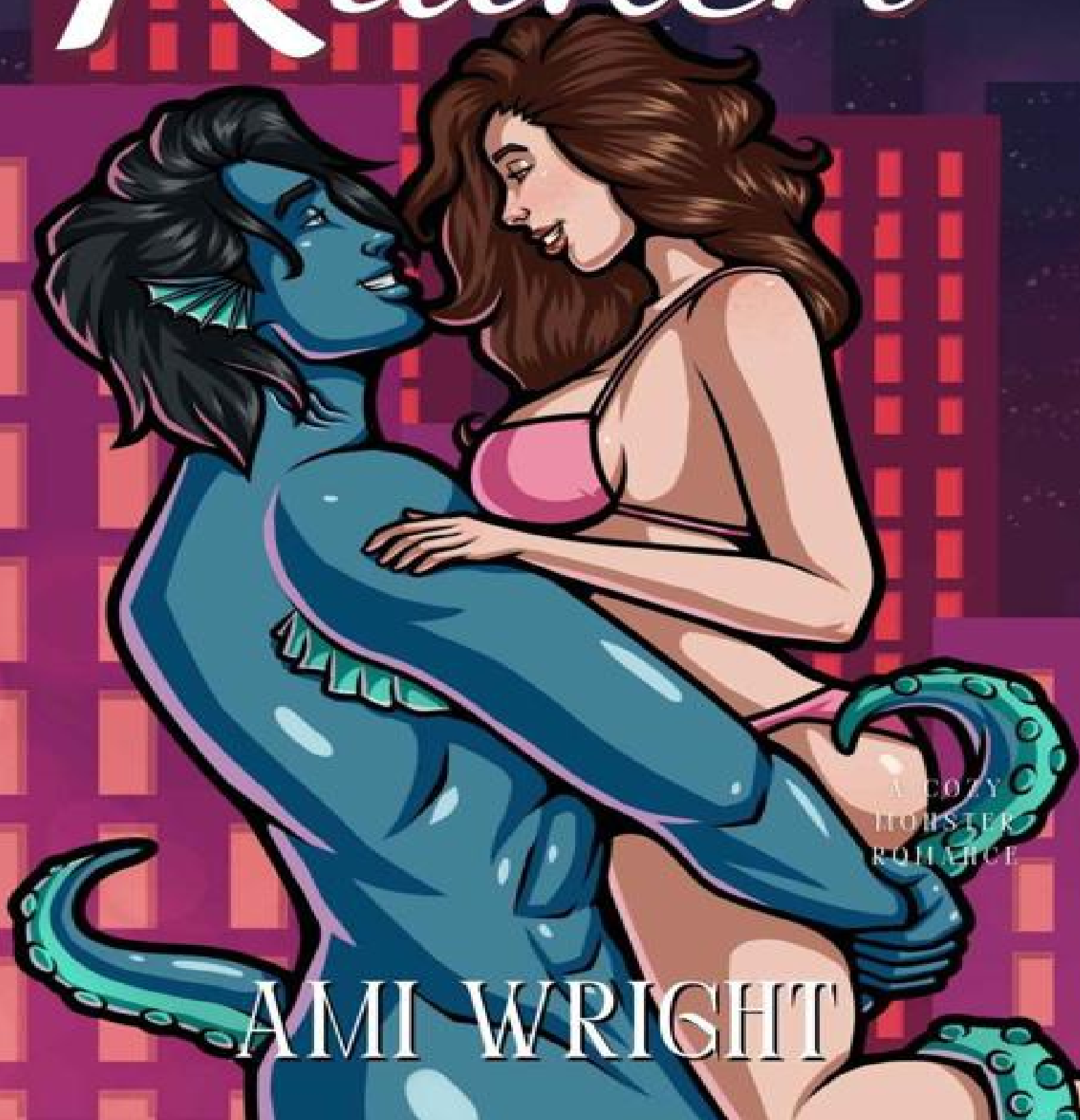


KEPT BY THE *Kraken*



A BOY
HOOPER
ROMANCE

AMI WRIGHT

Kept by the Kraken
Ami Wright

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BLURB

We're only faking, so what happens when I'm really falling for the gorgeous kraken billionaire?

Shelly

I've lost my job and my rent is overdue. So when a monster billionaire offers to pay me to come to his sister's wedding as his fake girlfriend, I'd be crazy to turn him down.

Gudroshcruka is a kraken, but that doesn't bother me at all. In fact, the more time we spend together, the more I find my heart and...other parts, entangled. And it's not just about the way he can't seem to keep his tentacles off me! Rosh looks at me as though I'm special. No one's ever looked at me that way before.

He isn't looking for anything serious, though. Every time we get close, he pulls away. Can I convince him to keep me around when the weekend is over?



Shelly

Beep. Beep. Beep.

I glance at the time on my register and almost groan out loud when I see there's another two hours to go until the end of my shift. The customer in front of me clears her throat angrily and I realize I'm still staring at the screen, not scanning anything.

"Sorry," I mumble.

Quickly, I reach for the jar of anchovies on the conveyor belt and try not to notice the way she folds her arms across her chest and taps her foot. I try to give her a friendly smile, but it does nothing to thaw her frostiness.

As I do, I fumble a can of white beans and almost drop it. At the last moment I recover, leaning forward to catch it before it rolls over the counter. My elbow knocks a bottle of tonic water that teeters precariously. I go to grab it, but I misjudge and it crashes to the ground, exploding in a fizzy bomb of liquid all over the customer's fancy leather shoes.

We stare at each other for a moment. Her thin brows narrow into a look of pure hatred and she stabs a finger at me. "These are limited edition Evarae, you idiot. Now they're ruined. I want to speak to your manager. Immediately."

I swallow. "Yes, ma'am."

Dread creeps in under my collar on spindly little legs as I reach for the 'call manager' button on my register. This is not going to be good. Sheryl is already pissed with me. She found me checking my phone under the counter an hour ago and gave me the 'you're only casual' talk. The one where she threatens not to give me another shift. To be fair, she's done that before, but this could be the final straw.

I deserve it. I know I do. I should have kept my phone in my bag like I normally do. It's just that this guy I've been chatting with on Heart2Heart suggested we might meet up for a date this week and I can't stop thinking about it. I really shouldn't have sent him all ten messages last night, though. He hasn't answered any of them, so now I'm worried I've come on a bit strong. As usual. I'm just so lonely.

Unable to face the angry glares of the customer and the three people behind her in the line, I scurry into the drinks aisle and collect another tonic water. When I get back to my register, Sheryl, my manager is waiting with

her arms folded across her chest. I'd laugh at the way she and my angry customer look almost like twins, except the laughter is smothered by the weight of their disapproving glares.

I hold out the tonic water. "I was just fetching you a new one."

