around his tentacle, my mouth full of it. I love that Jasper’s limbs are so fucking sensitive, and he makes it clear how much he’s enjoying this.

Then he slips his hand between our bodies and finds my clit with his fingertips. One brush over the sensitive bud, and my eyes roll back. I suck the air through my nose, then dip the tip of my tongue between his suckers.

Jasper shouts, his big body jerking around mine, and the twitch of his tentacles inside my pussy and ass is enough to shove me roughly over the edge. I come hard, squeezing my eyes against the onslaught of sensation. I’m only dimly aware of Jasper fucking me steadily through my release.

Slowly, he slips his tentacle from my mouth and releases my arms. I pull myself closer to him and wrap my arms around his neck, clinging to him in the aftermath of our lovemaking.

“Fuck,” he murmurs into my neck. “This was intense.”

I look down between us where the hard length of his cock is fully unleashed from its pocket, the ring of small tentacles twitching around it, ready to attach themselves to me.

I kiss Jasper on the lips and say, “Slowly, now.”

His gaze shines with love. He gently pulls the tentacle from my pussy and cups my ass with both hands to guide me onto his cock. Our bodies meet softly, with lingering kisses and long, deep thrusts. He keeps his other tentacle in my ass, though, sparking wicked sensations inside me, and I adore these contradictions in him.

His cock expands inside me, filling me up so well, and the probing tentacles around his base stick to my skin and my clit, pulsing in time with his heartbeat. My orgasm builds and grows, but I hold back, wanting to fall over the edge with Jasper, needing him as much as he needs me.

When the speed of his thrusts picks up despite him holding back, I know he's close. My nerves spark with my impending climax, so I reach into the water between us and slide two fingers into the slit of his cock pocket, finding the very base of his impressive cock. I've explored it before, curious about his anatomy, and found a rounded part of him that made him twitch the last time I brushed my fingers over it. Now I hook my fingers to caress the spot. Jasper lets out a hoarse shout. I grin, triumph surging through me as his movements stutter.

"Arielle?" He stares at me with wide eyes, his lips parted in shock.

"Don't stop," I beg him. "Let me make you feel good."

At the same time, I press the pads of my fingers onto that spot and massage gently. Jasper's grip on me tightens, and he fucks me hard now, pushing his hard cock deeper into my pussy. His tentacle pumps in my ass, and it's that renewed urgency that shoves me over the edge.

"Jasper!"

My scream reverberates over the water as I clench all my muscles. Jasper groans. His fingertips dig into the flesh of my ass, and he hugs me close, shaking from the force of his release. I roll my fingertips over the base of his cock once more, and he bites down on my shoulder, snarling into my skin.

I'm limp from pleasure, floating blissfully, but I can't help the satisfied smile that curls my lips. I made Jasper lose control, and I love it.

"Gods, Arielle." He kisses the spot where he bit me, then buries his face in my neck. "What the ever-loving fuck was that?"

I slide my fingers from his slit, enjoying the way that makes his whole big body shudder. "I'm thinking like a kraken version of a prostate?" I grin at his blank expression. "You can Google it later. But did you like it?"

"Did I like it?" Jasper squishes my cheeks with both palms and leans his forehead against mine. "Woman, I nearly

drowned us both because my brain stopped working.”

“Oh,” I say. “Cool.”

He snorts out a laugh, then slowly withdraws from me. We both gasp as his cock leaves me, drawing a long string of sticky white cum between us. I see a shower in the near future, but right now, I just want to cuddle with my husband.

As if he can read my thoughts, Jasper swims closer to the pier and guides me gently to the metal steps leading up from the water. He shifts into his human form and follows me up, then picks up a fluffy towel from a stack in the cabana and wraps me in it. I swipe the salt water off my face, shuffle my way to the wide lounge chair, and collapse on the pillows.

Jasper sits next to me, gathers me in his arms, and leans back on the chair. “So... When is the baby due?”

I press a kiss to the underside of his jaw. “If you’re right and it’ll take thirteen months, it’ll be here in January, probably?” Under the towel, I put my hand over my soft belly. “Do you think your witchy doctor will be able to tell us more?”

“I’m sure she will,” Jasper says. “I’ll make an appointment for us the moment we get back.”

“For us?” I ask, smiling.

“If you think I’m not coming to your doctor’s visits with you, you’re wrong.” He squeezes me closer to his chest. “I want to be there every step of the way.”

“Okay, I’d love that.”

I relax with a sigh, looking out over the water. The first stars are popping out on the vast, darkening sky, so much brighter than at home.

“Can we come here next Christmas, too?” I ask. Then I grimace. “Well, I might be too far along to fly this time next year, but you know what I mean.”

Jasper kisses my temple. “Any time you want. And if you can’t fly, we’ll find a place closer to home that’s just as peaceful.”

I smile, because that's it exactly—I love the serenity of this place and that I get to share it with Jasper.

“Deal?” he asks.

I crane my neck to press a kiss to his warm lips. “Deal.”

The End.



Thank you so much for reading Jasper and Arielle's story! If you liked it and you want more, I'm happy to say that Emmerich the gargoyle has definitely caught my interest, so he and his mate, Klaus, will be getting a story soon in *[Snowed in with the Gargoyles](#)*! You can preorder it now.

In the meantime, please check out my orc romance series, which has similar cozy vibes, lots of spice, and size difference issues! You can **[download Her Orc Mate](#)**, a freebie novella with a full happy ending (email me at zoe@zoeashwood.com if you're reading this in paperback!).

Or you can jump straight into the main series by grabbing *[Her Orc King](#)* - it's available in ebook, paperback, and audiobook form!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Zoe Ashwood writes cinnamon roll heroes, no matter how loud they growl.

While she's always been a reader, Zoe's writing used to be limited to diary scribbles and bad (really *bad*) teenage poetry. Then she participated in NaNoWriMo 2015 and never looked back.

A million words later, she's still in love with the art of making up stories—and making her characters fall in love.

Zoe is happily married to her best friend and has two boys who are as stubborn as they're cute. They also have a dog who has more fur than sense but is luckily too damn adorable to be turned into a rug.

The best way of keeping in touch is her newsletter (at zoeashwood.com/newsletter) of Facebook Group ([Zoe's Cabin](#)). You can also find her on social media:

