MIDLIFE MONSTERS

Stories of Desire, Second Chances & the Things That Go Bump in the Night

by Maven Ashcroft

A Collection

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Fixer-Upper

A Midlife Monsters story by Maven Ashcroft

One

Marnie Dolan got the house in the divorce, and the house, it turned out, had opinions.

The first was about the kitchen sink, which wept. The second was about the hallway floorboards, which sang. The third arrived at two in the morning on her first night as a single woman in twenty-six years, in the form of a sound from the cellar like a very large animal clearing its throat to be polite.

She went down in her robe with a cast-iron skillet. She was fifty-two. She had survived two teenagers, a mother-in-law, and a husband who referred to sex as "taking care of that." She was not going to be frightened by a coal cellar.

The bulb at the bottom of the stairs swung on its cord. Shadows slid across the shelves of dusty jars. And at the far end, hunched under the low beams, stood something broad and dark and very, very tall, with horns that curved up into the rafters.

"Please don't hit me with the pan," it said. The voice was low enough to rattle the jars. "I had a speech prepared. It had a great many apologies in it."

Marnie lifted the skillet higher. "What the hell are you?"

"Bram. I keep the house." He stepped into the light, one careful hoof at a time, like a man who knew exactly how big he was and was sorry about it. Seven feet and then some. A hide the color of wet bark. A heavy, handsome bull's face, with dark eyes that were far gentler than she expected. He wore a leather tool apron and nothing else, and his hands were the size of dinner plates. "Greg's grandmother and I had an arrangement. I live here, I keep the roof on. Greg never came down to the cellar."

"Greg said basements were for storage."

"Greg," said Bram, with great dignity, "was storage."

Marnie laughed. It surprised her, a big ugly honk of a laugh that bounced off the stone, and she kept laughing until she had to sit on the bottom step with the skillet in her lap and her eyes streaming.

Bram waited. He didn't come closer. He stayed exactly where he was until she could breathe again.

That was the first thing she noticed about him. He waited.

Two

He fixed the sink the next morning. She watched him lie on the kitchen floor with his horns tucked sideways under the cabinet and his big hand working a wrench like it was a teaspoon,

and she was ashamed of the thought that went through her head, because it was a very specific thought, and it involved the width of his shoulders.

He fixed the floorboards that week. He rehung the back door. He rewired the porch light. Every evening she brought a mug of coffee down to the cellar, and every evening they sat on the steps and talked. He asked questions and then actually listened to the answers. He remembered things. When she mentioned she hated how the front hall smelled like old shoes, he showed up the next day with cedar blocks.

The house told her its secrets slowly, the way old houses do, and Bram told her the rest.

Edith Dolan, Greg's grandmother, had bought the place in 1961 and gone down to the cellar to look at the furnace and found a minotaur sitting on an overturned bucket. They had settled the matter over a pot of tea. His labor for a roof, no questions, no landlord. "She was the only person who ever looked at me and said, Well, you're a big one, aren't you," Bram told her, "and then asked if I took my tea sweet." He had kept the house through three roofs, two floods and a pipe-bursting winter. The kitchen sink wept because the fitting had been wrong for forty years, and Greg's mother, and then Greg, had never once let him come upstairs to fix it.

"You could have just come up," Marnie said.

"I was not invited." He said it simply, the way another man might say it was raining. "I am a guest in this house. I do not go where I am not asked."

She thought about that all week. She thought about it while she sanded the hall floor. She thought about it on Saturday, when the doorbell rang and she opened it and found Greg on her porch in the quarter-zip she had bought him, holding a manila folder and wearing the smile he used when he was about to say something reasonable.

"Marn," he said. "You look well."

"Greg."

"I won't keep you." He was already stepping past her into the hall, glancing around with the air of a man appraising a used car. "Mother wants Grandma Edith's clock. It's a family piece. And honestly, Marn, I've been thinking, a place this size is a lot for one person. You've always been so accommodating. If we listed it and split the proceeds, you'd be spared the stress."

There it was. The old reflex rose in her like a tide. Can I get you a coffee? Did you eat? Let me wrap up some of the lasagna. She actually had her mouth open on the first word.

She closed it.

"No," said Marnie.

Greg blinked. "No to the clock?"

"No to all of it. Take the clock. It's hideous and it never kept time. And then leave, because this is my house." Her heart was hammering and her voice was perfectly steady. "I got it in the divorce, Greg. Fair and square. I'm not selling."

He gave a little tight laugh. “You can’t possibly manage it alone.”

“I’m not alone.”

He didn’t hear that. He was already looking at the cellar door. “I’ll just grab the old boxes from the basement while I’m here—”

“Greg, I wouldn’t—”

He opened the door. The cellar stairs dropped away into the dark, and from the dark, calm and courteous and carrying a faint rumble like thunder in a barrel, a voice said: “Good afternoon, Greg.”

Greg went the color of skim milk. The folder slid out of his hands. Hooves clicked on the steps, slow and heavy, one at a time, and a pair of curving horns rose into the light of the hall, scraping the lintel, followed by a great dark bull’s head and a pair of very patient eyes.

“You have not been in my cellar in nineteen years,” said Bram. “I would prefer you didn’t start.”

Greg made a noise like a squeaky toy. He backed into the umbrella stand. He grabbed the clock, which weighed a hundred and fifty pounds, and he carried it, wheezing, out the door and down the walk and into his car, and Marnie stood on the porch and watched him go until she couldn’t see the taillights.

Then she started laughing, and found she couldn’t stop.

Bram came out behind her, ducking under the frame. “I did not mean to frighten him,” he said.

“Yes, you did.”

A pause. “Yes. A little.”

She wiped her eyes. The laughter wobbled, and went to something else, and her hands began to shake. She had said no. She had said it out loud, to Greg’s face, and the sky hadn’t fallen. Bram didn’t touch her. He only sat down beside her on the porch step, a huge, warm, silent presence, until the shaking passed.

“You were magnificent,” he said at last.

“I said take the clock.”

“You said it like a queen.”

Marnie leaned her head against the broad wall of his arm, just for a moment. He was warm. He smelled like cedar and sawdust and rain. She felt a soft, shocking, delicious ache bloom low in her chest.

That was the evening she brought down the coffee, and the evening they really talked.

When she told him about the divorce, he didn’t say he was sorry. He said, “What did you want, all those years?”

Nobody had ever asked her that.

“I wanted,” Marnie said slowly, turning the mug in her hands, “to be wanted. Not tolerated. Not scheduled. Greg did it Sunday nights with the lights off, like paying a bill. For twenty-six years I was polite in bed. I said thank you. God help me, I said thank you.”

Bram’s nostrils flared. A low rumble moved through the stone under her feet. “I don’t know how to be polite,” he said. “I only know how to be attentive.”

Her pulse kicked hard in her throat. “What does that mean?”

“It means,” he said, very quietly, “that I have been listening to you walk around this house for three weeks. I know when you’re tired. I know when you’re sad. And I know the sound you make when you’re alone in your bed at night and you think no one hears.” His dark eyes held hers. “I hear it, Marnie. I hear all of it. I’ve wanted to answer for days.”

She should have been mortified. Instead, heat bloomed low in her belly and spread all the way to her fingertips.

“Say it plainly,” she whispered. “Nobody ever has.”

“I want to put my hands on you until you scream the house down. I want to learn every inch of you and then I want to fill you with my cock. I want you loud. I want you rude. I want you to stop saying thank you and start saying more.” He swallowed. “If you want that too. Only if you want it.”

Marnie put down the coffee. She stood. She reached up, and up, and curled her fingers into the thick hair at the base of his horn.

“Upstairs,” she said. “Now. And Bram? I want it all.”

Three

They never made it past the kitchen.

He kissed her against the counter until her knees went, and when his big hands found the knot of her robe, she caught his wrists.

“Wait,” Marnie said. Her face was hot. “The light’s on.”

“I know.” He did not move his hands. “I have been waiting three weeks to see you in it.”

“Bram.” She laughed, a thin, nervous sound, and hugged the robe tighter. “I’m fifty-two. Gravity and I have had some conversations. Things have, you know. Migrated. Greg used to say I’d settled.” She stared at his chest instead of his face. “I just don’t want you to be disappointed.”

Bram made a low, rumbling noise, not quite a growl. He lowered his head until his dark eyes were level with hers. “Settled,” he said slowly. “Like a good house settles. Like a foundation, after it has been standing long enough to hold everything.” He turned her wrists over and kissed each one. “May I show you what I see?”

She couldn’t speak. She nodded.

He untied the robe. He did it like a man unwrapping something priceless, and when the fabric fell away and her breasts spilled free, heavy and soft and a little lower than they used to be, Marnie shut her eyes. She heard the breath leave him.

“Look at me,” said Bram, very gently.

She opened her eyes. He was staring at her breasts the way other men stared at magazine covers. His lips had parted. His nostrils flared. A shudder rolled through his enormous frame, and the look on his bull’s face was so naked, so starving, that her knees nearly went out from under her.

“Gods,” he whispered. “Marnie.”

He cupped them. His hands were so big that each breast filled a palm and then some, and he lifted them with a reverence that made her heart stutter, thumbs dragging slowly over her nipples until they peaked hard and aching. “So soft,” he said hoarsely. “So heavy. Look how they fit my hands. They were made for my hands.” He pressed his face between them and inhaled, and a deep, shaking groan ripped out of him. “I could lose myself here. I could stay here until the house falls down.”

“Bram,” she gasped.

He kissed the swell of one breast, slow and open-mouthed, then the other. He mouthed the soft underside and the tender curve and the freckled skin under her collarbone, as if he were memorizing a map. When his hot, rough tongue finally dragged across her nipple, Marnie’s head thunked back against the cupboard and she cried out. He sucked. He drew it deep into his mouth and worked it with his tongue, and his other hand kneaded and shaped and worshipped the second breast, thumb flicking, until she was clutching his horns and arching into him, shameless, wet, helpless.

“You look at me,” she panted, “like I’m twenty-two.”

“I have seen twenty-two,” said Bram, lifting his head, her nipple glistening and swollen beneath his thumb. “It did not look like this.” He kissed her, once, hard. “You are the most beautiful woman I have ever laid eyes on. I will say it every day until you believe me. And then I will keep saying it.”

She laughed, wet-eyed and shaking. Something in her chest that had been clenched for twenty-six years finally let go. She slid her hands up his chest and shoved, and when she finally pushed him back, breathless, he went still at once, hands lifting away as if she were a hot stove.

“I’m not stopping,” Marnie said. “I’m rearranging.” She pointed at the kitchen chair. “Sit.”

He sat. The chair groaned under him. Marnie sank to her knees on the cold tile between his massive thighs, robe hanging open, and untied the leather apron with fingers that were only a little unsteady.

He was bigger than anything she had imagined. Thick and heavy and ridged, flushed dark with want, a pearl of wetness already gathering at the tip. Marnie wrapped both hands around him and he shuddered all over, horns scraping the ceiling lamp.

“Careful,” he rasped. “I have waited a long time.”

“So have I.” She licked the pearl from the head, slowly, and his skull thumped back against the wall with a groan that rattled the cupboards. She took him into her mouth, as much as she could, and worked the rest with both hands, long slick pulls that made him curse in a language she didn’t know. Her tongue circled the flared crown. The sounds were wet and filthy in the quiet kitchen, and she had never in her life been prouder of a mess.

“Marnie,” he gasped. “Marnie, I am close, you must—”

She pulled off with a wet pop and looked up at him, lips swollen, chin slick, eyes bright.

“Not in my mouth,” she said. “On my face.”

Bram went absolutely still. His nostrils flared. “You want that?”

“I’ve never done it. Greg would have fainted.” She stroked him, slow and tight, twisting at the head the way she’d learned he liked. “I want to feel it. I want you to mark me. I want to look up at you while you come all over my face and know it’s because of me. Do you want to?”

“Gods,” said Bram, shaking. “Yes. Only if you are certain.”

“I’m telling you. Come on my face. Make a mess of me. I want to wear it.”

She tipped her face up, closed her eyes, and opened her mouth a little. She stroked him fast and hard in both hands, slick and relentless, the wet rhythm loud in the quiet kitchen.

“Marnie.” His breath came in great ragged bull-huffs. “Marnie, Marnie, I cannot—”

“You can.” Her voice was low and urgent. “Give it to me. Come on, big boy. Give me all of it.”

He lasted four seconds. The sound he made came up from somewhere below his ribs, a deep, shuddering rumble that built and built and broke into a roar that cracked a plate on the drying rack. Then she heard it, a wet, heavy slap against her cheek, and another across her lips, and a third, hot across her chin and one closed eyelid, spilling down her throat onto the swell of her breasts. It kept coming. Marnie gasped, and then moaned, long and low and shaken, and tasted salt and heat and a faint, strange sweetness.

“Oh,” she breathed. “Oh, that’s warm. Oh, that’s so warm.”

When it was over she sat back on her heels and opened one eye, painted and dripping and grinning like a girl who had gotten away with something.

“Well,” she said, voice rough. “That’s a first. And I want it again.”

Bram stared at her like she was the sun. “You are the most beautiful thing I have ever seen.”