Sheryl sighs. "I think you've done quite enough here for today, Shelly. I'd like you to log out, and I'll speak with you after I've helped this customer."

With a resigned sigh, I swipe my ID card and log out, hurrying to the staff exit and break room with burning cheeks. I've always been clumsy. This isn't the first time it's gotten me into trouble either.

Damn it!

Pulling my phone from my pocket, I see there's a missed call from Jen, my housemate, and exactly zero messages from Ben. I cringe. I owe Jen about three weeks' rent. I've been avoiding her by staying out until all hours, so I didn't have to confess that I don't have it.

While I'm debating whether to call, a message notification pops up.

Jen: Shelly, we need to talk. It's pretty clear you're behind on rent and you're trying to avoid me—

Guilty!

—I'm sorry, but if you can't pay by the end of the week, I'm going to have to let your room to someone else.

Oh, could this day get any worse?

"Shelly," Sheryl's voice is scathing. I spin to see her glaring at me. "On your phone again?"

I lock the screen and whip it behind my back like a guilty teen.

"I'm sure you can guess what I'm going to say."

I wince. "That's my last shift."

She nods. "And...?"

"Um..." I'm not quite sure what else.

She looks at me as if I'm an ugly bit of something she's just scraped off the bottom of her thick soled orthopedic shoes. "You'll have to pay for those shoes. They're ruined."

"But—" My mouth is still flapping open and closed when she continues.

"I'll take it out of this week's pay. Which won't leave you with much I'm afraid, but you really need to learn to be more careful. That's not the first time you've damaged produce or created a spill this month, is it?"

I shake my head.

“You’re really lucky I never charged you for any of the other times.”

I nod. My mouth is dry. There’s no point arguing.

I hang my head. “I’ll get my bag.”

It’s possible I see a tiny bit of sympathy in her harsh blue eyes as I turn to go. It might just be my imagination, though. I can’t look at her again, so I quickly snatch my purse and head out the door into the sweltering heat of another Readstone summer afternoon.

This is the sort of weather that makes me want to be at the beach, or poolside on a lounge sipping a fancy cocktail. Not trudging through steamy city streets wondering how on earth I’m going to pay rent, or find a new job, or do any of the other things I’ve got to worry about now.

I can’t face going home. Not yet. Not when I know I definitely won’t have the money to pay the rent, and now I’ll have to find another place to live as well.

Oh shit.

I stumble to a nearby park bench and flop down with my head in my hands. I’m not going to cry in public. Definitely *not* going to cry.





Gudroshcruka

I stare glumly at the message from my father, listlessly noting the folders tucked behind my monitor are not sitting in a perfect line the way I like them.

Dad: Rosh, please tell me you're bringing someone special to your sister's wedding next week. I know you've been busy with work, but don't wait too long to start your family will you? You don't want to turn around and find out it's too late.

I groan and run a palm over my face. The skin is dry, flaky. That's what happens when I've been too stressed, and I haven't spent enough time soaking.

I knew this would happen. I'm the last member of my family not to find a mate and settle down. Now my sister is officially tying the knot and starting her family, I knew they'd be at me to find a female. I just thought I had come up with the perfect way to buy myself a little more time to ignore them.

I had a brilliant plan. I had a human woman all lined up to be my fake girlfriend, to smile and hold my hand, and pretend we were courting to see if it was a true match. For some couples, it can take a while before the glow appears.

Well all my plans are in ruins now, because the pretty human female just contacted me to cancel our contract. Apparently she's sick. What am I supposed to do now? The wedding starts tomorrow. I'm leaving in the morning. There's no way Monstrous Deals will be able to find me another fake girlfriend on such short notice.

Will they?

Fuck! I have to try. I can't stand a whole weekend of being hounded by every single member of my family and having to answer the same damn questions over and over: isn't your clock ticking, Rosh? Don't you want to be a father? How can a rich, handsome young kraken like you have failed to find a mate yet, huh? Don't your brothers and sisters all look so happy with their clutches? When's your turn?

With a sigh, I log off, knowing I'll never get any more work done while I'm still worrying over this problem. Maybe if I have pressing deadlines, I can use them as an excuse to sneak off to my room and skip half the festivities anyway.

What I need is a drink.

No, what I need is a good soak in a proper brine bath, but I don't have time for that now. A drink will have to do. I know just the place. The Monster Bar is where most of the supes in this area retreat in the evenings or on a lazy Sunday afternoon when we're sick of wearing the human masks we adopt to move about more easily in human society.

They know about us, of course. Have for a few years now. Ever since we came out. That doesn't mean they like the idea of all those tentacles and scales, all that fur, or all those teeth. I scoff. Some humans are pathetically short-sighted when it comes to tolerating differences. Luckily, they're not the ones I want anything to do with usually. And there are some who are more discerning.

Those are the humans who often show up at the Monster Bar, looking for something more.

It's perfect, since the Monster Bar is run out of the basement of Monstrous Deals. I'll go for a drink, try to relax, and while I'm there, I'll beg the owner, Sophia, in case there's someone she can book me with at the last minute.

I stand and stretch until the odd stiffness in my spine softens. It's never comfortable to wear this form for long. I'd much rather be swimming beneath the waves, letting my tentacles free and my skin absorb the salty water. But that's not the reality of my busy life as a real estate mogul in Readstone.

Still, I'm feeling more optimistic as I scan my pass and walk out onto the busy street. Hailing a taxi, I give the driver the instructions, and then put in my earbuds and sit back to snatch what peace and quiet I can. He takes the hint and doesn't chat. I can't fucking stand it when they want to chat.





Shelly

“Hey, I’m sure it’s not that bad.” An old-fashioned fabric handkerchief floats into my vision. It’s got a bright swirling rainbow pattern, and it is so much the last thing I expected to see I sniff and look around.

Beside me on the bench sits a petite woman with short blonde hair cut into a jagged style and long dangly earrings in the shape of stars and moons.

“You look like you could use this.” She gives me a warm smile.

I give her a watery smile back and take the hankie, fidgeting with it, rather than actually using it to dry my tears.

“What happened? Rough day?”

I nod. “Yeah. You could say that. I lost my job, my apartment, and my dignity all in one go.” I try to laugh but it comes out more like a sniffle.

The hippie woman takes pity on me and laughs along. “Well, the good news is I’m pretty sure no one else saw you crying in public. So that’s one thing. Maybe your dignity is safe after all.”

“Oh, god. I’m sorry. This really isn’t your problem.”

“Don’t be silly. I’m Sophia and I work right over there.” She points at an orange-painted terrace house with a green door and a sign out the front that I can’t quite make out. “Why don’t you come in with me and wash your face and maybe have a cup of tea. In my opinion there isn’t much which doesn’t look better after a nice cup of green tea.”

I’m about to say no, but Sophia looks so genuinely pleased to help me that I do what I really want to do and say yes. “I’m Shelly.” I hold my hand, realize I’m still holding her hankie and snatch it back, blushing.

Sophia just takes the hankie, folds it into a pocket somewhere in her voluminous flowery skirt and jumps up from the bench. “Nice to meet you, Shelly. And don’t worry. I have a great feeling about your day. It might not have started well, but I’m almost positive it’s going to wind up being the best day of your life.”

I snort, because I can’t help myself, but her smile is infectious, and I follow her inside the building, glancing at the sign on my way in. Monstrous Deals.

Huh.

I wonder what that’s about?

Sophia leads me into a cozy little lounge and starts making tea. Then she lets out a little tsk and turns. “Sorry, tea might have to wait. That was my bartender. It looks like we’re short staffed tonight. I’m going to have to—” She stops, tapping her finger against her lip. “Unless... You said you lost your job, right? I don’t suppose you’d like to help out behind the bar tonight? I could pay you.”

“Um...” I think of all that glassware. I’m not exactly the best choice, but she looks so hopeful. “I mean, I’ll give it a go.”

She beams me a bright smile and hustles me down the stairs into a classy-looking room with soft music playing and dim lighting. Behind the bar is a tall blond man with his long wavy hair tied back in a topknot and a shirt that reads ‘werewolves do it doggy style’.

“Maurice,” Sophia calls, “This is Shelly. She’s going to help us out tonight.”





Shelly

A few hours later I'm perched on a bar stool while Maurice leans over the bar to top up my drink. Again.

I wave him away. "I'm s'posed to be helping you out, not drinking the bar dry."

He grunts. "Listen, you are helping way more by staying put here and not touching any more of my glasses, you hear?"

I nod, feeling more than a little guilty. But my head is swimming pleasantly and this is a hell of a lot better than going home to face Jen and tell her I can't pay her rent. Besides, Maurice makes the best margaritas. "I promise I'll do all the washing up, OK? And I'll pay for the ones I broke."

Maurice just laughs at me. "No. You won't. But if you're very nice to me, I'll let you mop the floors after closing."

He goes to serve another customer and I sit for a while, swirling the remaining liquid in my cocktail glass and thinking. I really need a better solution for a new job. I just don't know what else I can do. This is the third job I've lost this year.

I'm jolted out of my blackening thoughts when a handsome businessman with a snappy blue suit sits down next to me with a long sigh that tells a whole damn story about his day.

I give him a warm smile. "Sounds like you had a worse day than me! That's saying something. Wanna talk about it?"

He turns to me and I'm arrested by the color of his eyes, swirling with green and gray, and the deepest blue I could imagine. "Why? What happened to you?"

I slurp down the rest of my drink and very carefully place my glass back on the bar. The man reaches out quickly to right it before I can tip it over.

"Well, I think I'm out of a job and homeless, or about to be. Why? What happened to you?"

His brow furrows. "Well, now my problem feels a little trivial, but since you asked, I have to go to my sister's wedding tomorrow and I don't have a date."

Maurice comes over and leans over the bar, bracing on his large palms. "Well, sir, you're in the right place if you need a date for a wedding. Pretty

sure Sophia has pre-made contracts ready for exactly that sort of thing and about a hundred workers on her contact list to choose from.”

I blink over the bar at Maurice. Is he saying Sophia runs an escort service? That’s actually such a cool job. Imagine being paid to dress up, look glamorous, and go out on dates with rich men!

The gentleman next to me sighs. “Yeah, Sophia had someone lined up for me, but she canceled today. I’m guessing she won’t be able to find me anyone at the last minute.”

Maurice grins. Then he looks at me, and back at the handsome man. Then he waggles his eyebrows. “Meet Shelly. She’s looking for work.” He gestures at the gentleman. “And this here is…”

“Gudroshcruka,” the handsome man replies. “Or Rosh for short.” He holds out his hand to me and I take it, loving the way his touch on my skin gives me a little flutter.

“Nice to meet you.”

Maurice’s grin spreads wider. “Well now, Rosh. Why don’t you give me your order so I can leave you two alone to get acquainted?”

Rosh looks at me for a long moment, those incredible eyes sweeping me up and down. Then he smiles. “Yes. A great plan. I’ll have a Wild Ghost Pale Ale and another of whatever Shelly was having, please.” He releases me and brushes a hand over his immaculately tailored pants. “So, Shelly, is he right? Are you looking for work?”





Gudroshcruka

I can't believe my luck. I force myself to look away from the beautiful human long enough to take another sip of my drink so I don't freak her out. It's all I can do to keep my hands to myself. Something about her gives me the strongest urge to get skin to skin. What I really want is to shift into my true form, so I can get a proper taste, but one step at a time.

"So when you say you're looking for someone to go to a wedding with you, what 'sactly are you looking for?"

It's not lost on me she's slurring her words. I didn't realize when I bought her the drink that she might have already had enough. It's really not the way I'd like to make this arrangement, but self-preservation kicks in and I give her a reassuring smile. "I promise you it's nothing onerous. My sister is getting married in Yepra Beach tomorrow, and I need someone to come and pretend to be my girlfriend to keep my parents off my back about settling down myself. Accommodation is all booked. Flights are arranged and paid for. All I need is your time over the weekend and a little light acting."

"So, you don't actually want a... you know?" She leans forward and swirls her finger in the air. I'm struck by the desire to brush a stray lock of hair back behind her ear as it falls forward into her face. That's not like me. Don't get me wrong, I often notice anything out of place in other people's appearance. I just never have the compulsion to do anything about it. But with Shelly, I have the feeling it's more about getting my hands on her body, and much less about my love of things being neat and tidy.

"I don't actually want what?"

Shelly giggles. "You *know!* An escort!"

I shake my head slowly. I didn't include this in the original contract. It wasn't what I was looking for. I'm not celibate. Not even close. This weekend is not a romantic getaway. It's a family function. Besides, I need her to say yes. "No. You'd have to stay in the same room and share a bed with me. It has to look real. And you'd have to hold my hand and tell my family we're courting. But other than that nothing. You probably wouldn't even have to kiss me."

"Oh." Her gaze drops to my mouth and her tongue darts out to wet her lips for a moment that I feel as a physical pull. Then she sighs. "I see."

Is it possible she's disappointed by that information? Moon goddess, I'm an idiot. I should have said the contract included full intimacies. But I can't change it now, I'll look like a creep.

Fuck!

I could slap myself. Sleeping next to this beauty and knowing I could have had her is going to make this weekend that much harder.

Shelly leans forward conspiratorially as if she wants to tell me a secret. I almost laugh when her whisper still practically carries across the whole bar. "Y'know, it's a shame you didn't want a real escort for *tonight*. You're pretty handsome and I really don't wanna go home, ya know?"