“I look like a disaster.”

“A magnificent disaster.” He found a dish towel and wiped her face with absurd tenderness, one gentle swipe at a time, until she was laughing too hard to hold still. Then he stopped, and looked down at himself, and Marnie followed his gaze.

He was still hard. Not remotely finished.

“Oh,” she said, with enormous satisfaction. “Good. Because I’m not done being painted.”

She stood, shrugged off the robe, and bent over the kitchen table, bracing her palms on the wood. She looked back over her shoulder and saw his whole body tense with restraint.

“Slowly,” she said. “And then not slowly. I want to feel every inch.”

He pushed into her one inch at a time. She was so full she couldn’t speak, stretched to the edge of what she could take, and she moaned, long and low, because it was perfect. He held still, trembling, one huge hand flat on her lower back, until she rocked against him and took the rest herself.

“Marnie,” he said hoarsely. “You’re so tight. So hot. Look at you taking me.”

“Move.”

He moved. Deep, steady strokes that built and built until the table was walking across the floor and she was clutching the edge with white knuckles, shouting his name at the ceiling. His hand slid around to find her clit and rubbed in tight, merciless circles.

“That’s it,” he growled against her shoulder. “Let me hear you. Fifty-two years old and getting fucked over your own kitchen table by a minotaur. You’re dripping down my cock. You’re perfect. You’re so fucking perfect like this.”

“Bram— oh God, Bram, I’m—” Her voice cracked up into a high, startled cry, and she broke apart, sobbing his name, clenching around him so hard he roared, a huge, wrecked bull’s bellow that rattled the cupboards. His hips slammed once, twice, and he buried himself deep and came again, pulsing hot inside her, grunting her name into her hair, while she shook and gasped and laughed and cried, all at once, in no particular order.

They stayed there for a long time, his chest heaving against her back, his lips pressed to her shoulder.

“Thank you,” said Marnie, out of pure habit, and then burst out laughing.

Bram laughed too, a deep, helpless sound that vibrated through every inch of her. “That’s the last one,” he said. “I’m going to fuck the manners out of you.”

Four

He made good on it.

He made good on it in the bed first, and she made sure the lamps were on.

All of them. The bedside lamp, the dresser lamp, the overhead fixture with the ugly shade she had been meaning to replace. She walked around the room switching them on one by one while Bram sat on the edge of the mattress with his hands flat on his thighs, watching her with an expression of pure, bewildered hope.

“The light’s on,” said Marnie.

“I noticed.” His voice was rough as gravel. “Marnie.”

“Don’t talk. Not yet.” She stood in front of him in the full yellow glow, in nothing but her bare feet and the soft, heavy fall of her own body, and she made herself keep her arms at her sides. It was the hardest thing she had done in twenty-six years, and somehow also the easiest. Her belly. Her thighs. Her breasts, lower than they used to be, freckled and heavy and still marked from his mouth. “Look. Look as long as you want.”

He looked. He took his time about it, from her toes to her face, and by the time he got there his big chest was heaving and his hands had curled into the bedspread hard enough to tear it.

“I want,” he said carefully, as though each word cost him, “to put my mouth on every inch of that. I want to stay in that light until the sun comes up.”

“Not every inch. Not yet.” She climbed onto the bed and into his lap, a knee on either side of his hips, and took his horns in both hands. “First you keep your hands where I put them.” She guided them to her breasts. “And your mouth right here.”

He made a sound like a dam cracking.

She sank onto him while he sucked her, slow, with his rough tongue dragging hot across one nipple and his big hand shaping and squeezing the other, and the double sensation, the stretch below and the pull above, went through her like a wire. She rode him with her fingers locked around his horns and her head thrown back, every light in the room on, and she let him see. Her belly rolling. Her breasts swaying in his hands. The flush spreading across her chest. She had spent twenty-six years in the dark, and she wanted him to see every second of what he did to her.

“Look at me,” she gasped, and he lifted his dark eyes, mouth wet, her nipple swollen between his lips. “Tell me what you see.”

“A woman,” said Bram, ragged, “who is the most beautiful thing in this house. In this town. In the world.” He sucked her harder, and she cried out. “I see you taking me, and I see you shining, and I would burn every other light in the world to keep this one on.”

“Again. Say it again.”

He said it again. He said it into her skin, against her nipple, in the gravel voice that went straight to her knees, while she ground down on him and rode them both toward the edge.

“Bram,” she gasped. “Bram, I’m going to— Don’t you dare stop—”

“Never.” The word came out as a growl against her breast. “Come for me, Marnie. Let the whole house hear.”

She did. She came on his cock with his mouth on her breast and her fingers in his horns, shouting his name at the ceiling, again and again, until it cracked in the middle. He came with her, roaring into the curve of her breast, a deep, shaking, grateful sound, shuddering up inside her and holding her so tightly she thought he might never let go. When it was over she stayed in his lap, sweat-slick and boneless, breathing like a runner, with every lamp in the room still burning, and did not turn off a single light.

He made good on it in the shower, against the tile, her leg hooked over his arm. He made good on it on the stairs, in the hallway, and once, memorably, over the very washing machine that had always been Greg's idea of a hobby.

She told him what she wanted, and he gave it to her. She told him to go harder, to go slower, to make her wait. She told him to stand there and let her touch herself while he watched, and she came with her eyes locked on his, and he never looked away. She learned the sound he made when she took him deep in her mouth, a low, shaken groan like a man being pulled apart. She learned she could make a seven-foot minotaur beg.

She was fifty-two, and she had never been so loud in her life.

By spring the house was nearly fixed. The sink no longer wept. The floorboards stopped singing, except on the nights when they had a reason to. Bram's cellar became a very nice guest room, in case anyone visited, which no one did, because the neighbors had started leaving casseroles on the porch and fleeing.

"You know," Marnie said one morning, curled against his chest, her fingers tracing the ridges of his horn, "I got the house in the divorce."

"So I hear."

"I think I got the better end of it."

Bram rumbled, warm and amused, and tilted her face up so he could kiss her. "Marnie Dolan," he said, "I intend to keep you very busy."

She grinned against his mouth. "Promises, promises."

"I never promise," said the minotaur. "I only fix things."

And he proceeded to fix her again, thoroughly, until the whole house sang.

End.

Keeper of the Light

A Midlife Monsters story by Maven Ashcroft

One: Harrow Point

The lighthouse had been Tom's dream, and then it was Ruth's problem.

Three years after the funeral she finally drove out to Harrow Point to deal with it. She was sixty-one years old, a widow, in sensible boots, carrying a clipboard and a plan: walk the property, call a realtor, be on the road home before the weather turned. The tower stood white and scarred against a bruise-colored sky. The keeper's cottage leaned beside it like a tired friend.

The porch rail she remembered as rotted through was whole.

She stood in the gravel and frowned at it. The paint was fresh. The nails were new. Someone had replaced the rail, and the loose step beneath it, and had even wired a hanging basket of sea thrift to the post, which had no business surviving a winter on this coast.

“Tom,” she said aloud, a bad habit she hadn’t broken, “did you hire someone and not tell me?”

The wind had no answer for her. It only pushed salt into her hair and rattled the dead lamp up in the tower, and Ruth went inside to find the light switch for the cottage and discovered that the electricity, which she had stopped paying for two years ago, was on.

She checked her purse. The shutoff notice was still in it, folded in thirds.

“Well,” she said to the empty kitchen, “somebody’s paying a hell of a bill.”

Two: The Logbook

She meant to stay one night. She stayed four.

There was too much to sort. Tom’s coats still hung by the door, stiff with old salt. His reading glasses sat on the windowsill, where she had left them the week before the ambulance. She hadn’t cried in the house since the funeral. She had thought that if she came back and cleaned it all out fast, she wouldn’t have to.

It was the little things that didn’t add up.

A row of sea glass on the kitchen sill, green and blue and one frosted amber, set out in a careful line that hadn’t been there before. A mended fishing net on the porch. Every morning, a small offering at the door: a pearly shell, a smooth stone, once a perfect spiral of driftwood that smelled like cedar and rain. On the second morning she found her car’s cracked wiper blade replaced. On the third, the garden gate had been rehung.

On the fourth day she climbed the tower.

The stairs were narrow and cold and she took them slowly, with one hand on the iron rail and the other pressed to her chest. The lamp room at the top was a glass cage of old brass and dust, with the great lens sitting dark in its cradle. And on the ledge below the lens, tucked beside a thermos and a pair of Tom’s old binoculars, sat the station logbook.

It was open. The last entry was in Tom’s blocky capitals, dated the week he died. It read:

Light kept. Weather fair. C. took the night watch again. Told him he doesn’t have to. He says he doesn’t mind. Should tell Ruthie about him someday. She’d like him.

She read it twice. Then she turned the page. The next entry was in a different hand, long and fine and strangely looping, like writing done with something other than fingers.

Light kept. Weather fair. Tom is gone. I will go on keeping it.

And the next. And the next. A hundred and fifty entries, one for every night, in the same careful hand. Light kept. Light kept. Light kept. Some of them added small things. Rain. A seal pup on

the north rocks. Her porch step is loose. She has not come. I think she cannot bear it. I mended the gate in case she does.

Ruth sat down on the cold iron floor with the logbook in her lap and finally, finally cried.

When she was done, she took a pencil from the ledge and wrote, under the last line, in her own plain hand:

Thank you for the gate. Whoever you are, come say it to my face.

Three: Notes

The answer came the next morning. A strip of paper, folded small, under the sea-glass line on the sill. It said, in long looping letters:

I would frighten you.

Ruth wrote back that she was sixty-one and had worked thirty years in a school cafeteria. She had been frightened by experts. She left the note in the lamp room, under a mug of tea, and went to bed with her heart doing something strange.

I do not drink tea, said the reply. But I kept the mug. It is warm where your hands were.

She laughed out loud in the empty cottage.

The notes went back and forth for a week. She learned that the writer disliked storms, which he said made the lamp "sing badly." That he had known Tom for twenty-six years. That he was lonelier than a thing his size had any right to be. That he did not know what to say to her, and so he had been mending things, because he understood that, and it seemed safer than speech. She told him about the kids, grown and gone to other states. About the quiet that had settled over her house like dust. About how she used to hum while she cooked, and then one day realized she had stopped.

I would like to hear you hum, he wrote.

Then come and hear it, she wrote back.

There was no answer for two days. She told herself she didn't mind.

Four: The Storm

The storm came in on the fifth night, faster than the forecast said it would.

Ruth woke to the roar of it, the cottage groaning on its foundation and rain flung against the windows like gravel. She sat up in bed with her heart racing, and out of habit, from thirty years married to a Coast Guard keeper, she looked toward the tower.

The lamp was dark.

Outside, far out on the black water, something was blinking. A small, desperate light, bobbing in the swell, and then a flare, red and hissing, thrown up into the rain.

A boat.

She didn't think. She grabbed Tom's old slicker and the flashlight and ran, up the path with the wind knocking her sideways, through the tower door and up the stairs two at a time, lungs burning, sixty-one years old and not caring. She burst into the lamp room and stopped dead.

The lens was turning. Slowly, grindingly, by hand.

Something stood on the far side of it with its shoulders braced against the great brass gear, pushing it around, heaving the heavy glass through its slow, stubborn rotation. The generator had failed. The storm had torn through the line. And here was the keeper, straining, soaked to the skin, his whole body shaking with effort, keeping the light alive the only way he could.

He turned his head. Black eyes met hers in the dark.

"You should not be here," he said, in a voice like surf over stones. "It is not safe."

"Neither is that boat." Ruth dropped the flashlight, put her shoulder to the gear next to his, and pushed. "How long have you been doing this?"

"Forty minutes."

"Then you're tired. Move over."

He said nothing. But he shifted, and she braced herself against the brass beside him, and together, a retired cafeteria cook and a creature out of the deep, they turned the light.

It took three hours.

She never looked at him straight on in all that time. She only felt him beside her, a cold wall of living muscle, breathing hard. Once she heard him murmur something in a language like water. Once he reached out, steadied her when she stumbled, and pulled his hand back as if burned. At 4:40 a.m. the radio on the ledge crackled, and a voice said, Harrow Point, this is the Marigold, we see you. Thank God, we see you. We're coming in.

Ruth slid down the gear housing and sat on the floor, shaking, grinning like a madwoman.

"We did it," she gasped.

"You did it," said the keeper.

She finally looked up.

Five: Corran

He was tall. Taller than Tom had been, taller than anyone Ruth had ever known. His skin was a pale, cold blue-gray, slick and faintly iridescent, and fine, delicate fins fanned along his forearms and down the long line of his spine. Glowing lines traced his shoulders and ribs, soft as moonlight in a tide pool. They were dimming, one by one. He was so tired he swayed on his feet.

She saw it all in one long, clear moment. And then she saw his face, and realized he was waiting to be afraid of.

“Oh, honey,” said Ruth, and got to her feet. “Sit down before you fall down.”

“I am Corran,” he said. He did not sit. “I am sorry. I should have told you. I should not have let you work. I should have—”

“Corran.” She took his cold, webbed hand in both of hers. “Sit.”