OK, it's official. She's definitely had too much to drink. And I am far too tempted by her drunken flirting. Looking for an outlet for my frustration, I glare at the werewolf bartender with the ridiculous shirt. "Just how many drinks has she had?"

He holds up his hands defensively and gives me a stupid grin. "Hey, she's fine. She's a big girl. Why don't you let her decide for herself?"

"Yeah," Shelly chimes in, poking me in the chest. "She's fine. I mean I'm fine. I've only had two. Maybe three. OK, three. And no dinner." She giggles. "Oh, I forgot I didn't eat lunch either." She levels an adorably lopsided frown at me and pokes my chest again. "So no taking advantage of me while I'm drunk, mister."

I catch her hand to stop her jabbing at me again and her lips part as she looks up at me. I should let her go now, but I can't quite make myself do that when she's looking up at me, all soft brown eyes, and small freckled nose, and plump pink lips—

I clear my throat. "Let me call you a taxi and we'll get you home safe."

Those pretty lips turn down into a frown. "I don't wanna go home. My housemate is mad at me cause I haven't paid the rent. Don't make me go home."

I scowl. "Well you're not staying here. Any monster could get his claws in you if you stay here and you're in no condition to sign a contract."

She looks puzzled. "Monster? Like supes? Really? Hey do you know any because I've always wanted to meet one."

I stare at her. Does she not know? What the fuck are the owners doing these days to let a sweet little human like Shelly in here without knowing what she's getting herself into? I scrub my hand over my face and try to think for a moment. I clearly can't trust the staff here. She's not going to go home,

and she's in no state to sign any contract right now. But I don't want to lose my opportunity.

The only course of action I can see is to take her home with me, wait until she's sobered up, and check again for consent in the morning. I tell myself I'll just keep her safe. I won't touch her. Of course I won't fucking touch her.

Waving at the bartender, I pay for our drinks and help Shelly off her stool. She's a little unsteady on her feet and I'm a little too happy to pull her against me and slip my arm around her slim waist. "Come on. You can stay at my place tonight. Nothing funny. Just sleeping, yeah? And we'll talk about the contract in the morning."

Shelly grins at me as if I'm her new hero, while I feel like a mollusk that needs to be squashed on a rock. I make another mental promise to myself not to touch her.

"Really? You're the best. The sweetest, kindest, most handsomest—" She giggles. "Is that even a word?"

I steer her out of the bar and into a waiting taxi, giving the driver the directions for my apartment.

"Hey." Shelly tucks her head against my chest and closes her eyes. "You never answered my question, you know."

I raise my arm, thinking she'll take the hint, but she snuggles close again and it feels far too good to not drape my arm over her shoulders. "What question was that, minnow?"

She hums softly. At my pet name? A ridiculous slip of my tongue, only I can't regret it.

"About supes. Do you know any? You'll have to introduce me."

I open my mouth to answer, unsure how much to say, but her breathing has slowed and when I peek, she's asleep, pink lips parted and a serene expression on her face.

Goddess, I'm in trouble. Big, big trouble. I should be running as fast as I can when the sight of her sleeping on my chest makes an unfamiliar warmth creep through me. Almost a glow. Haven't I said all along I'm not ready to settle down? I have at least five years of hard work ahead of me before my business will be stable and I can start to work fewer hours. Paternity leave is not even on my horizon yet, so a clutch is out of the question right now.

None of this is something I should even be thinking about just because a pretty girl flirted with me when she was drunk. Shaking my head, I try to keep my thoughts on other things as the taxi ferries us to my apartment.

Tucking her into my bed and walking away is one of the hardest things I've done in a while, but I manage it. I feel almost good about myself as I stretch out on the sofa in the living room. I'll call Monstrous Deals in the morning and get a new contract sorted. Then I'll see about finding a new apartment for Shelly to move into when we get home. I could probably even find a job for her in one of my offices. I always need new agents and she has an open friendly demeanor. She could do well in sales.

With my head full of plans for her future, I drift into a deep sleep and dream of home. Something I haven't done in months.





Shelly

I wake in the most comfortable bed I've ever slept in. When I blink open my eyes and stretch, I inhale a warm masculine scent that reminds me of sun-warmed sand and ocean breeze. Then I remember.

I sit so suddenly my head spins and I groan. But when I look to either side on the enormous mattress, I'm alone. OK, so where's the gorgeous guy I went home with?

A tap, tap from the doorway makes me look around. He comes in holding a tray with a large glass of juice and some buttered toast. He looks unreasonably good for someone who might have just woken up. He's wearing light chinos with a white polo neck shirt that is unbuttoned down the front, revealing a glimpse of sculpted, smooth chest. Perhaps he's an early riser and has been waiting for me to wake for hours. Oh god, how embarrassing.

"Hi," I croak.

I can't even remember if we had sex last night. The last thing I remember was falling asleep on him in the taxi. Shit. I probably drooled on him, didn't I?

"Good morning. How are you feeling?"

My stomach rumbles loudly and I clutch at it in mortification. "Sorry. And sorry for whatever I did or said last night."

He smiles. "No. Not at all. You're very charming when you're drunk."

I put my face into my palm and peek at him around my fingers, but he's still smiling. Maybe he means it. "Um... Rosh?"

He nods.

"Did we..." I gesture between us, my cheeks heating and probably turning a violent shade of red.

He shakes his head. "No. Like I said last night, nothing untoward. But I would like to ask you again about our agreement. Just to make sure you really understand what you're signing up for."

Oh, thank god.

But also, I'm just a little bit disappointed. Even if I can't remember it, I'd still love to have bragging rights over having been with someone this gorgeous. Even if I'd never actually brag about it.

I return his smile and accept the breakfast tray, taking a big sip of juice. My head feels instantly cooler and clearer. “OK. Do I remember right that you wanted someone to go with you to your sister’s wedding?”

“Correct. If you agree, we fly out in two hours and we’ll be back on Sunday night. I’ll cover all expenses, of course. Don’t worry about packing. I’ll have someone pick you up some things which will be there when we arrive.” He breaks off, but continues watching me like there’s something else he wants to say, but he’s not sure if he should.

I pause with the glass halfway to my lips. “What? Don’t tell me it’s a theme wedding. It’s not, is it? I mean if you want me to dress up in some silly outfit, I’ll totally do it. God. Sorry. I didn’t mean to be rude.”

He laughs. “No. Not a theme wedding exactly. Only...”

He’s really making me nervous here. My stomach rumbles again and he practically shoves a piece of toast at me. I hastily take it.

“Only you were saying last night you wanted to meet a monster. I hope you meant it.”

I nod. “Yeah. I’ve always wanted to. Why? Is the groom a monster?”

“Ah... not exactly.” He scratches at the back of his neck, shifting awkwardly in place. “I mean, he is, but so are most of the family. And me. I’m a monster. A kraken.”