He sat. Ruth stripped off the slicker, wrapped it around his shoulders, and then, because it clearly wasn’t enough, wrapped her arms around him. He went rigid. Then, all at once, he melted, and a soft, broken sound left his chest. His head dropped to her shoulder. She could feel him trembling, and she rocked him there on the lamp room floor while the storm ground itself out against the glass.

“Tom left something for you,” he said at last, muffled. “In case you came.”

He brought it out from the cabinet beneath the lens, an envelope soft with salt, and her name on the front in Tom’s blocky capitals. She opened it. It read:

Ruthie. If you’re reading this, you came out to sell the place, and I don’t blame you. But go easy on Corran. He’s been lonely longer than either of us has been alive, and he’s kind, and he’d look after you if you let him. Don’t sit alone in that house, love. You were always better when somebody was holding you. Be loud again. Be happy. That’s an order. — T.

She read it in the lamp’s slow, sweeping light, and for a long time she couldn’t speak.

When she looked up, Corran was watching her with those deep, patient eyes, and his hand was held out in the lamplight, palm up. It was an offering. It was a question.

It was cool, and it was waiting, and for the first time in three years Ruth wanted to be touched so badly she ached.

“Come down to the cottage,” she said. “I’ll make a fire. You’re freezing.”

“I am always cold.”

“Then let me fix that,” said Ruth.

Six: The Fire

The cottage was warm and dim and smelled of woodsmoke. She sat him in front of the hearth, wrapped in Tom’s old quilt, and he watched the flames with the wary wonder of someone who had spent his whole life underwater. She sat beside him. The rain drummed on the roof.

Neither of them said anything for a while.

She got him a towel. It seemed the sensible thing, a small ordinary kindness, and when he only stared at it she stood behind him and began to dry his hair herself, the long cold fall of it, carefully, the way she had once done for her children after bath. He went very still under her hands. Water ran down his fins. The firelight caught the faint iridescence of his skin, and she felt, absurdly, a little dizzy.

“You do not have to,” he said.

“I know.” She worked the towel down the back of his neck. “Tom used to say I couldn’t pass a wet dog without drying it.”

“Tom said many things about you.” A rough, startled laugh. “Most began with Ruthie would. He talked to the lamp, you know. He told it everything. I knew your whole life by the third winter.”

She stopped. “That must have been strange. Knowing me before I knew you.”

“It was like loving a country I had never visited.” He said it simply, as though it were a plain fact of geography. “Forgive me. That is too much. I forgot myself.”

She set the towel down. She looked at the long webbed hand lying open on his knee, at the delicate tracery of light under his skin, and with a clarity that startled her she understood that she was not afraid of him. She was afraid of herself. Of three years of quiet, and of how badly she wanted to be undone.

She took his hand. It was cool, and the webbing between his fingers was soft as silk. She turned it over and traced the lines of his palm with her thumb, and felt his whole arm tremble. The light under his skin brightened, a soft pulse of blue, then another.

“It brightens when I touch you,” she said.

“I am told it is embarrassing.”

“Who told you?”

“No one. I have never had anyone to tell me.” He looked down at their joined hands. “I have been alone a very long time, Ruth. I do not know how to hide it.”

“I don’t know how,” she said at last, quietly. “It’s been so long, Corran. I don’t know if I remember how to want.”

“Then let me remind you.” His fingers brushed her cheek, with a delicacy that made her breath catch. “Tell me when to stop, and I will. Tell me when to continue, and I will do that too.”

Her eyes stung. “Continue.”

He kissed her.

His mouth was cool at first, tasting of rain and salt and something sweet beneath, and it warmed against hers until her whole body hummed. His glowing lines brightened where she touched him, blooming pale blue along his throat and chest, and a faint hum came up through his skin, like a finger drawn around the rim of a glass, and she realized, with a rush of heat, that they answered her. Every time she dragged her nails over his ribs, the light flared. Every gasp, every shiver. He was a lantern, and she was the hand that lit him.

“You glow for me,” she breathed.

“I have never glowed like this,” he said, and the awe in his voice undid her.

They sank down onto the hearthrug together, slowly, as if the floor might refuse them. The fire popped. Her heart was going so hard she was sure he could hear it.

“I should tell you,” she said, with a shaky laugh, “that I haven’t done this since before I turned fifty-eight. Everything may be, you know. Out of practice. Under construction.”

“I have never done this at all.”

She stared at him. “Never?”

“Not with someone who stayed.” His fins flattened, shy. “I have read a great deal. Tom kept a shelf of paperbacks in the tower. Some were quite instructive.”

A startled laugh broke out of her, and then another, and then she was kissing him again to hide the way her eyes had filled, and he kissed her back with a breathless, grateful hunger that melted something in her chest. His hands moved over her back, hesitant at first, then steadier. She felt the cool slide of his palm up her ribs through the damp cotton of her nightgown, the wet ends of his hair brushing her cheek, the quick rise and fall of his chest. Desire, which she had thought was a country she could never return to, came back to her all at once, flooding her from her toes to her scalp.

“Ruth,” he whispered against her mouth. “If I do anything wrong.”

“You won’t.” She caught his hands and put them where she wanted them, on her waist, her hips, the heavy swell of her breasts. “Learn me.”

She slid the quilt off his shoulders and let it fall. Then she undressed him, because she wanted to, because for three years she had been the one holding things, and tonight she wanted to hold him. His skin was cool and silken under her palms. The glow along his ribs pulsed at every touch, soft blue deepening to violet where she dragged her thumbs over his hips, and when her hand closed around his cock he shuddered all over and made a sound like surf pulling back from stones.

He was long and smooth and slick, tapering at the tip, ridged along the underside, faintly luminous in the firelight. Cool at first. Not for long. She stroked him slowly, base to crown, feeling him warm in her fist, and the light in his chest flared with every pass.

“Ruth,” he said hoarsely. “You are going to undo me.”

“That’s the plan.” She let him undress her in return, button by button, with slow, shaking reverence, until she knelt bare on the hearthrug with the firelight on her soft belly and the silver in her hair and the heavy sweep of her breasts. He looked at her as if she were the most holy thing in the sea.

“You are so beautiful,” he said.

“I’m sixty-one.”

“You are lit.” He cupped her breast in one webbed hand, thumb sweeping her nipple, and she gasped. “Let me show you.”

He took his time. He kissed her throat and her shoulders and the soft inside of her arm, and then his mouth closed over her nipple, cool and slow, and the shock of it went straight through her. She arched. He worked her breasts with his lips and his hands, patient, thorough, until she

was breathless and aching, rocking against his thigh, and she shoved him back into Tom's old armchair by the fire and climbed into his lap.

"Ruth," he said, startled.

"Hush. I've waited three years." She wrapped her fingers around the base of him, lined him up, and sank down slowly.

The ridges dragged over every sensitive place inside her. She stopped halfway, shaking, and he stopped with her, hands gripping the arms of the chair so hard the wood creaked. "Too much?" he whispered.

"No. God, no. Just." She breathed. "Give me a second. You're so big."

"You're so warm," he said hoarsely. "So warm. Ruth, I can feel you everywhere."

She took the rest of him in one long, slow slide, and they both groaned. By the time she was fully seated she was gasping, nails raking his shoulders, and the glow had spread across his chest in rippling waves.

"Look at me," she said, and he did, black eyes wide, glowing lines flaring brighter every time she clenched around him, his skin humming under her palms like a plucked string. "That's it. That's it. Oh, you feel so good. You're so deep."

"Ruth," he gasped. "You're so warm. So wet. I can feel you everywhere. I've never— I've never had anyone like this."

"Then take it." She rode him harder, rolling her hips in long, deep circles, setting the pace because she could. "Look at me. Sixty-one years old and riding a sea monster in front of the fire. Tell me how I feel."

"Like home," he said, voice breaking. "Like the first warm thing I've ever touched. You're going to make me come just from watching you."

"Not yet." She leaned in and bit his lower lip. "I'm not done with you. Touch me."

His trembling hand slid between them and found her clit, rubbing slow, perfect circles. Ruth cried out. The pleasure spooled tight and hot, a thing she had thought was gone forever.

"Like this?" He watched her face with enormous concentration, the light in his chest flickering with every flick of his thumb.

"Slower. Just, there. Oh." She gasped. "Oh, you learn fast."

"I have read about it."

"Don't talk about the paperbacks. Oh, God, don't—"

He grinned, a startled, delighted flash of teeth, and circled again, exactly right. Every time she moaned something filthy, harder, there, don't stop, the glow under his skin flared bright, and she realized she could make him light up like a harbor just by telling him what she wanted. So she told him. She told him everything.

“Yes—there—don’t you dare stop—”

“Oh,” she whispered. “Oh. Oh, oh— Corran—” The word rose out of her in a shaking wail that rang up the chimney, long and ragged, going on and on. Her whole body bowed, clenching around him in helpless pulses, and Corran held her through it, murmuring her name in that low voice like surf over stones, “Ruth, Ruth, Ruth,” while she sobbed and laughed and shook, because she was alive, she was alive, and it had been so long.

She was still shaking when he lifted her, as if she weighed nothing, and laid her face-down on the quilt before the fire. “May I?” he asked, low, a hand on the small of her back.

“Corran.” She looked back over her shoulder, flushed and wild. “I am sixty-one years old and I have waited three years. Fuck me.”

He groaned and covered her with his long body. He pushed in slowly from behind, and she moaned into the quilt, because the angle was devastating, the ridges dragging deep and the cool weight of him pressing her into the floor. He wrapped one arm under her hips and tilted her up and began to move. A slow, rolling rhythm like waves coming in, deep and steady and unstoppable. She met every stroke.

“Harder,” she said. “Please.”

He gave her harder. The cold of his skin burned away to match her heat. The fire roared. The cottage seemed to ring around them, his fins fluttering against her back, his breath coming in ragged gasps at her ear.

“There,” she told him, into the quilt. “Deeper. There, there, oh God, there—” And when he picked up speed she bit the fabric and screamed.

“Tell me what you feel,” she panted into the quilt.

“Everything.” His voice was shredded. “You are squeezing me so hard I cannot think. You are so wet I can hear it. Ruth, look.”

She turned her head. In the dark glass of the window she could see them, the long pale length of him bent over her, the whole lantern of his body blazing blue and violet, every line of light pulsing in time with her breath. He glowed brighter every time she clenched. She clenched on purpose. He cried out, and she laughed, wild and breathless, and pushed back to meet him.

This time it hit like a wave. “Corran—” Her voice cracked in half, and she came with her head thrown back, clenching around him in long, helpless pulses, sobbing out his name. He followed with a thin, rising, keening cry, like wind in a bottle, like gulls over water, and spilled into her in a cool, endless rush, whispering her name into her neck again and again.

They lay tangled on the rug for a long time while the last of the storm wore itself out against the windows.

Seven: Light Kept

She didn’t sell the lighthouse.

The Marigold's crew came by the next week with a case of beer and a plaque. They never asked who had been in the tower that night. The harbor master, a gruff man named Dale, only looked at the new paint on the porch and said, "Tom always said the point looked after itself," and left it at that.

Corran took the lower rooms of the cottage, and then the upper ones, and then her bed. In the mornings he made her tea, which was terrible, and she drank every cup. She hummed while she cooked. He sat at the table with his chin in his webbed hand and listened as if it were the finest music in the world.

In the evenings they climbed the tower together and he lit the great lamp, and she stood behind him with her arms around his waist and her cheek on his spine. She had the generator replaced. He pretended to be annoyed.

She kept Tom's note in the drawer by the bed. Sometimes she read it. She wasn't sad when she did.

One night she took the old logbook down from the ledge, turned to the last entry in Corran's long looping hand, and wrote beneath it, in her own.

Light kept. Weather fair. Ruth is home.

The first big storm of the winter hit in January.

She woke in the dark to find the bed empty and the wind howling, and climbed the tower in her nightgown and Tom's old slicker, and found Corran at the great lens with the beam sweeping over a black, heaving sea. He had been tending it for an hour. The new generator hummed, steady and sure. He looked back over his shoulder, and the lines of light along his spine were already brightening.

"You should be in bed," he said.

"So should you." She shut the lamp room door behind her. She locked it. She let the slicker fall.

His fins flared. "Ruth. The lamp—"

"Is on a timer. I had it installed." She crossed the iron floor in her bare feet, took his hand, and put it flat on her breast. "Tom wanted me loud. I think I have a few years of loud to make up for."

She backed up against the cold curved glass of the lantern room, and the beam swept over them, and the whole storm-black sea lit up behind her shoulder and fell dark again. She pulled his mouth down to hers. She pulled his hips against hers. When she took him in her hand he was already hard and slick and cool, and she stroked him, once, twice, three times, until his head fell back and the light in his chest went white.

"Turn me around," said Ruth.

He did. His hands were shaking. She braced both palms on the glass, with the sea roaring below and the beam going out over it, and looked back over her shoulder at him, a sixty-one-year-old

woman in the open window of a lighthouse with her gray hair loose and her breasts swaying and her whole body shining.

“Now,” she said. “Fuck me like you mean it, keeper.”

He pushed in with a groan she felt in her ribs. The ridges dragged deep. She pushed back to meet him, and he took her hips in both hands and began to move, long and hard and steady, and every time the beam swung past she saw them reflected in the glass, his dark eyes locked on her face, his mouth open on her name.

“Harder,” she told him. “Deeper. Put your hand on my breast. There. Now two fingers, right— Oh.” Her voice cracked on it. “Don’t stop. Tell me you’re mine.”

“I am yours.” His voice shook with every thrust, and that thin, reedy keening rose in his throat. “Ruth. Ruth. I am yours.”

“Louder.”

He gave her all of it. The light under his skin flared with every filthy word until the whole lamp room blazed, and when she came she screamed his name, a raw, ragged, glorious sound that rang off the glass, so loud the gulls on the rocks below took off in a cloud.

He came with her, with a long, shuddering cry that broke into pieces, spilling cool and endless inside her, his forehead pressed to her spine, whispering her name into the dark like a tide going out.

Then she turned, and wrapped her legs around his waist, and had him again against the glass, slower, face to face, while the storm outside wore itself out against the point.

And on stormy nights, she got loud.

The gulls complained. The neighbors a mile down the coast learned to close their windows. The lamp burned bright and steady, and the keeper’s wife lay in the keeper’s arms and let the whole sea know exactly how happy she was.

End.

Hot Flash

A Midlife Monsters story by Maven Ashcroft

One

Krista Jackson had tried everything. Cooling pillows. Black cohosh. A fan strapped to her desk, a fan on the nightstand, a fan clipped to the visor of her car. She had stood in the open freezer at 3 a.m. in nothing but a sports bra and spite, and still the heat rose through her like a kettle coming to a boil.

At fifty-four, her body had decided to become a furnace and nobody had asked her permission.

The toaster had caught fire on Tuesday. On Wednesday the thermostat melted. On Thursday, as she stood at the kitchen window mid-flash with her face scarlet and her robe hanging open, a roar like a freight train ripped across the sky, the pane rattled in its frame, and something enormous landed on her roof.

She froze with an ice cube halfway to her mouth.

“Hello?” she called, in the voice she used on delivery drivers. “Whoever you are, I have a baseball bat and no patience.”

A face lowered itself slowly into the window.

It was a dragon’s face. Long and elegant, scaled in deep burnished copper, with eyes like molten amber and a mouth that curved, unmistakably, into a smile. Smoke curled from his nostrils. “Good evening,” he said, in a voice like a cello being played inside a cave. “I apologize for the noise. I’ve been circling your house for three nights, and I lost my nerve twice.”

Krista looked at him. She looked at the fire damage. She looked at the ice cube, which had melted in her hand.

“You’re the reason my gutter is on the lawn.”

“I am,” said the dragon, with profound regret. “Also the reason for the thermostat. I think. I’m not entirely certain that was me.”

“That was me. It’s menopause.”

“Is that what you call it?” He tilted his great head. “Where I come from, we call that a bloom.”

Two

His name was Varrick, and he was, he explained, a bit out of practice. Dragons didn’t exactly attend mixers. He had been alone for six hundred years, sleeping on a mountain, and three nights ago a warm, wild, furious scent had drifted up from this very town and he had flown through the dark like a man who had been waiting his whole life to hear his name.

“It’s the heat,” he said, with some embarrassment, folded into what he called his indoor size, which was eight feet of copper scales and shoulder muscle crouched in her kitchen with his wings tucked and his tail curled around the table leg. “Among my kind, a woman in her bloom is the most magnificent thing in the world. She burns brighter than the rest of us. She has earned the fire.”

Krista sat across from him with a glass of ice water and the distinct sense that the universe had finally bent in her favor.

“Let me get this straight. Everything I’ve been hating about my body, the sweating, the flushing, the rage, all of it,” she said slowly, “you find attractive.”

“Krista.” His amber eyes locked on hers, and heat prickled all the way down her spine. “I would sit at your feet for a thousand years if you asked me.”

She took a long, slow sip of water. A familiar warmth rose from her chest to her throat, and her skin began to flush, and for once she didn't reach for a fan.

He watched it happen, nostrils flaring, a low rumble building in his chest.

"There," he whispered. "Just like that. Oh, you are glorious."

Krista set down her glass. She stood. She walked around the table, and she looked up at all that copper and muscle and shy, scorching want, and she thought: I have spent two years apologizing for this fire.

"Varrick," she said. "I'm going to bed. Alone. If you want to worship me, dragon, you're going to have to earn it."

He tried. He tried so hard.

On Friday morning she opened the front door and found, laid out on her welcome mat with a ribbon around its antlers, a dead elk.

"Varrick." Krista put down her coffee. "What is that."

"A gift." The great copper head lowered from the roof, hopeful. "Eight hundred pounds of venison. It is customary."

"It is not customary in Ohio." She pinched the bridge of her nose. "We're going to have a conversation about flowers."

He buried the elk, with great solemnity, in the backyard. He fixed the gutter. He replaced the thermostat with one he had apparently built himself out of forged iron, and she had to admit it was a handsome thermostat. He learned how to use the dishwasher. He learned, after a long and painful afternoon, to stop calling the vacuum cleaner "the beast." He asked her questions about her life and he listened to every answer with the full unblinking attention of someone who had spent six centuries talking to rocks.

On Sunday, her neighbor Mrs. Pruitt called the fire marshal.

The fire marshal arrived at noon with a clipboard and a deeply tired expression. Krista met him on the lawn, mid-flash, fanning herself with a seed catalog, and behind her, tarped from nose to tail and posed on the roof with surprising dignity, sat what she informed the marshal was an art installation entitled Rage in Copper.

"It's very, ah, large," said the marshal.

"It's a statement." Krista's face was scarlet. Sweat ran down her temples. A thin curl of smoke drifted from the hem of her cardigan. "On a lot of things."

The marshal looked at her. He looked at the smoking cardigan. He looked at the tarp, which had begun, very slightly, to steam.

"Ma'am," he said carefully, "is that you or the sculpture?"

"Menopause."

The marshal's face softened into the expression of a man who had been married for thirty years. "Say no more," he said, and went back to his truck.

Varrick waited until the taillights were gone. Then he slid the tarp off, shaking like a man trying not to laugh. "You were splendid," he said, voice cracking. "Rage in Copper."

Krista started to laugh too, and couldn't stop, and sat down on the lawn with the seed catalog in her lap and her face in her hands. Somewhere in there it had stopped being a joke and started being something else. She had laughed more in four days than she had in four years.

That night he asked if he could show her something.

She had never been so cold or so happy as she was on his back, two thousand feet above the dark county, the wind roaring past her ears, his wings beating like slow thunder under her thighs. They landed on a mountain peak she didn't recognize, and he led her down a long tunnel lit by the glow of his own scales, and opened a great stone door.

Gold. Mounds of it. Coins and crowns and chalices and a thousand years of other people's bad decisions, heaped in a vast cavern. And, in the middle of it, a shallow hollow in the gold where a very large body had lain night after night after night.

"This is where I sleep," said Varrick, a little shyly.

Krista looked at the hollow. She looked at the gold, which was lumpy, cold, and clearly terrible for a person's back.

"You've been sleeping on a pile of coins," she said. "For six hundred years."

"It is traditional."

"Honey, it's no wonder you're lonely. Your whole spine must be a fist." She turned and looked at him, this enormous proud, shy, copper-colored creature who had flown over a continent for the smell of her hot flashes, and something in her chest cracked wide open. "Why me?" she asked. "Really. Out of everyone."

He was quiet for a long moment. "Because you were not afraid," he said at last. "You burned, and you did not apologize. You were the first thing in six hundred years that was as bright as I am."

She had been apologizing for her body for two years. She had apologized to her boss. To her students. To the pharmacist. She stood in a cavern of stolen gold and let that sink all the way down into her bones.

She stepped close. She put her palm flat against the hot copper of his chest, and felt his heart thundering beneath it.

"Varrick," she said. "You've earned it."

His amber eyes went wide. "Krista—"

"Fly me home," said Krista. "Now."

Three

They made it as far as the living room floor.

She put him on the couch first.

“Sit,” she said. “Hands on the cushions. Wings in.” He obeyed so fast he knocked over a lamp. “Good dragon. Now you’re going to watch, and you are not going to touch, until I say you can.”

Krista stood in front of him in her robe with her arms folded and let the silence stretch. Then the heat hit her, the way it did, from nowhere, a slow furnace rising from her belly to her throat, and instead of reaching for the fan she lifted her chin and let it come. Her skin went pink. Sweat beaded at her collarbone. She untied the robe and let it hang open, and watched his pupils blow wide.

“Do you know what I do at three in the morning?” she asked. She plucked an ice cube from her glass. “When it hits?”

“No,” he whispered.

“I stand in the kitchen, and I do this.” She dragged the ice slowly down her throat, between her breasts, across her belly, and where it touched her skin it hissed and steamed and left a wet trail glittering in the lamplight. His claws punched through the cushions. Smoke poured from his nostrils. She let the ice slide lower, and lower, and then she tipped her head back, closed her eyes, and moaned, a long, throaty, shameless sound, because it was cold and she was burning and she had never once done this with anyone watching.

“Krista,” Varrick said hoarsely. “Please.”

“Please what?”

“Please let me touch you. I will do anything.”

“Mm.” She opened her eyes and looked at him, flushed and glittering and perfectly unrepentant. “Get on the floor. On your back.”

He lay back at her command, wings spread beneath him like a bed of dark leather, while Krista stood over him in her open robe and let him look. His throat worked. His claws dug furrows into the carpet.

“Tell me what you want,” she said.

“To worship you.”

“That’s a start.” She dropped the robe. “Don’t move. Not until I say.”

She knelt astride his chest and slid her hands over his scales, which were hot as sun-warmed stone and slick with a faint sheen of sweat. His breath hitched. She traced the ridges along his belly and found them, lower down, hard and flushed, a thick, tapering cock that glowed faintly orange at the tip and radiated heat like a hearth.

“Oh, that’s nice,” Krista said appreciatively. “Look at you. You’ve been holding that back for six hundred years?”

He made a strangled noise. “Krista, please.”

“Please what?”

“Please touch me.”

“Say it nicely.”

A tiny plume of smoke escaped him. “Please, my lady. I am begging.”

She wrapped her fingers around him, slowly, and watched his whole body shudder. He was scorching, slick at the head, and she stroked him in long, languid pulls, taking her time, teasing the underside with her thumb until his claws tore through the carpet and his tail lashed against the couch. She leaned down and licked a slow stripe up his length, and he roared. Actually roared, loud enough to rattle the windows.

“Shh,” she said, delighted. “The neighbors.”

“Let them hear,” he gasped.

She took him in her mouth, as deep as she could, and hummed around the heat of him. He hissed out a long, shaking plume of smoke. She worked him with her lips and her tongue and the flat of her hand, slow and then not slow, and every time she took him deeper his claws tore a fresh furrow in the carpet and his wings beat against the floor like a trapped storm.

“Krista,” he gasped. “Krista, I am, if you do not stop, I am going to—”

She looked up at him with her mouth full, eyes bright and wild, and did not stop.

She moaned around him instead, a long, delighted, greedy sound, and cupped his heavy sack in her free hand and sucked harder. She had spent two years waiting for something that would burn for her, and here it was, six hundred years of want, and she was so excited she could barely breathe.

“Krista, please, I cannot—”

She dragged her lips up the thick, scalding length of him, flicked her tongue across the glowing head, and took him down again, and that did it.

“Krista,” he gasped, a hiss of smoke in every syllable. “Krista, my lady, I— I am— Krista—”

He came with a roar that rattled every window on the street, a bass note that broke apart into a wet, ragged huff, flooding her mouth in a hot, thick, glorious rush. Krista moaned around him, a long, greedy, delighted sound, and swallowed every drop, throat working, the wet little sounds of it loud in the quiet room. She kept going. She took everything he had, and licked him clean, and sat back on her heels with her lips swollen and her chin shining, panting, grinning, absolutely thrilled.

“Oh my God,” she said. “Oh, that’s so good. Do you know how long I’ve wanted to—” She stopped, and laughed breathlessly, and licked her lips. “Okay. I need you to know that I am very excited about this.”

Varrick lay with his chest heaving and smoke curling from both nostrils and an expression of such stunned, reverent bliss that she almost felt bad. Almost.

“Mercy,” he croaked.

“Absolutely not.” She glanced down. He was still hard. Of course he was. Six hundred years. “Oh, look at that. Dragon stamina.” She crawled up his body, pausing to kiss him, deep and slow, and he groaned at the taste of himself on her tongue. “You’re going to lie there like a good dragon and let me take what I want.”

“Yes,” he rasped. “Yes, yes, anything.”

She sank down on him slowly, inch by inch, and the stretch was glorious. Thick and hot and impossibly full, he filled her like nothing ever had. Krista’s head fell back and she let out a long, raw groan, because her whole body had been burning for two years with no place to put the fire, and now there was somewhere for it to go.

“Oh my God,” she said. “Oh, that’s perfect. You’re so fucking big. Look at me. Look at what you’re doing to me.”

He looked. His eyes were molten, his scales rippling with light.