I almost choke on the toast in my excitement. “A kraken? Really? Oh my god. But you... I mean.” I gesture at him from his tailored pants and bare, clearly human feet up to the luscious dark hair on his head. “You don’t look like one!”

Rosh laughs and the tension breaks. “Well, not right now. No. But I look very different when I’m wet.”

Oh god. There I go totally imagining him wet and half naked, those tailored chinos clinging to his well-defined legs and highlighting the bulge I may have already noticed.

I refocus on his words when he continues. “I’m afraid most of the wedding takes place on the beach and in the water, so there’s no way to escape it.”

Oh dear. I’m definitely in trouble. He is way too gorgeous to be single. How on earth is he single?

Rosh clears his throat and I realize he’s waiting for my answer. I can be cool. I can be collected.

I grin. “This is the best news I’ve had in days. You’re paying me to go on a beach holiday, to a wedding, and I get to meet a real live kraken—a family of kraken? Amazing!”

He shakes his head, but the smile stays in place. “Well, I must say I’m relieved. You’re taking this remarkably well. I thought you didn’t know about the Monster Bar.”

I blink. Then it dawns on me. “You mean, that bar last night was full of monsters just like you?”

He nods.

I slap myself on the forehead and laugh. “I can’t believe I was in a whole room full of monsters and I didn’t even know it. Remind me to ask you sometime how many supes I’ve actually met.”

He gives me a wink and takes the empty tray. “A whole lot more than you think, I’ll bet.”





Gudroshcruka

Shelly is amazing. I couldn't have asked for a better fake girlfriend. Except, the more excited she genuinely seems to be over the wedding, the more she asks me about kraken customs and about my life and listens with rapt attention, the more I'm realizing she's actually the worst fake girlfriend for me. She'd make the perfect *real* girlfriend. The kind I'd actually like to court and see if she was my match. That would be a disaster for me right now.

I spend most of the flight trying to pretend I'm not dying to ask her about her life; dying to lean closer, to reach over and take her hand in mine or drape my arm around her shoulders like I did last night. She just keeps looking at me with her broad smile and soft brown eyes, sucking me in more surely with every pretty laugh and shy blush. Kraken can't drown obviously, but if we could I'd be in danger, because I feel like I'm drowning in her a little more with every minute.

At some point in my eternity of torment, the hostess brings us lunch. "Good afternoon, sir, ma'am. Today's meal is confit ocean trout with mint and cilantro pilaf. What can I get for you to drink, ma'am? Wine, sparkling wine, water, soft drink? Something else?"

"Oh wow!" Shelly grins at me. "I don't know if I've ever eaten anything this fancy. I can't believe we're flying first class."

It makes me feel just a little guilty knowing without her here I might have taken this for granted. It's been a while since I had to worry about money like I suspect she does. Really, when did I ever have to worry about not being able to pay the rent? I worked hard to get my business off the ground, but I can acknowledge my family's wealth was what allowed me to start it in the first place. "Well I'm glad I could give you the opportunity to enjoy it."

"I'll just have sparkling water," she tells the hostess, with a little self-effacing smile. "Better stick to water today."

As the hostess pours the water, I can't help leaning a little closer to her to whisper in her ear. "Don't hold back on my account. You're a terrible flirt when you're under the influence. I rather liked it."

Shelly sucks in a sharp breath and fumbles with the glass as the hostess hands it to her. That's all the warning I get before the entire vessel's contents is dumped into my lap and Shelly shrieks in horror.

"Oh no! Oh my god. I'm so sor—"

I launch to my feet, spilling my food onto the floor, brushing uselessly at the wet patch forming on my trousers. It's no good, though. It's already too late. I can only spare half a moment to hope Shelly is prepared for what's about to happen before it begins.

Water kisses my skin in the way I hear humans describe stepping into the sunshine from a cold room. My body shifts, changing and splitting, swelling and writhing to be let free.

I'm no longer standing on two human legs. Instead, eight tentacles cleave apart, tearing the clothing and twisting as they always do at first, seeking, latching.

Usually, this is not a problem. Usually, I transform in a bath or shower, or in the sea where I have room to stretch out. Not here, though. Here I'm hemmed in by the seats, bound by too much clothing and worst of all, right beside me, eye level with my crotch is the most problematic temptation of all.

In my defense, my tentacles literally have a mind of their own. A tiny brain in each one drives my baser instincts. When I'm in my true form, I can taste my prey in the water, savor the desire of my lovers, feel a hundred nuances I cannot feel when I'm constrained by my shifted form. The drawback: I can't control that animal side of me that has been thinking about wrapping Shelly in my limbs, spreading her wide for my satisfaction, and filling every hole she wants filled until she belongs to me.

A tentacle slides up Shelly's ankle, reaching for the sweet, wet heat between her thighs before I can stop it. Rather than scream or protest, Shelly gapes at me. She stares straight ahead at my hard, straining cock popping through where my pants split. It twitches, and she grips the handrests tighter. Goddess help me, I think I feel her pulse racing through the suckers on my tentacle and it's thrumming just as fast as mine.

You wouldn't think a creature with eight limbs could stumble, but I do, nearly bowled over by the intensity of my reaction to her in this form. I whisk my questing tentacles away from the sweetness of her skin, instantly regretting the loss of her flavor.

Snatching my jacket from the back of my seat, I hold it over my lap and dash for the bathroom. I slam the door shut behind me. Then I lean on the back of it, heart pounding in my throat and tentacles already reaching for the handle in rebellion. What is happening to me? I've never felt this out of control in all my thirty-two years. It's as if—

No. It can't be.

I press my eyes shut tight and pray with everything I have that I'm wrong. Then I look down and see what I've been dreading. Every one of my eight tentacles is glowing with a pale iridescence. Beneath the blue-green of my natural color, they glow silver-white, the color of a mated male.





Shelly

“Rosh?” I tap gently at the bathroom door again, keeping my voice low. “Rosh, I’m really sorry about the water and your pants. I didn’t realize. But I promise no one saw your um...your privates. And I got your bag from the hostess, so you can get changed now. I mean you can change your clothing. You don’t have to change back yet, if you don’t want to. I don’t mind it. I mean I liked it. I mean...” I stop and take a breath. “OK, I’m going to leave the bag here. I’ll just be back at our seats.”

When I get no answer, I set down the bag and walk back to my seat with a knot in my chest. I’ve stuffed up another job. This has got to be some kind of record for me. Less than twenty-four hours! Rosh probably won’t even bother letting me leave the airport. He’ll just put me on the next flight home so he can be rid of me as soon as possible.

The knot moves higher until it’s firmly lodged in my throat. It’s not even about the job. Not really. If I’m honest, I was really excited about attending the kraken wedding and I’m also more than a little bit attracted to Rosh. A very small, very stupid part of my heart even hoped—wished—he might call me when all this is over. That we could be friends. Or more.