“You’re taking me so well,” he rasped. “Fifty-four years old and stretching around a dragon’s cock like you were made for it. You’re so hot inside I can barely think.”

“Good.” She started to ride him, slow and deep, grinding down on every stroke. “I want you to feel every second of this. I’ve been on fire for two years. Now you get to burn with me.”

Four

She took her time. She rode him slow and deep, grinding down on every stroke, and watched him come apart beneath her. His wings beat helplessly against the floor. His tail curled around her thigh. Every time her own heat flared, a surge of sweat and fever and fury, his cock jumped inside her, as if her fire fed his.

“You’re so hot,” he panted. “So hot, Krista, I can’t, I’m going to—”

“Not yet.” She ground against him harder, circling her hips, finding the perfect angle. “You wait for me. Hold it.”

His whole body shook. A thin line of smoke trailed from his mouth. “Mercy,” he begged.

“No.” She grinned, wild, flushed, magnificent. “Not today.”

She rode him faster. His tail slid up her thigh and found her clit, a smooth, hot tip of scale that pressed and circled exactly where she needed it, and Krista cried out. “Oh, fuck, yes. Right there. Keep that, keep that.”

A flash hit her then, a real one, a wall of heat that started in her chest and rolled out through every inch of her skin, and instead of fighting it she let it burn. Steam rose off her shoulders. The sweat on her back sizzled where Varrick’s hands gripped her, and his scales flushed from copper

to molten orange, glowing under her palms like a forge. The carpet beneath his wings began to smoke.

“More,” she gasped, grinding down on him. “Burn with me. Don’t you dare hold back.”

He didn’t. His whole body went incandescent. Every thrust sent a wave of fire through her, and for the first time in two years the heat wasn’t something happening to her. It was something they were making together.

The tail worked her in tight, relentless circles. She felt the climax building low and bright, a wave of heat so intense she thought she might ignite, and she heard herself babbling, “Varrick— oh, don’t you stop, don’t you dare— I’m— I’m—” and then it broke. She came with a scream that started as his name and ended in a roar of her own, her whole body clenching around him in long, hard waves, and a fireball of sheer pleasure rolled through her that actually singed the curtains.

“Now,” she gasped. “Now, Varrick—now. Pull out. I want it on my face.”

He let go with a roar. In the same heartbeat she slid off him, dropped between his knees, caught him in both fists and tipped her face up. Eyes bright and wild, mouth already open.

“Here,” she ordered, voice rough with need. “Give it to me. All of it. I want to feel how hot you are. Paint me. Make me filthy. I’ve been burning for two years—give me something that burns back.”

He came in a scalding rush across her cheeks and mouth and lashes, thick ropes of liquid heat that sizzled faintly against her skin, with a sound like a furnace door slamming. “Krista,” he groaned. “Krista. Krista—” over and over, through a throat full of smoke, while flames licked across the ceiling and the smoke alarm shrieked. Krista, painted and panting and shaking with laughter, opened one eye and licked a stripe of him from her upper lip. “Mm,” she said. “Smoky.”

“Fuck,” she breathed, almost reverent. “That’s so good. Look at the mess you made of me. I love it. Do it again sometime. I want to wear you.”

Varrick made a noise halfway between a laugh and a sob. Scorch marks fanned out across the carpet around them in a perfect ring, and the smoke alarm was still shrieking.

“Krista,” he croaked, “I believe my scales have fused to your couch.”

“Then you’ll just have to stay.” She crawled back up his body and collapsed across his chest, giddy with aftershocks, and he wrapped his huge wings around her like a blanket. “That was the best night of my life. And I still want more of your come on my face later.”

Five

She never bought another fan.

Varrick moved in by the end of the week. He fixed the gutter, replaced the thermostat, and installed a fireproof reading nook on the roof, which the neighbors pretended not to notice.

When the flashes hit, which they still did, she didn't panic. She just looked across the room, and he looked back with hungry amber eyes, and the evening rearranged itself accordingly.

The doctor said it would pass in a few years.

Krista told the doctor she was in no rush.

End.

Night Shift

A Midlife Monsters story by Maven Ashcroft

One

Carol Whitlock had worked nights for twenty-five years, and she had never once been frightened by a hospital.

She had held hands through codes. She had talked down drunks, held babies, and sat with the dying until dawn. She had seen blood in every color and heard every kind of scream, and when the staffing agency offered her a triple-rate contract at St. Aubrey's, a decommissioned hospital with a bad reputation, a leaking roof, and one open wing, she had signed without reading the fine print.

The fine print, it turned out, mentioned the curse.

"Call lights ring in empty rooms," the day supervisor told her, not quite meeting her eyes. "Don't answer them. Don't go past the sub-basement. And if anyone offers to help you on nights, be polite."

"Anyone like who?"

The supervisor was already walking away.

At 2:14 a.m., third night in, the call light over Room 9 lit up. Room 9 had been empty for eleven years. Carol put down her coffee, picked up her penlight, and went to answer it, because someone had to, and because twenty-five years had taught her that when a light is on, somebody needs something.

The room was cold. The bed was made. And in the corner by the window, tall and folded and soft-edged in the dark, something was holding a dead woman's hand.

She stopped in the doorway.

The woman on the bed was barely a shimmer, thin as breath, and she was whispering something, and the creature bent beside her was listening with such tenderness that Carol felt her throat close. He was eight feet if he was an inch, long-limbed and pale gray, wrapped in dusky wings the color of storm clouds, with feathery antennae that twitched toward the sound of her footsteps. He was covered in a fine, velvety down. His eyes caught her penlight and shone back silver, like a cat's.

“She’s afraid of the dark,” he said softly. His voice was low and gentle and a little dry, like pages turning. “I stay until she isn’t.”

The shimmer sighed. The light went out. The room was only a room again.

Carol let out a breath she hadn’t known she was holding. “Well,” she said. “That’s the nicest thing I’ve seen in a hospital in years.”

The creature turned his silver eyes on her, and looked, for just a moment, completely undone.

Two

His name was Vesper. He was the night resident, which was a joke he had been making for a hundred and fifty years and which no one had ever laughed at, until Carol did.

He lived in the old sub-basement and came out when the wards went quiet. He sat with the ones who lingered. He quieted the call lights. He had been drawn to St. Aubrey’s the way moths are drawn to flame, and when the lights went out for good he had stayed, because someone had to.

Carol started bringing him coffee, which he couldn’t drink, and he kept the cups anyway. She started saving him the last of the cookies from the break room. At 3 a.m. they walked the dark corridors together, her penlight sweeping, his wings brushing the walls, and he asked her questions about the living world and listened to every answer like it was scripture.

The woman in Room 9 was named Marguerite Doyle.

Carol learned this on the sixth night, because on the sixth night she stopped waiting for Vesper to explain and went down to the old records room herself with a flashlight and a thermos. St. Aubrey’s paper charts were still shelved in the dark, forty years of them, smelling of mildew and old toner. It took her two hours. The last chart for Room 9 had been closed eleven years ago. Doyle, Marguerite, 81. Admitted with pneumonia. Expired 3:40 a.m. Family not reached in time.

She sat down on the dusty floor with the chart in her lap.

“She whispers a name,” she said, when Vesper found her. “Every night. I’ve been listening.”

“Annie.” His antennae drooped. “Her daughter. She called for her all night, and the phone was never answered. That is the curse, you see. It is not a punishment. Those who leave without finishing remain until it is finished, and they cannot finish it alone.” He settled beside her, wings folding, a long pale shape in the gloom. “I sit with them. It is all I can do. I have sat with forty-one.”

“Forty-one,” Carol said slowly. “And in a hundred and fifty years, nobody ever just…called?”

He looked at her blankly.

“There’s an emergency contact on the chart,” said Carol, and held it up. “A phone number. Eleven years old, but we’re nurses. We find people for a living.”

It was 4 a.m. She used the old landline in the break room and left a voicemail on an answering machine in a suburb two states away, in the same calm, clear voice she had used on a thousand

worried families. This is Carol Whitlock, a nurse at St. Aubrey's. I'm calling about your mother, Marguerite. I think there is something she'd like you to hear. Please call me back.

She didn't expect an answer.

Two nights later, at the end of her shift, the phone rang. And the morning after that, as the sun came up gray through the dirty windows, a stooped woman in her sixties stood in the doorway of Room 9 with a thermos in her hands and tears already running down her face.

"I was on a plane," said Annie Doyle-Pratt. "I was on a plane, and they couldn't find me, and by the time I landed—" She couldn't finish.

"I know," said Carol. "Would you like to sit with her?"

She held up her penlight. Beyond her shoulder, in the corner, tall and shadowed and very still, Vesper bent his head. And in the beam of the little light, thin as breath, a shimmer rose from the empty bed.

Annie made a sound Carol would hear for the rest of her life. She crossed the floor in three steps, knelt beside the bed, and spoke in a low, broken voice that Carol didn't listen to, because some things belong to the people they belong to. She stayed there for a long time. When she finally got up, the shimmer was smiling. Then it was gone, like a candle snuffed out in a warm room, and the call light over the door went dark, and stayed dark.

Carol walked out into the corridor and leaned against the wall and cried quietly, once, hard.

A gentle hand touched her shoulder. Vesper stood beside her, eight feet of dusky wings and silver eyes, looking at her as if she had hung the moon.

"In a hundred and fifty years," he said, "no one has ever thought to find them a living person."

"It's not a trick." She wiped her face with the heel of her hand. "You just have to keep trying to reach people."

"Forty," said Vesper, very softly. "There are forty still waiting."

"Then we'd better get started."

"You're very good at this," he told her that night. "At staying with people."

"It's the job."

"It isn't. I've watched a hundred nurses. You stay." His antennae curled toward her. "Who stays with you, Carol?"

She opened her mouth to say nobody, and then closed it, because it was true, and because he was looking at her like he already knew.

"I'm fifty-six," she said at last, quietly. "I've given orders my whole life. I've taken care of everyone. I don't remember the last time anybody took care of me."

Vesper stopped walking. The corridor was dim and silent and smelled of old linen. The call lights, one after another, went dark, as if the building were holding its breath.

He stepped closer. She had to tilt her head all the way back to meet his eyes.

“May I?” he asked. “I would very much like to.”

Carol had spent a career telling people what to do. She was tired down to her bones, and aching, and entirely sure, and for the first time in a very long time she let someone else lead.

“Yes,” she said.

Three

He backed her gently against the supply cabinet and the whole world narrowed to the soft rustle of his wings.

“You’ve been so professional,” he murmured, cradling her face in his long, cool fingers. “Would you like to stop?”

Her pulse tripped. “God, yes.”

“Then stop.” His thumb traced her lower lip. “Let go, Nurse Whitlock. I have you.”

He kissed her. It was slow and warm and unexpectedly tender, his mouth soft, the fine down along his jaw tickling her skin, and Carol moaned into him and fisted her hands in his chest fur. It was like touching a cloud. His wings rose and folded around her, enclosing them both in a velvet dark, shutting out the buzzing lights, and in that warm hush something in her chest, tight for years, finally loosened.

“Tell me what you want,” he said against her throat. “Anything. I’m very good at listening.”

“I want to stop thinking.”

“Then let me be honest with you first.” His antennae dipped, a little shy. “I have a fondness. I’ve walked behind you down this corridor for nine nights, and I have thought about very little except the shape of you from behind. I would like to take you there, Carol. Slowly. Only if you want it.”

She blinked up at him. Heat shot through her so fast it startled a laugh out of her. “You’re asking if you can fuck my ass in a supply room.”

“In the on-call room. There’s a bed.” His voice dropped to a murmur. “Have you ever?”

“No.” Her heart was pounding. She was not afraid. She was curious, which was somehow so much better. “Not once. Not even close.”

“Then we’ll go as slow as you need, and we’ll stop at any step you say.”

Carol reached behind her, opened the cabinet without looking, and held up a little foil packet between two fingers.

“Water-based. Hospital grade.” She smiled. “I stocked it myself.”

Vesper laughed, a rich, rustling, helpless sound, and she felt it all the way down.

Four

The on-call room was dim and narrow and smelled of old coffee and clean sheets. He undressed her with enormous care, one button at a time, and when she lay down on her stomach on the narrow bed with a pillow tucked under her hips, he stood over her for a long moment and just looked.

“Tell me if anything is too much,” he said.

“I will. Don’t you dare go easy on the foreplay.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

He kissed his way down her spine. Slow, warm kisses, the soft brush of his down following along, until she was shivering and rocking into the mattress. Then his big, cool hands spread her cheeks, and she heard the tear of foil, and a cool slick touch slid over her, gentle, circling, patient.

“Breathe,” he murmured. “Let me in. Just a fingertip.”

It was strange. It was so strange, and then it was warm, and then it was something else entirely—a deep, spreading pressure that made her gasp into the sheets. One long finger worked in slowly, thoroughly, and she pushed back against it with a moan.

“More,” she said. “Another.”

“So good,” said Vesper. “So brave. Look at you. You’re doing so well.”

He took his time. One finger, then two, curling slowly, stretching her with a care that made her eyes sting. He fed her praise the entire time in that low, dry voice. Beautiful. Perfect. Take your time, love. You’re opening up for me so nicely. When he finally slid in three, and she cried out and ground back against his hand, he used his other to reach around her hip and press two fingers against her clit in slow, deliberate circles. Carol saw white.