I press the back of my hand over my mouth and stare at my uneaten meal on the little table in front of me. The hostess even brought us new meals after I made Rosh spill ours everywhere. God, I’m so clumsy. Why does this always happen to me? I sit there wallowing in self-pity until the soft clearing of a throat beside me makes me look up.

“Excuse me.” Rosh is back in human form, a new pair of navy trousers on and his dark hair neatly combed. He gestures with a tip of his head toward his seat and I scramble to my feet, picking up my meal and pushing aside the table so he can get past.

He sits without another word, looking straight ahead, his jaw set in a hard line.

I hang my head. “I’m really sorry. I understand if you want to fire me, but I swear it won’t happen again. I’ll be more careful.”

“I don’t.” He’s still not looking at me.

“You don’t?”

“I don’t want to fire you. I’m just tired.” He pinches the bridge of his nose. “I’m going to try and get some sleep. You should do the same.”

I nod and sit back in a rush when my trembling legs almost collapse. He's not going to fire me. I have another chance. I promise myself I'm going to be the best darn fake girlfriend ever.





Shelly

Oh, my god. I'm officially the worst fake girlfriend ever. The party is in full swing and I've barely even seen Rosh. When we arrived at the resort, he introduced me to his family, then took me to our room so I could get changed. Someone—my monster fairy godmother, I guess—found four new dresses all in my exact size, each more beautiful than the last. I chose a coral maxi dress and woven sandals. I feel beautiful with the way the floaty fabric swishes around my slim figure and the two thigh high splits expose quite a bit of skin.

Tonight is the formal dinner and the speeches. Tomorrow is the ceremony. My heart races when I think about my outfit for tomorrow. It's basically the tiniest pink bikini known to man, which barely covers any of my bits! Luckily I waxed before the weekend hoping I'd get that date with the guy I was chatting to on Heart2Heart. Now all I can think about is what Rosh will think when he sees me in it.

I roll my eyes and take another large sip of my cocktail. He won't think anything, since he won't even look at me. I think he's still hiding out in our room.

Our room!

I hope things won't be too awkward when we have to share a bed tonight. God, he'll probably be laying there wishing he hadn't taken home the random girl from the bar for a weekend. I just know all I'll be thinking about will be his beautiful eyes and strong jaw and the way his hands on me feel capable and tender and so, so perfect.

I sigh.

Everything here is perfect, except me.

I stare out at the dark ocean through the white fabric draped over the wooden gazebo on the beach where the dinner is being held. Elegant guests move around between the wooden tables decorated with bright tropical flowers. Many of the women are wearing similar outfits to mine with long slits cut into the skirts. The men wear a knee length wrap-around skirt like I've seen Polynesian men wear. I guess it's more practical if you need to transform from legs to tentacles. I wince when I'm reminded again of the incident on the plane.

And OK, I might have told Rosh a little white lie when I said no one saw his bits. Because I'm pretty sure I count, and I'm pretty sure I copped an eyeful when his trousers split. So much so my mouth hung open and I got all hot and bothered. All I could do was sit with the totally indecent throb in my clit at the memory of the long thick appendage covered in the same bumps, ridges, and suckers as his tentacles.

I take a big gulp of my cocktail and fan myself even now at the thought of what that thing would feel like between my thighs.

Rosh's sister, Ceraphcruka, comes across to where I'm sitting with a tense smile. "Hey, Shelly. Have you seen Rosh?"

I shake my head. "Not since we arrived." I have to clear my throat around that familiar tightness. "I think he's mad at me."

"Oh, honey." She sits beside me and puts a comforting arm around me. "My brother is an idiot. I promise you, whatever it is, it's totally his fault."

I laugh at this, but shake my head again sadly. "No. I don't think so. Today on the plane, I spilled my water on him, and when he transformed he rushed off to the bathroom. I think I embarrassed him. And now..." I gesture at the empty seat on my other side.

Ceraphcruka leans back and gives me a narrow-eyed look. "What do you mean you embarrassed him?"

I shrug. "He hid in the bathroom for ages. And then I wouldn't even look at me the rest of the flight."

"But you've seen him naked and transformed before, right?"

I shit. Worst. Fake girlfriend. Ever. "Ah, yeah? I mean, no? My family is really religious. We're waiting for marriage" I stumble over the lie and I know she's onto me.

Ceraphcruka frowns. "Oh, he's such an idiot. Excuse me. I'm going to go find my brother and give him the dressing down he clearly deserves."

I stare after her as she storms across the beach and back toward the hotel. Well, if I hadn't fucked up this job before, I sure have now.

Pushing back my chair, I stumble onto the sand and stagger across the uneven surface and away from the lights of the gazebo and the happy guests. I pull off my heeled sandals and dump them so I can move more easily. The ocean breeze blows my hair out of the loose topknot I styled it in and plasters it to my wet cheeks. I find a dark patch of sand at the edge of the waves and tuck myself into the smallest shape I can manage. Maybe I can just die of shame here and never have to face anyone again.





Gudroshcruka

A violent pounding on my door brings back childhood memories of screeched arguments. “Rosh!”

I groan. “Go away, Ceraph.”

“The hell I will. This is my wedding day and everyone is supposed to do what I say!”

I snort. Of course my sister is the most epic Bridezilla in history. “Just leave me alone.”

“I’m warning you, if you don’t let me in there, I’m going to tell hotel management you’re having a seizure and they’ll break in.”

I sigh. Doesn’t matter how old we get, it always rankles me when she outwits me. I stalk to the door and pull it open so I can glare at her. “What do you want? Can’t you listen? What if I was feeling unwell and I make you sick for tomorrow?”

She snorts and pushes past me into the room. “You’re not sick, you’re just stupid.”

Folding my arms across my chest, I wait for her to continue. Clearly she’s not interested in being reasonable. Must be a case of cold tentacles or something.

“You found her didn’t you?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Your mate! You found her and you’re stuffing around making her think you’re about to send her away. If you’re not careful you’re going to lose her.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose and take a long breath in and let it out. Where my sister is concerned, sometimes it’s best to be honest. “Look, Ceraph. I have something to tell you, just please don’t tell Mom and Dad, OK?”

She groans in frustration, waving her arms about her head like she used to when we were small. “I know you hired her as your fake girlfriend, you loser. I also know she triggered your glow on the plane. Didn’t she?”

My mouth goes dry and my heart thumps in my chest. “Who told you that?”

“No one had to tell me. I worked it out on my own. What I can’t work out is why you haven’t told her yet.”

I groan, pushing a hand through my hair. “Look, it’s not as easy as you think.”

“No.” Ceraph grabs at my sleeve and pulls me around to look at her. “It’s exactly as easy. Just tell her.”

“It’s not good timing, OK? I can’t have a clutch now. I can’t bond with her here, like this. As soon as I go into the water with her, I’ll claim her, and she’ll get pregnant, and then what the fuck do I do about my business? You know things are still done the traditional way. I’d still be expected to look after our children. It’s easy for you. You’re female. You just get to pop out a clutch and go back to work.”

Her glare is murderous. She waves an angry finger in my face and I wish back the thoughtless words. Then the tears start flowing and I freeze. “She might not.”

“Huh?” I stare at my sister, for once completely at a loss what she’s talking about.

“She might not get pregnant. She might never get pregnant. *I* probably won’t.”

“Aw, Ceraph.” I pull her into my arms and she sobs against my chest. “The appointment didn’t go as well as you hoped then?”

“Mhmm. Doctor said there was a five percent chance, but it’s not much, is it? And it’s genetic, Rosh. You could have it, too. So instead of worrying too much about it and letting it get in the way of real happiness, why not look at it as the blessing it would be? Hell, if you don’t want the clutch, I’ll raise them!”

Oh, fuck. Goddess I’m a heartless ass. I hug my sister tight until the tears subside. “I’m so sorry, Ceraph. I didn’t know. I should have known.”

She sniffs and pulls back. “Now I’ll have to go fix my makeup.” She slaps my chest. “Just think about it OK? I don’t even know her well, but I can already see she’ll be great for you. And you never know what will happen. But is your business really more important?”

I sigh. “No. I suppose you’re right.”

“Of course I am. Now go get your mate before she gives up on you.”





Gudroshcruka

There's a sick feeling in my stomach when I enter the gazebo and find no trace of Shelly. I'm too late. I already fucked it up and she's gone. God, I'm an idiot. It doesn't matter if life gets a little messy. What matters is keeping the people you care for close.

A little hand tugs on my sleeve and I look down to see my youngest niece trying to get my attention. Silently, she points out at the beach.

"She went that way?"

Kossa nods.

"Thank you!" Bending swiftly, I press a kiss to the top of her head and rush out onto the beach. The tide is high and the beach is a dark, narrow strip of land. The moon is high and full. It's a beautiful night, but I'm not interested in that. I need my mate. Impatiently, I strip off my clothing and step into the water, instantly transforming. I let out a long groan as the salt water seeps into my skin and my tentacles unfold. Then another, longer groan comes as the taste of pure heaven filters through to me above the grit of sand and the rich, homely flavor of my family. It's her. The rightness of it fills every pore, speeds my movements, has my blood rushing through my veins.

I move faster on eight limbs, crawling across the sand toward a tiny patch of seagrass where a dark figure huddles behind a dune, hidden from the gazebo.

"Shelly!"

She lifts her head and gasps when she catches sight of me. I hope I haven't made a mistake. I tasted no fear on her at the sight of my true form when I transformed earlier, but perhaps in the dark...

"Rosh!" Shelly jumps up. Taking a step toward me, she stumbles in the receding wave. I don't even have to think. I hurry forward and catch her in my arms, holding her against my chest and taking a long, deep taste.

Moon goddess, I could almost be content with this forever. Could drown in her sunshine and crisp apple flavor.

My tentacles and my cock say otherwise. Four support my weight, while four limbs snake around Shelly and hold her against me as my dick swells and hardens, pressed against her belly. Pleasure spears me and I shudder. I may have misjudged how long I'll be able to control myself like this.

"Rosh, I thought you were angry with me—"

“Shhh.” I place a finger over her lips and suck in a breath at the feel of her mouth against my flesh. “I’m not angry. I’m sorry you thought I was. I shouldn’t have been avoiding you.”

“But I told your sister! She found out I’m only your fake girlfriend.”

“That doesn’t matter. It’s not fake anymore. At least not for me.”

Shelly shakes her head. Have I made a mistake?

“What do you mean?”

I wrap a tentacle further around her until the tip comes into view. It’s glowing silver-white like the moon in the night sky. “The glow.” She looks at me blankly.

“Kraken glow when they’ve found their true mate.”

Her eyes widen and she looks up at my face. “You mean I’m...?”

I nod. “You are, if you’ll have me.”

“Of course, I will. I thought you didn’t want me. Why would someone like you want someone like me?”

Cupping her chin, I look deep into her eyes. “Shelly. Don’t talk like that. Of course, I want you. Apart from fate or pheromones, or call it what you will, I see you. I want you. I want the fun and friendly woman who took pity on me and agreed to come on a crazy last-minute trip to help me out. I want the woman who dropped her whole drink in my lap, then brought me a change of clothes and told me no one saw my cock even though I definitely caught you looking.”

She flushes. “Uh, sorry about that.”

I grin. “Don’t be sorry. It’s yours to look at. Whenever you like.”

Her gaze drops immediately to the place our bodies meet and I lean back to let her look. My cock obliges us both by swelling further under her inspection.

I grit my teeth. Iridescent moisture is already beading and glistening at the tip. “Shelly, I—”

“Can I touch you?”

Sweet ocean tides, I’m going to come in her hand just at her hungry look. “Shelly, I’m not sure how long I can hold back. Once the mating bond forms, for my kind... we...” I’m trying to find a way to say this delicately. All I can think about is her wrapping her small hand around my aching cock while I taste her flavor in my soul. She tastes of love and desire and excitement.

“You what? Please tell me kraken have sex like humans, because I’d really really like it if we could.”

My laughter sounds a little wild in my ears. I take her hand and guide it over my cock, barely managing not to spill right then.

Slowly we stroke down and up together, and I savor a few moments of heaven before I have to pull her away again. “I hate to disappoint you, Shelly. Kraken don’t have sex like humans. We do it much, much better.”





Shelly

Warmth that has nothing to do with the balmy summer night courses through me at Rosh's touch and the look in his beautiful eyes. I can still feel the phantom thickness of his cock in my palm and I long to touch him again. Feel the ridges and bumps and the way he pulses in my grip.

Then he bends his head and kisses me before I have a chance. Yeah, it's a pretty good distraction. I'm lucky he's got his tentacles wrapped tight about me so I don't fall. My knees go weak when his tongue slicks against mine, and his lips tease and caress and excite. His hands are everywhere, my butt, my hips, my face. Of course, it's not just hands, but tentacles, too. The brush of textured flesh against my bare calf makes me shiver. We're standing in the water, the waves lapping at my ankles. My shoes are forgotten on the beach, or probably taken by the water by now. I could care less.

Rosh's tentacles are wet, but the sensation isn't unpleasant. In fact, as one slides higher and higher my breath catches in my throat, and I moan into his mouth when the tip slides into the slit in my skirt.

He pulls back, panting, and looks down at me. "Is this OK?"

I nod quickly, not wanting him to stop even for a moment. "God, yes."