“Vesper,” she gasped. “Please. I’m ready. I want you.”

“Say it again.”

“I want you in my ass. Right now. Please. Don’t make me wait anymore.”

A shudder ran through his whole body. He slicked himself—the long, smooth, warm length of him, ridged near the base, glistening—and pressed the blunt, tapered head to her. She breathed out, and he pushed, a slow, steady inch at a time.

She made a sound she had never made in her life.

It was a deep, burning stretch, thick and relentless, and she gripped the pillow and shook. He stopped the instant she tensed.

“Too much?”

“No. No. Don’t stop. God, don’t stop—it’s so much.” She pushed back against him on her own, forcing another inch inside. “Give me all of it. I can take it. I want it.”

He gave it to her. Slowly, so slowly, until he was fully seated, his hips flush against her, his wings spread wide across the bed like a dark canopy, both of them trembling. She felt completely full. She felt claimed. She had been in charge of every room she had ever entered, and for once she had nothing to do but feel the heavy stretch of him buried deep in her ass.

“Move,” she begged. “Please. Fuck me.”

He moved. Long, slow, rolling thrusts that dragged every nerve to the surface, his fingers still working her clit in perfect rhythm. The bed creaked. The headboard knocked the wall. She could feel every ridge, every inch of him sliding in and out of her tight heat.

“So tight,” he groaned. “So warm. Carol, you feel like heaven. You’re gripping me so hard.”

“Harder.”

He went harder. His wings beat against the mattress with each stroke, and she was babbling now —yes, there, fuck, don’t stop, fuck my ass—and the pleasure built so tight and bright and deep that it felt like falling. Every thrust forced a broken sound out of her. She could feel him all the way inside, thick and relentless, stretching her open on every stroke.

“You take me so well,” he murmured against Carol’s shoulder, voice rough. “Look at you. Twenty-five years of everyone else’s orders and everyone else’s emergencies, and here you are, face-down in an on-call bed, taking mine.” His teeth grazed her ear. “You’re soaking the sheets. You are exquisite like this.”

“Harder,” she demanded again, voice wrecked. “I can take more. Give me more.”

He gave her more. Deeper. Faster. One arm braced beside her head while the other stayed locked on her clit, rubbing tight, merciless circles. The dual sensation—his cock dragging through her ass while his fingers worked her front—made her vision blur. She was shaking, drooling into the pillow, completely undone.

“Oh— fuck— Vesper, I’m— I’m—” She came with a ragged shout, clenching around him in long, helpless waves, her whole body locking, and the orgasm ripped through her so hard she sobbed. He fucked her through it, never slowing, never easing up, murmuring against her ear in that dry, papery whisper, “There. There, love. Yes. Just like that,” until she was trembling and oversensitive and still pushing back for more.

“Again,” he said, low and certain. “You’re going to come again for me while I’m in your ass.”

“I can’t—”

“You can. And you will.”

His fingers on her clit never stopped. His cock never stopped. The second orgasm built faster, sharper, almost painful in its intensity. When it hit she screamed into the pillow, a muffled, wordless, furious sound, body seizing, ass clenching so tight around him that his wings shuddered and he gasped, “Oh— Carol—” in a voice that cracked clean in half.

He followed with a low, broken, rustling cry, wings quivering, buried deep, pulsing warm inside her while he sobbed her name into her shoulder like a prayer. She felt every throb, every spurt of

heat flooding her ass, and it dragged a third, smaller climax out of her, just a helpless flutter and a thin, broken whimper.

Afterward he cleaned her with a warm cloth, so carefully she almost cried, and then he gathered her against his chest and wrapped his wings around them both, soft and warm as a blanket. He stroked her hair. He said nothing. No one had ever simply held her like this, and she turned her face into his chest and started, quietly, to cry. It wasn't sadness. It was twenty-five years of carrying everything finally set down.

"I've got you," he whispered. "Rest, Carol. I'll sit up."

She slept. Truly, deeply, for the first time in decades.

Five

The call lights never rang in empty rooms again, at least not for her.

She stayed on at St. Aubrey's. The agency doubled her rate, and the day supervisor stopped meeting her eyes in a different way. Most mornings she walked out into the sunlight with her hair a mess and her scrubs buttoned wrong, and the lobby cleaner pretended not to see the soft gray feather tucked behind her ear.

Every night at 2 a.m. she walked the wards with her penlight, and Vesper walked beside her, and between rounds, in the supply room, the on-call room, and once, memorably, the old X-ray suite, she let someone else take charge.

The X-ray suite, for the record, was where he finally took her at her word.

She had come in with a chart and a flashlight, and he had been waiting in the dark with his wings spread across the doorway. "Hands on the table, Nurse Whitlock," he said. His voice was pleasant and dry and absolutely unarguable. "All the way down."

She looked at him. She looked at the cold steel table. Her pulse went wild. "Is that an order?"

"It is," said Vesper. "Lead apron on. Nothing else."

She had to bite her lip to keep from laughing, and then she didn't want to laugh at all. She stripped in the dark while he watched, and pulled the heavy gray apron over her head, and bent over the table with her palms flat on the freezing steel and the weight of the lead across her shoulders. It was absurd. It was the hottest thing that had ever happened to her.

He took his time. His wings folded around them like a closing door. He ran his long cool hands down her sides, over the lead, down her hips, and then he nudged her feet wide and she heard the rustle of him behind her. "Don't move," he said. "Don't speak unless I ask. You've told everyone what to do for twenty-five years. Tonight, you do what you're told."

"Yes," Carol whispered.

"Yes what?"

"Yes, sir."

He pushed into her in one slow, deep, devastating stroke, and she bit down on a moan. He gave her no mercy after that. One hand wound in her hair and the other held her hip, and he fucked her with long, hard strokes that made the whole steel table rattle, never faster than she could stand and never slower than she wanted. The apron slid and clinked. The call light in the corridor outside lit up, flickered, and went dark, as if even the ghosts had decided to respect her privacy.

"Come when I say," he murmured against her neck. "Not before."

She held it. She held it until her knees shook and tears ran down her face and she was begging, quietly, into the steel, "Please, please, please, sir, please—" until he finally said, in that dry, tender voice, "Now, love," and she came so hard she saw stars, a hoarse, muffled cry torn out against the cold metal, "Oh— oh, God—" and he followed her with a dry, shaken rustle of wings and a groan that cracked on her name, his forehead against her spine.

Afterward he took the apron off her himself, folded it, and set it on the shelf like a nurse tidying a room, and she laughed until she had to sit on the floor.

She had given orders her whole career.

It turned out she loved being told.

End.

Overboard

A Midlife Monsters story by Maven Ashcroft

One

Pat Delacroix turned fifty at sea, in a sequined sash that read 50 AND FABULOUS, holding a rum punch the size of her head, on a cruise ship she had paid for entirely herself.

She had earned it. Thirty years as a middle-school vice principal. A divorce. A kitchen remodel that had gone sideways. She had promised herself one week of sun, one week of being nobody's boss and nobody's mother, and by day four she was dancing on the Lido deck with a conga line of retirees and feeling, for the first time in years, gloriously unserious.

Then, on night five, the ship hit something.

It wasn't an iceberg. It wasn't a reef. Pat never did find out what it was, only that the whole vessel shuddered like a struck bell, and the lights went out, and the alarm began to wail, and some very large, very deliberate force slid through the dark water and plucked her off the sinking lifeboat like a woman plucking a grape.

She woke on a beach.

She was soaked, sandy, wearing one sandal and the sash. The sky overhead was an obscene shade of blue. A very large shape sat hunched at the water's edge, with its back to her, and it was holding, with enormous care, the other sandal.

“You dropped this,” it said.

Pat sat up very slowly. “I’m going to need a minute.”

“Of course.” The shape did not turn around. “I’ll wait. Waiting is one of my better qualities. I am also very good with, ah, hands. Not that you asked. I don’t know why I said that. I’ve been alone for a hundred years, and I’ve forgotten how to do small talk.”

He turned.

Two

He was the size of a delivery truck, give or take.

From the waist up he was almost a man: broad and muscular, with smooth, glistening skin the deep blue-violet of a twilight sea and a face that was striking and slightly alien, with wide dark eyes and delicate frills along the jaw. From the waist down he was something else entirely. Eight long, powerful arms, thick as her thigh at the root and tapering to delicate tips, coiled across the sand around him, each one lined with soft, pale suckers. They shifted and flexed with a mind of their own.

“Kraken,” said Pat flatly.

“Technically I prefer deep-dweller,” he said, wincing. “But yes. Orrin. Hello. I’m, um, so sorry about the ship. I was only trying to find some company, and then there was a very loud noise, and—”

“You sank my cruise.”

“A small portion of it!” He held up two tentacles in a placating gesture, and then, in his agitation, knocked over a palm tree. “The rest is fine. The passengers are fine. A rescue vessel has already been called, though it will be a few days, because I may have, ah, relocated us to a somewhat remote island. I wanted to apologize in person. With a lot of coconuts.”

He produced, from behind his back, with several arms at once, a coconut, a bouquet of wildflowers, a tidy pile of fresh fish, and a very small umbrella.

Pat looked at the umbrella. She looked at the huge, nervous, indigo creature offering it with trembling tentacles, and a laugh rose in her chest, helpless and enormous.

“Oh my God,” she wheezed. “You brought me an umbrella.”

“It’s a nice umbrella,” said Orrin, wounded.

She laughed until she cried, and by the time she wiped her eyes, he was smiling shyly, and something warm and dangerous had begun to unspool low in her belly.

Three

They spent three days on the island. By the second, she had stopped being afraid. By the third, she had stopped pretending she wasn’t looking.

Orrin cooked her fish over a driftwood fire, with six arms at once. He built her a shelter out of palm fronds and a surprisingly sophisticated pulley system. He told terrible jokes and then explained them. He asked about her life, and listened with his whole huge, absorbed attention. She learned that he was a hundred and twelve, that he had spent his entire life near the bottom of the sea, and that he was more than a little in awe of the sun.

She also learned that when she laughed, a ripple of soft violet light ran down his arms, and that he was extremely good with his hands.

On the second morning she demanded the truth.

“Why did you sink my cruise?” Pat sat on a driftwood log with her arms crossed and one sandal on, and her vice-principal voice, the one that had stopped a hundred fistfights in a hundred hallways, rang across the beach. “And I don’t want a small portion of it. I want the whole story.”

Orrin, who had been shredding coconuts with four arms and fanning a fire with two more, went violet to the tips of his frills.

“It is easier,” he said, “if I show you.”

He led her through a tunnel in the rocks at low tide, his tentacles drawing silent patterns in the wet sand, and opened a hidden cave. Pat stopped in the entrance.

It was full of things. Hundreds of them, arranged with patient, obsessive care on stone shelves. Sunglasses. Flip-flops. A ukulele. A lifebuoy stamped S.S. HALCYON. Eleven snow globes. A rack of cruise-ship towel animals, preserved, somehow, in salt. And umbrellas. So many umbrellas, hundreds of them, small and large and printed and plain, lined up along the wall in neat, hopeful rows.

“Oh, honey,” said Pat softly.

“Things fall off ships,” said Orrin. He was not looking at her. “I collect them. I do not know what most of them are for. But the people on the ships are so happy. They sing. They dance. They have such noise, all of it so bright and loud and alive, and I have lived at the bottom of the sea for a hundred and twelve years.” His voice dropped. “I have followed your ship for eight days. I stayed in its wake and listened to the music. And on the second night, there was a woman on the top deck who laughed.”

Pat’s breath stopped.

“It was the most beautiful sound,” said Orrin, to the cave floor. “It went on and on. It was a conga line, I think. She was at the front. I rose to the surface to see her face, only for a moment, and I misjudged how close the ship was. I am very large. There was a noise.” His shoulders slumped. “I am so sorry. I only wanted to hear it again.”

Pat opened her mouth. She closed it.

“You sank a cruise ship,” she said, slowly, “because you liked my laugh.”

“A very small cruise ship.”

She started laughing. Of course she did. It rolled out of her, helpless and enormous, bouncing off the cave walls and the rows of umbrellas, and all across Orrin's great, ridiculous, indigo face spread an expression of such stunned, naked joy that her laughter caught in her throat and turned into something warm and unsteady.

"Oh, you ridiculous creature," she said, wiping her eyes. "Come here."

She took the ukulele off its shelf, because it was the only thing in that cave that looked lonelier than he did, and she handed it to him.

"I cannot play this," said Orrin.

"Nobody can, the first day." She showed him a chord. He fumbled it, all eight arms trying to help, and the whole thing came out as a long, twanging, magnificent disaster. Pat laughed until she had to sit on the cave floor. Orrin tried again. And again. By sunset they were out on the beach with the fire crackling, and she was teaching a kraken to conga, a line of one woman and eight arms, shuffling across the sand while the sun went down, and he was laughing too, a deep rumbling delighted sound that rolled out over the water.

She hadn't known, until then, how long it had been since someone had wanted to hear her laugh.

On the third evening, he was braiding her hair. He had been doing it for twenty minutes, with the slow, tender concentration of a man defusing a bomb, and Pat realized she had been leaning back against his chest the entire time, warm and drowsy, listening to the surf.

"Orrin," she said.

"Mm?"

"How do you feel about my being fifty?"

"Fifty years," he said thoughtfully, "is a very young age, where I come from. But you are the most interesting person I have ever met." A tentacle curled around her wrist. "I mean this sincerely. I have been looking at you for three days and I cannot think about anything else. I want to touch you. I don't know if that's appropriate. I have no manual."

Pat turned around in his arms, slowly.

"Did you say," she said, "that you were very good with your hands?"

His frills flared bright violet. "I said that. Unprompted. Yes."

"Show me."

Four

He kissed her like a man who had read about kissing in a book and wanted very badly to do it right.

It was awkward at first—bumped noses, a nervous laugh—and then it stopped being awkward at all. His mouth was cool and gentle and tasted of salt, and when Pat curled her hands in his hair and dragged him closer he opened to her with a long, shuddering sound. The kiss turned deep

and slow and filthy. His arms slid around her. All of them. They wrapped her waist, her thighs, her ribs, a dozen soft, slick, curious touches that made her gasp into his mouth.

“Is this all right?” he said, breathless. “You must tell me if anything is too much.”

“Orrin.” She grabbed his face in both hands. “I have wanted this since the umbrella. You have eight arms, and I intend to use every single one.”

He went completely still. “All eight?”

“Start with as many as you can find a place for. And don’t you dare go gentle on me.”

He made a low, hungry sound, and the shy creature vanished.

Two arms peeled the dress up over her head. A third unhooked her bathing suit with a delicacy that made her laugh—until the warm air hit her bare skin and his wide dark eyes drank her in, and the laugh turned into a moan. “Look at you,” he whispered. “Every soft, perfect part of you.” He had two real hands, big and warm and blue-violet, and he cupped her breasts in them, thumbs dragging over her nipples until they peaked hard. At the same time a tentacle slid up the inside of her thigh, slick with something warm that smelled like rain and sea and pure want. Wherever it touched, her skin began to tingle and glow with heat.

“It will help,” he said, a little embarrassed. “I make it for… comfort. And for this.”

“Orrin,” said Pat, already arching, “don’t you dare stop making it. God, look at you. You’re so good at this already. Those arms… fuck, you’re going to ruin me and I’m going to thank you for it.”

He laid her back on a bed of warm sand and soft fronds, and then he was everywhere at once.

A tentacle curled around each breast, squeezing, kneading, the soft ringed undersides pulling at her nipples with slow, tugging suction that made her cry out. Another found her clit and began to pulse against it—wet, relentless, perfect. Two more slid up the insides of her thighs and spread her wide, holding her open so he could look. Pat stared down the length of her own body at the huge, glistening indigo creature between her knees, his chest heaving, his frills flared dark violet, and thought, with perfect clarity: I am about to get absolutely wrecked.

“Tell me what you want,” he said hoarsely. “Pat. I want to give you everything.”

“Fuck me,” she said, voice already rough. “With all of them. Everything you’ve got. Fill me until I can’t think. You’re so careful and so strong and I need you to stop being careful. I need you to stuff me full.”

A thick tentacle pressed against her entrance—tapered at the tip, slick and heavy and warm—and slid into her inch by inch. Pat’s breath punched out of her. It was a hundred times better than she had imagined: smooth and thick and endlessly patient, stretching her open as he eased in and out in long, slow strokes. She was so wet she could hear it. She was shameless. She clawed at the fronds and moaned his name and ground down against him, taking more, and he gave it to her, deeper, until her whole body was shaking.

“That’s it,” she panted. “God, yes—look at you, filling me up like that. You’re perfect. Another one. Give me another. Stretch me. I can take it.”

A second tentacle, slightly thinner, pressed against her already-stretched entrance and began to work its way in beside the first. The stretch burned sweet and overwhelming. Pat’s head fell back and she laughed, high and breathless.

“Fuck—yes. Two in my cunt. You’re so good, Orrin. So fucking good at this. Keep going. Don’t you dare stop.”

He groaned like the ocean itself, and then a third tentacle, slick and insistent, circled her ass. She pushed back against it without hesitation.

“Yes. There. Put it in. Put two in if you can. Fill every hole. I want to feel you everywhere. You’re doing so well—look at how full you’re making me. Good boy. Perfect boy. More.”

The second tentacle in her ass slid home, stretching her open until she was shaking and sobbing with pleasure. Four tentacles now buried in her body—two in her cunt, two in her ass—moving in slow, overlapping rhythms so she was never empty, never still. The one at her clit sucked and pulsed. The ones on her breasts tugged and squeezed. She was babbling, praise pouring out of her in a broken stream.

“You’re incredible,” she gasped. “Fuck, look at you, stuffing me so full I can barely breathe. Those tentacles feel so good, so thick, so perfect. You’re going to make me come just like this and I haven’t even had you in my mouth yet. God, Orrin, you’re everything. Don’t stop. Don’t you dare stop. Use me. Fill me. Ruin me. I want to walk funny tomorrow. I want to feel you every time I sit down.”

Only then did she look up, eyes glassy, lips parted, and open her mouth wide in clear invitation.

His seventh tentacle hovered beside her face, smooth and slick, the tip pearled with wetness. Pat grinned, wicked and wrecked and utterly unashamed.

“Now,” she said, voice wrecked with want. “Mouth. Fuck my mouth while you keep filling the rest of me. I want all of you.”

He made a deep, bubbling sound like the sea turning over, and gave her what she asked for.

She took him in, sucking, swirling her tongue around the slippery tip, and every one of his arms shuddered at once. Now she was full in every hole—mouth, double-stuffed cunt, double-stuffed ass—with a tentacle at her clit and two more wrapped around her breasts and the last cradling the back of her head. Orrin began to wiggle. All of them. A slow, rippling squirm that made every nerve she owned light up at once, deep inside her, curling, twisting, spiraling, stroking places she hadn’t known she had. The ones in her ass pulsed in time with the ones in her pussy. The one in her mouth swelled and thrummed against her tongue. She screamed around him, a muffled, wild, helpless sound, and her hips bucked off the sand. The noises in that little cove were obscene: the slick, wet squelch of him moving inside her, her cries muffled around the one in her mouth, the deep bubbling hum rising in Orrin’s chest like a kettle full of ocean.

He fucked her like the sea itself—relentless, deep, overwhelming. The four tentacles in her lower body moved in opposite rhythms, stretching her, filling her, rubbing against each other through the thin walls of her body until she was shaking and sobbing with pleasure. The one at her clit sucked and pulsed in perfect time. The ones on her breasts tugged and squeezed. The one in her mouth fucked her throat in shallow, careful thrusts, letting her breathe, then taking her deeper when she moaned for more.

"Orrin— oh God— Orrin, I'm—" She came the first time with a shout that sent seabirds scattering from the palms, her whole body locking, clenching around him in long, rolling waves, a gush of wet heat soaking the fronds beneath her. He didn't let up. He worked her through it, twisting, pulsing, tracing slow circles on her clit with those soft ringed suckers, and she came again, and then a third time, hoarse and shaking, tears running down her temples, laughing helplessly because she had never in her life felt anything like this.

"Orrin," she sobbed around the tentacle in her mouth when he finally eased it free for a moment. "I can't—I can't—I'm going to—"

"Again," he growled, and she realized with a thrill that the shy, stammering sea creature had vanished. His real hands pinned her wrists to the sand. His voice was dark and low and thick with command. "You are going to come for me again, Pat. I want to feel you do it around every part of me. Come."

"Oh God—"

"Come."

She came so hard the world went white, and what tore out of her wasn't words at all, just one long, high, ragged wail that rolled out across the water. Her back arched off the ground and every muscle seized. She felt him follow her over the edge, his whole body flaring violet, every tentacle pulsing warm inside her and over her at once as he spent himself with a long, deep, bubbling groan like the tide going out, her name on his lips like a prayer—hot, thick spurts flooding her mouth, her cunt, her ass, painting her skin where the free tentacles stroked her.

It was a long time before she could speak.

"Okay," said Pat, to the sky, in a voice she didn't recognize. "Okay. Give me ten minutes. And then I want to do that again. Harder."

Orrin laughed, rich and breathless and overjoyed, and gathered her up in all eight arms. They lay tangled on the sand for hours, his tentacles still stroking her lazily, keeping her open and slick and humming, while she recovered enough to demand a second round.

She got her second round at dawn, in the shallows, with the sun coming up pink and gold over the water.

"Harder," she had said, and Orrin had taken it seriously.

He lay half out of the surf with his torso propped on the sand and his arms spread around her like the petals of a flower, and Pat knelt over him in the warm tide, naked and sand-streaked,

with her fifty-year-old thighs spread wide around the thickest tentacle he had. “You’re going to hold still,” she told him, “and let me work.”

“I will try,” he said, and every arm he owned trembled.

She sank onto him slowly, gasping, and he groaned like the tide going out. She took it deep. She took it all. She ground down and rolled her hips and felt him fill her, stretching her wide, and two more tentacles curled up around her thighs and held her there, gentle and unbearably strong. A slimmer one traced the cleft of her ass, teasing, and she said, “Yes,” before he could ask. It slid in beside the first, slick and warm, and her whole body clenched around them both.

“Pat,” he breathed. “I cannot, the sun, I—”

“I don’t care about the sun.” She braced her hands on his chest and looked down at him, wild-haired and flushed and gorgeous, and told him what she wanted in the filthiest voice she owned. She told him to take her hips. She told him to lift. And Orrin, helpless and worshipful and utterly undone, wrapped four arms around her waist and thighs and took her, rising and falling with the surf, lifting her almost off him and bringing her down hard, again and again, the slap and slosh of salt water and skin loud across the empty beach.

“Harder,” she screamed. “Is that the best you’ve got? Harder—”

He gave her harder. A tentacle circled her throat, light, loving, a loose warm collar. Another worked her clit with a vicious, steady suck. Her breasts bounced in his two big hands. “Orrin— yes— yes— yes—” She came on a shout that sent every gull in the cove screaming into the sky, and he came with her, flaring violet from throat to tip, flooding her in a long, pulsing wave that overflowed and ran down her thighs into the surf.

She collapsed on his chest, laughing and sobbing, sunlight on her back.

“Was that harder?” asked Orrin, shy again, and so hopeful it hurt.

“That,” said Pat, “was exactly harder.”

Five

The rescue boat arrived on the fourth morning.

Pat watched it come over the horizon with her head on Orrin’s chest, his arms tucked warmly around her, and a distinct sense of irritation.

“They’re early,” she said.

“I could scare them off,” said Orrin hopefully.

“Don’t be dramatic.” She kissed the soft frill along his jaw. “Give me a few days to sort out the paperwork. Then come find me.”

“Find you?” His dark eyes widened.

“I have a very large bathtub, and a very small apartment, and a fifty-first birthday coming up that I intend to spend a lot more wisely.” She stood, brushed the sand from her sash, and pointed one finger at his enormous, adoring face. “And Orrin? Next time, no sinking the cruise.”

“I promise,” said the kraken solemnly, and held out his very small umbrella.

Pat took it, and walked toward the rescue boat grinning like a woman who had finally, finally gotten exactly what she wanted.

End.

Full House

A Midlife Monsters story by Maven Ashcroft

One

It started with a text from Marnie.

Bram fixed the spare rooms. Come for the weekend. Bring your men. I mean it.

Ruth was the first to answer. Then Krista. Then Carol. Pat sent a voice note that was mostly laughter and the words “I’m already packing.”

By Friday afternoon the old Dolan house was full.

Marnie met them at the door in a soft robe and not much else, with Bram looming behind her like a contented shadow. The minotaur nodded to each arrival with grave courtesy. Corran came up from the car with Ruth’s bag and a faint phosphorescent shimmer still clinging to his skin from the drive. Varrick had to duck to get through the front door; his copper wings scraped the frame and left a faint scorched smell that made Krista grin. Vesper folded his dusky wings tight and still managed to fill the hallway. Orrin took one look at the porch steps, decided they were decorative, and simply flowed up and over them on eight arms, careful not to scratch the new paint.

They ate first. Marnie insisted. Lasagna, salad, too much wine. The monsters mostly watched the women eat and talk and lean into one another like people who had been lonely in the same specific way and had finally found the others who understood.

Then Pat set down her glass.

“Okay,” she said. “House rules. Everyone tells the table the filthiest thing their monster has done to them. Truthfully. In detail.”

“Pat,” Ruth said faintly.

“Nobody leaves until we’ve all confessed.” Pat pointed her fork at Marnie. “Hostess first.”

Marnie swirled her wine. Behind her chair, Bram had gone very still. “He came on my face in the kitchen,” she said, in the voice she might have used to describe a casserole. “Then he bent me over the table and fucked me until I forgot my own name. I said thank you afterward. Out of

habit.” She smiled sweetly up at the horns above her. “He promised to fuck the manners out of me.”

“I kept my promise,” Bram rumbled.

“Oh, you did.”