He uses a hand to tilt my head to the side so he can kiss tenderly along my neck while the tip of a wet tentacle slides higher still. I tremble when it reaches my mound. Sensation rushes to my pussy, though only the lightest touch grazes over my underwear. Beneath, I'm swollen, and a trickle of moisture adds to the pooling slick gathering there.

"Oh, why didn't you do this sooner?" I lean into his hold when he finally slides under the seam of my panties and pushes into my wet heat.

He groans, and his fingers and limbs tighten on my back and butt. "You wanted me to do this on the plane?" I hear the laughter in his voice, but it's also low and raspy, filled with passion and longing. "Goddess, I would have."

I hardly have the words to reply as he invades me further. The unique texture of his skin stimulates me in a way nothing ever has before. He pulls back, undulating the tip of his tentacle right against my clit and I cling to him desperately. Pressure builds until I can hardly hold it back, but there's still a question at the back of my mind.

Like he senses it, Rosh pulls back, not stopping the attention on my pussy, but not accelerating things either. "You really want to know why I've

been holding back?” His gaze searches mine.

I nod. “I need to know. I need to know what changed.”

“I’ve been so worried about what it would mean if I found my mate. In kraken culture fathers look after the infants. But a whole clutch, Shelly! I don’t know how I’d cope.”

I look up at him, the urgency of my pleasure dulls a little. “And now?”

He looks a little sheepish. “And now someone I hate to admit is a little bit wiser than me gave me some very good advice.”

I grin at him. “Your sister?”

He mock scowls, then his expression clears into something more serious. “She told me I might have a genetic condition, which could make it hard for us to even have children. Would that bother you?”

I shake my head. “I’ve always been a big believer in just going with the flow and seeing where life takes me.”

He shakes his head, a smile on his lips. “And that’s why you’re perfect for me. I need a little more of that energy in my life, I think. You want this then? My claim?”

I nod. “Of course.”

Then on your knees, my treasure. I told you kraken do it differently. There’s something you need to do before I can fuck you properly.”

Obediently, I get to my knees in the sand. Waves swirl flirtatiously up my legs. Rosh’s hand caresses my cheek. “You need to drink the first load to help your gills to grow.”

I blink up at him. “Gills?”

He nods. I’d laugh, except I can tell he’s being serious. “It will allow you to breathe underwater when I claim you, which is done beneath the surface.”

Oh my freaking god. I’m going to have gills like an actual mermaid. I’m grinning right up until he takes his cock in hand and directs it into my mouth. I moan when the salty fresh flavor of him coats my tongue and the ridges play against my lips. I can already imagine how good he’s going to feel inside my pussy.

I slide down, taking as much of him as I can. He watches me, and the look in his eyes is one I want to bottle. The green-blue swirls with passion and intensity as I bob my head, hollowing out my cheeks to suck him.

Rosh groans. His hand cups the back of my head so carefully. Then he’s directing my movements until we both speed up and he’s spilling warm, salty

liquid down my throat with a deep, guttural sound that makes me clench my thighs together.

He pulls back before I'm finished with him, and I'd almost be embarrassed at the little whine that leaves my lips. Only, his thumb gathers the moisture that spills from the corners of my mouth and wipes a trail along my neck beneath my ear where the skin is already tingling.

He repeats the process on the other side, and the strangest feeling comes over me. It's like gasping for breath, only I'm getting enough air. But I'm breathing through the brand new gills which have opened on either side of my throat.

He grins at me. "There's my good girl. You ready to find out how kraken do it?"

"Yes, please." I frown a little when I notice his cock has softened, but he tips my chin up, then helps me to stand.

"Don't be disappointed, little minnow. I have plenty of ways to satisfy you until I'm ready again."

Understanding dawns on me when two tentacles slide up the insides of my thighs, finding their way to my needy pussy. My knees buckle and Rosh catches me up, diving backward into the waves, rolling. We tumble into the water in a rush of bubbles and motion I can't follow. I don't know which way is up or down. I can't tell where the surface is and for a moment, I panic and clutch him. Then he brings his lips to mine, breathing air into my lungs with a kiss that gives more than it takes until I calm.

Rosh holds tight to me, moving us through the water with effortless grace. Without pausing, he kisses me sweetly. Finally, I feel my new gills open and water rush in. It doesn't feel the way you'd expect. It's nothing like swallowing water or accidentally breathing it in. It feels like breathing air, only richer, more satisfying. Soon, I'm used to the feeling and love the way it means I don't have to break off our kiss.

Soon, we're deep below the waves. The ocean is dark except for the pale light from Rosh's glowing tentacles. Those tentacles are everywhere, moving over my body in an all-consuming possession, leaving me reeling. Suction over my clit makes me gasp and I let out a stream of bubbles as I try to moan. Rosh's laughter sounds deep and reverberates in the water, as if it travels through me, warming me.

Another two tentacles curl around my breasts, teasing the nipples and driving me close to orgasm already. The tentacle on my pussy slides deeper,

the tip feeding into my channel and curling to find a spot that has my fingers digging into Rosh's shoulders. He doesn't let up on the suction over my clit, either. Soon I'm taking more of him, squirming and writhing at the sensation of being filled.

When a fourth tentacle slips through my wetness and up into my other hole, I nearly black out for a moment. Pleasure clamps my pussy tight around his invasion, and then the tentacle at my ass slips inside and I'm coming. I throw back my head, giving up on everything but the sensation of him holding me, possessing me. My body clenches around him over and over. A tide of feeling washes through me until I'm a shuddering mess.

When I'm done, his limbs slide slowly from me and he brushes a bubbly kiss over my brow. Regaining awareness of my surroundings, I realize there's a hard throbbing pressure at my belly, slipping lower as Rosh maneuvers me in his arms. His eyes speak the question he doesn't need to ask.

Reaching between us, I grasp his cock and guide him into me and watch as his eyes flutter closed. His jaw tenses when his hips thrust and he enters me. His eyes open and his gaze locks on me as he begins to move faster. Our bodies undulate in the water and pleasure blooms inside me again, more slowly this time.

His lips move to trace words I can't hear out loud. *My treasure. Be mine.* His eyes and hands and mouth on me tell me what I can't hear beneath the water. I hope mine do the same as I wrap my legs more tightly around him and move with him as much as I'm able.

We reach the final peak together. Rosh digs his hands into my ass and buries himself deep. His beautiful features strain in a final surrender to his pleasure. The sight tips me over the edge and we float to the surface as the feeling crests.

When my head breaks between the tiny white-tipped waves, he pulls me back against his chest and I look up at the fat, round moon. I don't know if our joining will bring us the babies he was anxious about, or if we'll ever be able to have children. I do know that whatever the future brings, it looks a lot brighter with my own caring, devoted kraken. And if we do ever fall pregnant, he'll make the best father and the best mate ever.