Krista went next, flushed to the roots of her hair, the fan she hadn’t needed in weeks abandoned beside her plate. “Mine came in my mouth the very first night,” she said. “I swallowed every drop. I asked for more.” Varrick made a sound like a kettle. A wisp of smoke curled from his nostrils and set a napkin smoldering. “Then he painted my face with it. And I told him to do it again.”

Carol, who had been a nurse for twenty-five years and could say anything with a straight face, lifted one eyebrow. “Vesper took my ass in the on-call room. I had never done it before. I’d like to report that I have since done it eleven times.” Across the table the moth-creature’s antennae curled slowly, and a pale flush crept up his throat. “And in the X-ray suite he made me keep the lead apron on, and I came so hard I saw the bones of my own hands.”

“Eleven?” said Vesper mildly. “I believed it was twelve.”

Pat burst out laughing. Ruth had gone pink to her collarbone. She looked sideways at Corran, whose skin had begun to glow in slow blue pulses under his collar, and then she lifted her chin. “In the lighthouse,” she said, “against the glass, with the beam going over us, I told him to fuck me like he meant it. And he did. I was sixty-one years old and I screamed so loud the gulls left.”

“And you?” Marnie asked, turning to Pat.

Pat leaned back in her chair, glowing and wicked. Beside her Orrin had gone violet to the tips of his frills. “Four of them in my cunt and my ass at once,” she said cheerfully. “One in my mouth. Two on my tits. One on my clit. And he wiggled them. All of them.” She took a long sip of wine. “Then I asked for a second round at dawn, in the ocean.”

Nobody spoke. Somebody’s chair creaked. Under the table Ruth’s hand found Carol’s.

Then Marnie stood, walked around the room, and switched on every lamp.

Two

“The light’s on,” said Marnie, to no one in particular, and smiled.

Warm yellow light poured across the living room. Couches, rugs, wine glasses, monsters. She stood in the middle of it and untied her robe and let it drop. She was fifty-two years old, and her breasts hung heavy and soft and lower than they used to, her belly and hips and thighs were everything that twenty-six years and two kids and a thousand lasagnas had made them, and every person in the room was looking at her.

She did not cover herself. It took everything she had, and then, abruptly, it was easy.

“Gods,” said Bram behind her, very quietly.

“Come here,” said Marnie. “Show them.”

He came. He knelt behind her on the rug, huge and slow, and cupped her breasts in both his hands, lifting them, thumbs dragging across her nipples. “Look,” he told the room, in the gravel voice that always turned her knees to water. “Look at her.” He pressed his mouth to the side of her neck. “Have you ever seen anything more beautiful?”

“No,” said Ruth, and her voice cracked.

“Never,” said Carol.

Pat said something unprintable and approving, and Krista whistled, low and long, and Marnie laughed out loud, red-faced and shaking and happy, and let her head fall back against the broad wall of her minotaur’s chest.

“Sit,” she told him.

He sat on the couch. She knelt on the rug between his thighs, in front of all of them, and untied his apron, and took him into her mouth. He groaned, a deep, grinding rumble she felt in her knees. He was thick and heavy and hot against her tongue, and she worked him with her lips and both hands, slow and wet and unashamed, looking up at his face. His horns raked the lampshade. One huge hand cradled the back of her head, gentle and trembling. Behind her Ruth made a soft, helpless sound, a wine glass clinked, and Krista said, low and delighted, “Look at her go.”

“She has always been like this,” Bram said, voice shredded. “Once she decides she wants something.”

“Oh, I want something.” Marnie pulled off with a wet pop, her chin slick, her lips swollen. She stood, turned, and bent over the arm of the couch in the full light, breasts swaying, looking back over her shoulder. “Bram. Everyone’s watching. Fuck me.”

He took her with a groan that rattled the windows. He filled her slowly, inch by inch, and she moaned long and low, and then he reached around to cup one breast in his big palm and began to move. Deep, steady strokes, the couch creaking, her breasts swaying in his hand. Ruth watched with her mouth open. Carol’s fingers had found Vesper’s wrist. Pat said, “Jesus Christ,” and meant it as a compliment.

“Tell them,” Bram growled in her ear. “Tell them how it feels.”

“Full,” Marnie gasped. “So full. He’s so big, and he’s looking at my tits like I’m twenty-two. Everyone’s looking at my tits, and I like it.” She laughed, wild and breathless. “Harder. Show them what you do.”

He showed them. His hips snapped, and she came with a ragged shout, “Bram— oh God— Bram —” clenching around him, her whole body bowing, and he followed with a roar, a deep, grinding bull’s bellow that rattled the windows, pinning her to the couch and pouring himself into her while the whole room watched her come apart in the lamplight.

Three

It was Krista who broke the silence, laughing breathlessly. “Well. I can’t follow that.” She stood up, and something reckless crossed her face. “I’m going to try.”

The flush was already climbing her throat. A flash rolled through her, the heat blooming like a struck match, and she did not reach for the fan. She tugged Varrick down by one copper horn. “On the floor,” she told him. “On your back. Everyone’s going to watch me ride you.”

He went down like a felled tree. The carpet scorched where his scales touched it, and the temperature in the room rose five degrees as she stripped, steam curling off her bare shoulders, sweat gleaming between her breasts. She straddled him, took his cock in her hand, hot as a forge and glowing orange at the tip, and sank down on it with a long, ragged groan.

“Oh my God,” said Krista. “You’re so hot.”

“I am a dragon,” Varrick said hoarsely.

“Shut up and burn.”

She rode him. The air shimmered around them. Her flush spread down her chest and his scales glowed in answer, and every time she ground down the room seemed to pulse with heat. Ruth, kneeling beside them with her hand pressed to her own mouth, whispered, “She’s on fire.” Carol took Ruth’s other hand. The two of them watched Krista’s hips roll and her head fall back, and when Varrick’s tail slid up her thigh to find her clit and she screamed, they both flinched and then leaned in closer.

Krista came with a cry that singed the curtains. She slid off him, dropped between his knees, and caught him in both fists, tipping her face up. “All of it,” she gasped. “Look at me. Give it to me.” He came with a roar and a long hiss of smoke, groaning her name through his teeth, thick scalding ropes across her cheeks and mouth and the heavy curve of her breasts, and she moaned at the heat of it, eyes closed, painted and shining.

That was when Ruth and Carol moved in.

They didn’t ask. They knelt on either side of her, looked at each other once, and bent their heads. Ruth licked a slow stripe up the side of Krista’s breast, gathering the dragon’s come on her tongue. Carol did the same on the other side, then kissed the corner of Krista’s mouth and shared it with her. Krista laughed, breathless and filthy, and held both their heads while their tongues worked over her skin, hot and thorough and unhurried, the wet sounds loud in the lamplit room.

“Fuck,” Pat said from the other couch, where Orrin had a tentacle curled around each of her wrists and a third drifting up her thigh. “That’s the hottest thing I’ve seen all year.”

“Get every drop,” said Marnie from the couch arm, still dazed and flushed. “She earned it.”

They did. When they were done, Krista was clean and gleaming and already pulling both of them into a deep, come-slick kiss that went on and on, until Carol came up for air and said, in her calmest charge-nurse voice, “My turn.”

Four

Carol did not ask Vesper. She took his wrist. “Sofa bed,” she said. “Ruth, with me.”

Ruth went. Her hands were shaking. Carol knelt on all fours on the big pulled-out mattress, and Ruth, flushed and eager, slid beneath her, and put her mouth to Carol’s cunt. Behind them Vesper knelt, his dusky wings spreading over the bed like a canopy, and a foil packet tore. “Breathe,” he murmured. “You know how.”

“I know how,” Carol said, and groaned as he eased into her ass, slow and deep and patient, until she was full to the root and trembling. “Oh. Oh, that’s, Ruth, don’t you dare stop—”

Ruth didn’t. She licked Carol in long, slow strokes, greedy for it, her tongue circling her clit while Vesper fucked her open with deep, rolling thrusts. Carol came twice, hard, thighs shaking around Ruth’s ears, bitten-off curses cracking out of her in her charge-nurse voice, “Oh, fuck. Fuck. Ruth. Ruth—” and every time Ruth made a pleased little hum and kept going.

“That’s it,” Vesper said, low and dry, against Carol’s shoulder. “Let her taste you. You’re soaking her face.”

“Don’t you dare talk,” Carol gasped. “Don’t, oh, fuck—”

From across the room Corran watched Ruth’s hips lift, bare and helpless, and rose without a word. He knelt behind her, glowing softly blue, and the look he gave her was so wondering that she moaned into Carol’s skin. “May I?” he whispered. “Please.”

“Yes,” Ruth said, muffled, shaking. “Yes, please. Now.”

He took her slowly from behind, the light along his spine pulsing violet with every stroke, and Ruth pushed back onto him with a shattered little sound, her tongue never stopping. The four of them found a rhythm, rocking, the mattress groaning, Carol’s head bowed, Ruth’s fingers digging into her thighs, Vesper’s wings brushing Corran’s fins in the lamplight. Carol came a third time with a ragged shout that made the windows shiver, and Corran’s thin, rising keen answered it from behind Ruth, and Ruth came a moment later, weeping, with Carol’s name in her mouth.

Five

Pat had watched all of it, flushed and panting on the rug with her legs spread and Orrin’s arms around her like a nest.

“Okay,” she said hoarsely. “My turn. And I want everybody.”

Orrin’s frills flared. “Everyone?”

“You have eight arms. I’ve seen what you can do with four.” She looked around at the tangle of women, flushed and shining, and grinned. “Share.”

He did.

It spread the way heat spreads. Two tentacles slid into Pat, one in her pussy and one in her ass, and she threw her head back with a shout. A third found her mouth. But the rest unfurled through the room like vines, curling around Marnie’s thighs where she lay panting on the couch

arm, around Krista's waist, around Ruth's ankle, soft and slick and humming with warmth, and every woman they touched gasped.

"Oh, fuck," said Krista as a slim tentacle circled her clit. "Pat, I take it back, you were right—"

"Told you," Pat said around the one in her mouth, and then lost the thread of the thought entirely.

Marnie and Krista ended up in each other's arms, kissing slow and hungry, Marnie's fist tangled in Krista's hair, while a tentacle worked between them, rubbing both their clits at once, the soft ringed undersides pulsing in a rhythm that made them cry out into each other's mouths. Ruth and Carol lay tangled on the mattress, laughing and gasping, as Orrin's smallest arm teased them in tandem. Corran laid a hand at the base of Ruth's spine and the glow flared across her skin. Vesper's antennae stroked Carol's throat. Varrick curled one hot copper wing around the whole pile of them like a blanket, and the room filled with steam.

Pat came first, with a scream that dissolved into helpless, wheezing laughter, clenching around the thick, wiggling length of him. "Oh my God, oh my God, I'm dying, tell them I died happy—" Then Krista, with a furious, delighted roar. Then Marnie, sobbing and laughing and gasping Bram's name. All three of them broke in rolling, overlapping waves, and under them ran all the other sounds: Corran's thin keening, Vesper's dry, shaken rustle, Varrick's long hiss of smoke, Orrin's deep, bubbling hum, and beneath it all Bram's low rumble shaking the floorboards. Ruth came with her face in Carol's shoulder, a small broken sound, "oh, oh, oh." Carol came with a long, low, astonished laugh. It rolled around the room like a tide, one climax setting off the next, women and monsters crying out in turn, until the whole house seemed to shudder with it.

"Look at you," Bram said, wondering, still buried in Marnie's warmth as it rolled through her. "All of you. Fifty and sixty and still this greedy for each other." His voice went rough. "You are magnificent."

Six

By the time the first real pause came, the living room looked like a natural disaster and every woman in it was marked in one way or another: come on skin, teeth marks on shoulders, the faint glowing residue of Corran's slick, the scorched-sugar scent of dragon spend.

They lay in a tangled heap on the overlapping rugs. Monsters and women, limbs and wings and tentacles, the slow quiet of people who had taken exactly what they wanted and were in no hurry to move.

Pat was the one who spoke first, voice wrecked and satisfied.

"We are doing this again."

Marnie, head on Bram's chest, one of Orrin's tentacles still loosely curled around her ankle, laughed.

"The guest rooms are still free," she said. "Or we can stay here. I'm not particular."

Krista was already reaching for Varrick again. Ruth had not stopped touching Corran. Carol was kissing the soft place behind Vesper's antenna. Pat had one of Orrin's tentacles wrapped around her wrist like a living bracelet and showed no interest in letting go.

Bram rumbled, warm and amused, and reached for the nearest lamp.

"Leave it on," said Marnie.

He paused. Every light in the house was still blazing, and she lay in the middle of them, naked and sweaty and sticky and laughing, and had not covered herself once in six hours. She hadn't even noticed.

"I fixed the house," he said at last. "I did not account for this many people needing the floor."

Marnie grinned, bright and filthy and completely unrepentant.

"Then you'd better get used to it. I have a feeling we're going to need a bigger rug."

Outside, the old house settled around them, floorboards, pipes, the faint creak of timber that had learned, over the years, how to hold a great deal of weight.

Inside, five women in the middle of their lives, and the monsters who loved them, started again.

End.